



Alluding Alliance: The Indo-U.S Trajectory in the New Decade

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Abstract: The Indo-U.S relation has transformed into an increasingly close strategic partnership over the years. Symbolic terms like 'Natural Allies¹' or 'Defining partnership of the 21st century²' were used to illuminate the growing bonhomie and also made many wonder over the possibility of an alliance in the near future if situation so arise. With turn of another decade the international system is confronted with impending threats in the form of Russian aggression in Ukraine, consistent Chinese border incursions and expansion in Central and South Asia or the Taliban upsurge in Afghanistan. Such threats pose serious concern to maintenance of security, stability and other global and regional strategic interests of both U.S and India. This article tries to understand that after several years of building a pronounced strategic partnership to cooperate over common interests and mitigate threats to those; why are we not witnessing any sign of formal alliance between India and U.S. This article argues that despite emergence of mutual threats like the rise of Islamic fundamentalism through resurgence of Taliban or Chinese regional aggression; formation of formal Indo-U.S alliance has not occurred in light of fundamental difference over long term structural perspectives given one being a superpower and the other a rising power, variance in strategic thinking, divergence over the means and outcomes of common interests and the specific international system they seek to uphold.

Key Words: Alliance, flexibility, Indo-U.S, strategic interests, threats.

Introduction

Strategic ramifications and new security challenges have solidified the bilateral relations between U.S and India into a global strategic partnership. The U.S administrations have been showcasing their positive support for India's rise as a global power (Rice, 2005). The India-U.S. bilateral cooperation at present is broad-based and multi-sectorial, covering trade and investment, defense and security, education, science and technology, cyber security, high-technology, civil nuclear energy, space technology and applications, clean energy, environment,

agriculture and health. They have specifically stressed on the common objective of promoting and preserving stability and security in Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region (Panetta, 2012). Rise of potent security threats will invigorate efforts on both sides to counter those disruptions and challenges and might even present the situation to form an alliance. If such a sustained ever expanding strategic partnership seeks to retain flexible alignments even when confronted with mutual threats then we must understand that there remain substantial lingering differences in strategy and outlook beneath the overarching structure of the partnership. The following section will define the concept of alliance and then outline the developments of Indo- U.S partnership. The next section highlights the upcoming security challenges which are of concern to both and argue that inspite of emergence of such threats why we won't be witnessing the formation of an Indo-U.S alliance.

The Concept of Alliance

Alliances have been an integral component of international politics since ages. Alliance can be described as a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support mainly to deter a common adversary (Hugland, 2019). Alliances and its varied forms play a fundamental role in the theory and practice of international relations. They are a 'universal component of relations between political units, irrespective of time and place (Holsti; Hopmann; Sullivan, 1973:2). As Arnold Wolfers puts it 'wherever in recorded history a system of multiple sovereignty has existed, some of the sovereign units when uninvolved in conflicts with others have entered into alliances'(Wolfers, 1968:269).

There remains substantial conceptual ambiguity over the definition of alliance. Alliances differ in many ways: the circumstances under which they became operative, the type of commitment, the degree of cooperation and their scope (Dwivedi, 2012).

Walt defines alliance as 'a formal or informal relationship of security co-operation between two or more sovereign states'(Walt,1987:6) According to Wolfers, 'in technical language of statesmen and scholars the term alliance signifies a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states' the term connotes that 'peculiarly far reaching commitment contained in military pacts by which a nation formally promises to join another in fighting a common enemy'(Wolfers,1968:268-269).Thus for Wolfers (1968) the outstanding asset of an alliance is the military assistance expected in case of need and its deterrent effect on enemy.

Bruce M. Russett defines an alliance as 'a formal agreement among a limited number of countries concerning the conditions under which they will or will not employ military force' (Russett, 1971:262). On similar lines Glenn H. Snyder points out the main elements of alliances as 'formal agreements; they are concluded by states; they involve collaboration in military matters; and they have other orientation' aiming at 'states outside their own membership'.¹² This differs from Walt's definition in its exclusion of informal or implicit relations and from Wolfers as this does not account for a prior identification of a 'common enemy'. Alliances fall into different categories related to different objectives. These could be bilateral or multilateral, defensive or offensive in nature.

The tendency to align has had one key underlying determinant: perceived common interest against a common enemy. This common interest may stem from fear, a desire to expand or a need to deter the enemy from acting or pre-empt it from acting by joining hands with a likeminded ally (Hussain, 1979).

Alliances, therefore is a form of coalition between states with a formal military commitment. The element of military assistance is the binding factor in any alliance. During cold war both the superpowers engaged in several alliances to preserve and protect their spheres of influence, the end of cold war also witnesses several alliances of the sole superpower with regional actors with formal security commitments. It is pertinent to mention here that such alliances between a major power and minor powers are referred as asymmetric alliances. Morrow (1991) posits that asymmetric alliances provide different benefits to the parties involved—autonomy to the great power and security to the minor power (Morrow, 1991:903). The difference in power capabilities often creates a difference in their perception of threat but side payments or trade -offs act as positive incentives for both sides to continue with the alliance (Kabir, 2019:165).

Thus, alliances of any form are compact formal agreement between parties where military and security commitments should be the prime components.

Contours of INDO- U.S Strategic Partnership

South Asia as region has not been in the central concern for United States during cold war to the exception of U.S USSR embroilment in Afghanistan, ‘South Asia was either marginalized or ignored by the American government (Rubinoff, 2006:39-51). However with the end of cold war, renewed attention was given and a separate bureau was finally created, South Asia was included as a part of Near East in the U.S State Department. This tendency towards neglect of India and South Asia created indifference, hostility, resentment and disdain in U.S policy towards South Asia (Glazer,1990:24).The end of cold war and the removal of superpower scuffle, new issues emerged that necessitated engagements at the regional level. Within South Asia India showcased a robust economic growth and together with its stable democracy became difficult to be ignored. “In this emerging world India stands out, along with China and perhaps South Korea, Brazil, and some of the European states, for its balanced power. Like a versatile computer, India does nothing best but does many things reasonably well. Unlike Korea, any European state, Iraq, Brazil or China, India is dominant within its own geographical region” (Cohen, 2001:138)

India was confronted with new strategic situation of an international system dominated by United States in which the Soviet Union was no longer available as a political, economic and security anchor. Bereft of an ally coupled with acute economic crisis India needed pristine ideas and strategies to tide over the predicaments and also seize the moment freed from the cold war constraints to think where it wants to see itself within this new system and

how would it operate. The sequence of adaptation, innovation and transformation was the key to achieve a desired status in the international system. The new system could no longer be identified by a single overarching criterion as the cold war, it is diverse, complex and extremely interwoven and hence India realized that engagements and enmeshments are the key to sustain and rise in this system.

The Clinton administration's policy of engagement and enlargement with its stress on democracy resonated with India eager to forge new relations within the altered international system. The end of the cold war brought out a change of perception and U.S stopped looking at India through a soviet lens, together with India's economic reforms and a growing market necessitated a further deepening of ties. Even the discord following India's nuclear test resulted a new course of negotiations in the form of Talbott- Singh dialogue. There was a significant change in the way U.S diplomats addressed India on media stressing on the point that despite India's nuclear explosions, India was a 'friend' possessing ' huge potential for global leadership'(Talbott,2004). Despite global nonproliferation being one of America's vital interests, the Clinton foreign policy team showcased some genuine sensitivity towards India's legitimate national security interests after May 1998 (Talbott, 2004). The novelty of the Clinton administration's policy towards India rested on the understanding that engagement was priority and cannot be disrupted for the sake of individual conflicting interest, a continued effort should be introduced to not only to prioritize reconciliation but also to bypass the stalemate and identify other converging interests.

The joint statement 'A vision for 21st century' revealed such conciliatory and constructive attitude on both sides whereby they agreed that they differ on the means to achieve their common goal of reduction and ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons but highlighted their intention of cooperating on other common interests like 'complementary responsibility for ensuring regional and international security', 'stability and growth of global economy', 'common efforts to fight infectious diseases'. (Indo-U.S Joint Statement, 2001)

The Bush administration period witnessed the development of mature and structural bilateral relations between the two states even finding a common ground on the contentious issue of nuclear material. The post September 2001 Security issues emerged as the prime objective of American foreign policy along with the aim of fighting Al-Queda to the end. With Afghanistan reassuming its position as the area of conflict United States attention centered around South Asia, while it deepened its cooperation with India in its fight against terrorism as India offered unconditional support but it also opened up new avenues for Pakistan becoming a frontline state due to its geostrategic position. Easing Indian concern of being sidelined by a renewed U.S Pakistan bond, the Bush administration efficiently formalized a policy of de-hyphenation and showcased its will to pursue a differentiated policy towards the region centered on 'decoupling of India and Pakistan in United States calculation'(Tellis,2008). While de-hyphenation was indeed a major policy but what stood out was the administration's repeated recognition of India having the capability to contribute and influence the global affairs. By these the administration addressed India's two most crucial strategic needs, one being in an independent bilateral relationship with U.S and the other being recognized as a potential major power by the dominant power

in the international system. The particular attention of the administration on status related matter and the readiness to promote, project and acknowledge India as a rising power marks its distinction from any other previous administrations. By 2002, the strategic convergence between India and United States, the official statement from Washington reasserted ‘a growing world power with which we have common strategic interest’ (Clinton, 2011). The Bush administration extended its positive attitude towards recognizing India’s potentialities by stressing on its intention to “help India become a major power in the twenty-first century.” (U.S Department of State, 2005)

By 2005 Washington announced the most wide-ranging partnership in the history of their bilateral relations, covering the economy, energy security, democracy promotion, defense cooperation, and high technology and space cooperation. In line with such promises they signed the Next step in Strategic Partnership, the New Framework of Defense Relationship and finally the historic Indo- U.S Civilian Nuclear Deal (U.S State Department, 2005).

During the Obama presidency a new thrust was given towards regional cooperation. While endorsing and acknowledging India’s rise President Obama harped on certain region or areas where U.S expects India to play an active and effective role, the foremost importance was given to the Asia Pacific region. With Secretary of state Hilary Clinton’s visit to India to initiate the Security Partnership of 21st century with stress on ‘shared Interest in Asia’, followed by the U.S India Strategic Dialogue on Asia pacific Region and later in the year indicated the new avenue of cooperation. The launch of ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy further highlighted the partnership with India, “the Obama administration has expanded our bilateral partnership; actively supported India's Look East efforts, including through a new trilateral dialogue with India and Japan; and outlined a new vision for a more economically integrated and politically stable South and Central Asia, with India as a linchpin.” (Clinton, 2011) As a linchpin to the strategy apart from the regular strategic dialogue and cooperation in the regional institutions the bilateral cooperation was strengthened in the defense field. In August 2016, after years of prolonged negotiations and consultations and a new BJP government in New Delhi, they signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement (LEMOA). A tweaked version of the original Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), LEMOA was supposed to give access to both countries to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refueling and replenishment but requirements was agreed to be applicable on a case by case basis.

Despite such commendable improvements India and United States cannot be termed as alliance partners. Hagerty(2006) points out that Indo- U.S partnership cannot be seen as an alliance as they do not fulfill the basic criteria of having a formal agreement on military cooperation ‘under which they will or will not employ military force’ (Russett,1971).Inspite of sharing the common interest of maintaining stability and peace in Asia pacific their engagements are loosely defined and lacks definite military commitments. Secondly, as Wolfers(1968) points out that identification of a common enemy is necessary in alliances, India and United States have not zeroed down or publicly identified a single common enemy which needs to be deterred. However, Hagerty thereby

argues that emergence of more compelling mutual security threats like emergence of fundamentalist Islamic regime in Pakistan or Chinese regional aggression might lead India and the United States to upgrade their partnership in to an alliance (Hagerty, 2006:16)

The current international scenario is plagued with emergent compelling threats in the form of resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan, Chinese assertiveness and Russian attacks on Ukraine which have definite effects on United States' and India's strategic policies. The resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan after two decades of serious commitment to democratize and restructure the Afghan state not only presents a major setback to U.S policy of maintaining stability and a bigger threat arising for India in view of the new opportunities for rise of Islamic fundamentalism easily percolated from Afghanistan to Pakistan. The Chinese border incursions and increased regional assertiveness jeopardizes Indo-U.S commitment to maintain stability and security in Asia Pacific. Finally the Russian attack on Ukraine resulting in a war has further complicated the interdependent structure of international system. Despite the rise of such potent immediate common threats the Indo-U.S responses have remained informal and flexible with no signs of upgrading into a formal alliance. Their asymmetry in power and strategic perspectives limit their chances to consider a threat with same magnitude and security.

This work argues that inspite of rise of compelling threats we are not witnessing an Indo-U.S alliance is due to the entrenched fundamental difference in strategic worldview of a superpower and a rising power, their incompatible objectives and the divergences in their viewpoint over the future international system they wish to uphold. Their coming together to form an alliance to deter immediate threats is thwarted by the deep rooted differences in power asymmetry which further informs their core strategic considerations and their engagements.

The Fundamental Difference in Strategic Worldview

The idea of exceptionalism has been embedded in the strategic thinking of United States from the very beginning and the disintegration of Soviet Union truly presented it as the predominant power. In the Post Cold war scenario the United States' main strategy was that U.S should undertake all efforts to retain its position as the undisputed preeminent power in the international system and to promote its values among others and to shape the international environment so as to reflect its values (Huntington,1999).The protection and preservation of American preeminence can be noted as the common prime objective of all the contending grand strategy theories even when they differ over the means to achieve those.

Closely following the first objective is to preserve U.S. supremacy by politically, economically, and militarily outdistancing any global challenger (Posen & Ross, 1997). Prevention of the rise of a competitor at the global or regional level that can or may have the potential to threaten U.S primacy globally or in a region is considered a priority. U.S needs to promote universality of an international order based on international law, democratic traditions, free market economies which will not only solidify its global interests but also prevent the emergence

of niche regional orders with regional hegemons. The regional dimension of the strategy is consistent with the global dimension: the aspirations of regional as well as global hegemons are to be thwarted.

A constructive American strategy to forward its interests and to address any sort of non-conformity or challenges is to work through multilateral cooperation or alliance system. Advocates of Selective engagement and liberal internationalism stress on multilateral cooperation and alliance building as the suitable means to achieve its goals.

India's strategic thinking on the other hand has been informed by its perception of the international system as a hegemonic one imposing its will and norms on a developing state and India's instinct was to protect itself against the shifts and conflicts of the major powers. The core of India's strategic worldview is the enduring and deep rooted aspiration of achieving the status of major power within the international system. Closely following its desire for a major power status is India's stress on maintaining independence in its foreign policy (Hoffmann 2002:229; Bajpai and Sahni 2008). India's objective of attaining a major power status is largely based on its inclination in retaining the independence over strategic choices and policies so as to create a niche foreign policy as an alternative to following the overarching international structure maintained by a single or handful of powerful states and being reduced to the satellite status in world politics. India's engagements in bilateral or multilateral forms are focused on identifying areas of agreement to avoid confrontations and to forward its distinct interests while maintaining its autonomy in strategic thinking.

India's penchant for recognition and status as a new major power runs in contrast to United States' prime objective of maintaining unrivalled primacy and prevention of the rise of new power at any part of the world. However, it can be noticed since the Bush Presidency U.S has showcased its support for India's rise and also proclaimed so in official statements like "to help India become a major world power in 21st century" (U.S Department of State,2005).It can be understood in a way that U.S have maintained its policy of working through alliances where the allies remain committed to U.S led international structures and in similar lines it perceives that nurturing a strategic partnership with rising India will be conducive to U.S interests in the region and larger global platform. But India's strive for a major power status is strongly rooted in its quest for 'redistribution and recognition on its own terms which will essentially ensure its independent decision making in accordance with its distinct needs and interests that may or may not coincide with the structures and norms maintained by the dominant state (Nell,2010:956). Hence, being a confirmative ally or a satellite state is non-consistent with India's core strategic objective.

The Divergent Perception of International System

The United States being the dominant power of the international system since the end of cold war have carefully constructed the structures and norms of the current international system to serve its interest, hence, it stresses on the preservation of the same and seeks status quo. An international system with American preponderance continues to be the main prerogative. U.S founded the liberal international order based on global system of

alliances, institutions and norms to further and maintain U.S primacy. The key to this order is to be able to pursue its interests in part by creating and maintaining a web of institutions, norms and rules which constructs a framework that shapes much of international politics. United States provide security guarantees to allies to restrain regional initiatives and competition binding all through an interdependent economic structure. It became an order as its rules and norms have gradually assumed a degree of independent influence (Lind & Wohlforth, 2019:71)

India being an emerging power eager for status and recognition has always advocated an international system with multiple centers of power. The strategic thinking on this includes concepts covering international power structures that India thinks will be preferable to its rise. India prefers a world with diffused centers of power, It sees itself acquiring its desired status and taken more seriously within such a system. A polycentric or multipolar world will not only be more conducive towards absorbing a new power but it will also be conducive towards acknowledging it with more flexible terms of operation. This would provide greater strategic flexibility and the concerned efforts for integration and interconnectedness will be much more indigenous and free from a specific structure forced by a hegemonic state. “From Indian perspective, the ideal world will consist of many great powers, each dominant in its own region, and pledged to avoid interference across regions”.³⁰ In consonance with its preference of a multipolar world India voice its concern over biases in international order and also invests in being part of indigenous regional initiatives thus, India can be said to espouse prominent changes in the present international order. India in its strive to bring about alteration in the established order acts through two distinct ways,

(a) It tries inducing changes in norms and rules by working within the established institutions through negotiations or by building sub-forums with other like-minded developing states. (b) To construct and participate in indigenous regional attempts to form new organizations or institutions that can provide alternative approaches to address the concerns.

India strives to alter the distribution of the benefits generated by the global economy more in favour of developing countries. It rely on its predominant regional and emerging global stature to try and shape the international economic environment to bring it closer to what it perceives to be optimal conditions for the domestic and global advancement of the developing world in its individual capacity, but also through collective measures. Within WTO India vociferously advocates for a fairer distribution of the benefits of trade and the removal of non-tariff obstacles obstructing access to markets in developing countries, increased development-focused capital flows and others. India has been promoting its distributive approach to international negotiations and voicing against the indifference towards the concerns of developing countries through its active participation within the New QUAD to alter the decision making processes in WTO, with other developing countries through G20 and G77. India is a part of the Heiligendamm Process which is the semi-institutionalized dialogue between the group of industrialized countries and the emerging economies of Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa, and the

G20, whose summits are replacing those of the G8 as the primary coordination venue in the global economy (Hurrell,2007).India together with South Africa, Brazil and China has emerged as some of the most vocal opponent to developing countries being saddled with quantified emission-abatement targets in the post Kyoto negotiation processes of UNFCCC (Ayres, 2017).

India is an enthusiastic participant in various indigenous regional organizations in its immediate and extended neighbourhood to Central Asia and Africa. It identifies with the self- reliant efforts of the regional actors to address questions of economy, trade, security etc. in contrast to the established norms. India has established links with diverse organisations ranging from ASEAN, BRICS,IBSA to organizations with extended neighbourhood including BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Initiative. For instance, BRICS has constituted New Development Bank which has started giving loans subtracting the conditions of structural adjustment programmes often levied by global organizations like World Bank.(Ayres,2017) These Initiatives appreciate what is distinct and valuable to these regional actors which are often neglected by the established system. Such regional endeavours works toward institutionalizing policy co-ordination on a range of fronts between regional powers across regions, encouraging bilateral and multilateral trade, reciprocal investment by developing infrastructural links between member countries, negotiating strategies in areas as diverse as multilateral trade talks, climate and environmental issues, financial and technology regulation and management. According to Hurrell India can be differentiated from other second tier states by the virtue of it being outside of an alliance system with the United States and has historically espoused the conception of a different international order (Hurrell, 2007).

Altered Approaches to Areas of Congruence

Given such differences in strategic worldviews and perceptions of international system the identified areas of convergence or common goals are marked by divergent approaches and the outcomes or agreements are often very specific or modified versions to suit both U.S and India. The work cites their negotiations to bridge through the distinct concerns regarding the logistics agreement while agreeing on the benefits of having such an agreement in place. They have engaged heavily in defense cooperation, joint military exercises involving all military branches, military training and unit exchanges over the years but when it came to agreeing on the terms on of the logistics agreement we saw how they negotiated to find a distinct altered version to satisfy both ends. U.S has no template for a close defense relationship outside the obligations inherent in a formal alliance structure which necessitates signing of the foundational agreements (Ayres, 2017). For India a large scale domestic opposition to signing of LEMOA was witnessed based on the perception that signing such an agreement will make India equivalent with U.S allies and will drag India into America's conflicts and policies, especially in West Asia and East Asia (Rajagopalan, 2016). While understanding the benefits of having a logistics agreement with U.S, India was cautious over making extensive commitments in line of formal alliance and over-ride its cherished ideal of maintaining autonomy.

The LEMOA signed in 2016 highlighted how an India specific version of the original Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) was put to effect to address the concerns of both sides. While U.S signs three agreements — Logistics Support Agreement (LSA), Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA) are referred to as the foundational agreements with countries with which it has close military ties and wanted to extend the same to India but the Indian side raised concern regarding issues of national security and being entangled in American security structure. LEMOA was signed which permits the US and India to use each other's facilities and provides for easier access to supplies and services for the military forces of the two countries when they are engaged in specific types of activities. The agreement primarily covers four areas of port calls, joint exercises, training and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Any other requirement has to be agreed upon by both sides on a case-by-case basis. LEMOA is much more flexible and limited in scope than LSA but it satisfied the U.S interest of having a logistics agreement in place and also addressed India's concern of entering into a formal binding agreement related to security (Hindu, 30th August, 2016). On similar lines The LEMOA was followed by the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which was signed on 6 September 2018 being a tweaked version of the original the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA). This was only an instance to show how their difference in strategic thinking informs their terms of engagement. Even when an area of convergence has been identified there needs to be committed efforts to tide over the difference in viewpoint and reaching a middle ground.

Conclusion

Indo U.S strategic partnership has developed into a multifaceted process with both sides exhibiting constructive efforts to identify areas of congruence and to negotiate their way through the divergences in order to avoid long term disengagement. Identification of common goals does not necessarily materialize into common approaches. From proliferation to economy and even on climate change they differ over strategies and means. Washington's imperative in indulging into an alliance has mainly depended on having an agreeable ally committed to support U.S policies and strategies under all circumstances. India's policy has been informed by its indelible allegiance to its autonomy in decision making and has for the very reason cautious of the binding commitments of an alliance. Thus, their initiatives of cooperation remain quite informal, loosely defined and flexible in nature to accommodate their divergences in their distinct long term vision and interests. Trade-offs or positive incentives might accelerate or strengthen their cooperation but formally acknowledging to support each other across issues remains a distant idea. A formal binding alliance will continue to elude India and the United States as long as their difference in entrenched strategic thinking, power asymmetry will continue.

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