

Defence cooperation between India and the US

Since the end of cold war many countries have redefined their relationships after reassessing their positions in a vastly changed world system. It is truer in the case of growing relations between India and the United States than any other two countries in our region. In a major shift in its policy after the fall of communism, Delhi began to make overtures toward Washington as a potential partner for managing regional security. Washington was equally eager to develop close relations with India in the larger context of its Indian Ocean strategy.

As the cold war barriers fell down and the old structure of relations began to give way to new ones, India and the US found too much common ground to act together on number of important issues. No longer was American policy in South Asia centred on strategic ties with Pakistan, because the Soviet threat, the context within which that alliance had developed was gone. It was an old desire on the part of US policy makers to bring India into their strategic ambit but Jawaharlar Nehru's vision of a neutral India playing an independent role in world affairs prevented that from happening. Since Nehru's India was not available, Pakistan was a second best bet in the American strategy of containing communism and countering the Soviet threat in the North-West Asia.

For the past ten years, India and the United States have moved closer to each other for number of reasons. The United States regards India as very important country for its large size and population, its Hindu civilisation that fascinates large number of scholars and researchers, secularism and a functioning democracy in such a vast and plural third world society. All these factors add to India's prestige, influence and credentials as a strategic partner of the United States. It needs to be mentioned that even during the cold war, the United States and other Western powers didn't leave India out of their developmental programmes and kept assisting it in many diverse areas. They began to understand, tolerate and accept India's pro-Moscow foreign policy and didn't make a big issue out of that. What I am suggesting here is that characteristics of a country, what is it and where it is really matter in its world standing. India does have many of those qualities.

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standard are multi-faceted. The US policy recognises the role of the regional powers and attaches tremendous importance to what they can do to advance American interests or pursue policies that run parallel to theirs. In the post-nine-eleven world, countering and fighting terrorism is one of their shared interests. Like many other countries in the region, India no longer makes noises about US naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Rather it has pushed pragmatism to the extreme end and has been trying to seek strategic part-

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nership with the US in the Indian Ocean and beyond to its hinterland. That is big change from its policy of opposing external powers' presence there. No state, however can be held for inconsistency or on the ground of immorality because all what they do is primarily driven by national interests, and they change with the changes in the world environment. Only deft and skilful statesmen and diplomats can recognise which way the wind is blow and they quickly readjust their policies. India has done that in a remarkable way in making transition from Moscow's closest partner to that of emerging ally of the United States.

India has strong interest in accessing American market for its goods and transfer of dual-use technologies. Just this week Indo-US defence group met in Washington

to examine India's request for acquiring sophisticated technologies and weapons systems.

Transfer of technologies is the most important aspect of Indo-US defence cooperation. India was the first country out of NATO members that was allowed the purchase of supercomputers. The relationship in this area was disrupted by the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998, but it seems it is being revived. The other component is sale of weapons system. India has not achieved any major breakthrough directly, but many of the systems developed by the American defence industry funded by the US Defence Department and co-produced by Israel have been transferred to India. There is a long list items that India is buying from Israel with American assent and the items are likely to grow, as Israel becomes one of the biggest suppliers of defence hardware for Indian forces.

There are wide-ranging military programmes between India and the United States essentially in the fields of training and conducting joint exercises. Last year, India and US revived their joint exercises programmes involving all the three forces. They have planned similar exercises for the coming year. Those familiar with joint exercises will never regard them as merely symbolic; yes they could be regarded as such if they were occasional or limited to few surface ships, fighter plans and ground troops. Since 1992, India and the US have held four major naval exercises that included a variety of ships, submarines and interestingly P-3C aircraft on the American side that Pakistan Navy had. There couldn't better opportunity for the Indian Navy to familiarise itself with a weapon system that its adversary had. India reciprocated by bringing in Kilo-class submarines in the 1995 exercises that the Iranian Navy has to give a fair idea to the Americans about their strengths and weaknesses.

There could be serious implications for Pakistan's security, and perhaps that of China and other countries in the region as well if some new polarisation, looks unlikely, develops between China and the United States. Some policy hawks in the US would like to see India as a counterweight to China, if not for now, perhaps in the future. One thing is clear, keeping parity between Pakistan and India is not an American policy, and in my view never was it. Washington has very carefully worded its new policy by saying its relations with India will be independent of relations with Pakistan. Similarly, it would shape its relations with Pakistan without any prejudice to its ties with India. Sounds fine, but ground realities are very different. Just think of F-16 issue and you will have a clear perspective.