

# Implications of an Indo-US Strategic Embrace

**Major General Alok Deb, SM, VSM, (Retd)<sup>@</sup>**

## Introduction

The United States Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter arrived in Delhi for consultations in April 2016. As is the case when itineraries of foreign dignitaries are announced, this visit also generated its share of speculation and crystal gazing. Despite steady progress over the years, for certain sections of Indians, the prospects of balanced and positive Indo-US relations remain illusory – thanks to a history of continued American insensitivity to Indian strategic interests and stated policy in various fields, as also to the disparate and disjointed voices of India's fractured polity.

During the visit, India has committed to signing a Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), tailored specifically to Indian interests, in a matter of a few weeks or months.<sup>1</sup> The jury is still out on this, with many in the Indian strategic community arguing for and against such an arrangement. With degrees of merit on both sides, a closer scrutiny of the issues involved is warranted before reaching any conclusion on this specific aspect as also the entire canvas of Indo-US strategic cooperation with its attendant ramifications.

## India in the US Strategic Calculus

Indo-US ties which flowered with India's liberalisation programme of the 1990s were further stimulated by a reassessment of US policy following the September 2001 attacks. Immediately after that, India's role in the American scheme of things was clearly enunciated through the US National Security Strategy paper of September 2002 which notes that "the Administration sees India's potential to become one of the great democratic powers of the twenty-first century and has worked hard to transform our

---

**Major General Alok Deb, SM, VSM** was commissioned in the Regiment of Artillery in June 1977 and retired as Major General Artillery of HQ Eastern Command in Dec 2014. He commanded his regiment in Operation Vijay where it was awarded the COAS Unit Citation and Honour Title Kargil, and subsequently an Artillery Division.

*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLVI, No. 604, April-June 2016.

relationship accordingly”.<sup>2</sup> It further adds that “The United States has undertaken a transformation in its bilateral relationship with India based on a conviction that the US interests require a strong relationship with India..... we have a common interest in the free flow of commerce, including through the vital sea lanes of the Indian Ocean.... we share an interest in fighting terrorism and in creating a strategically stable Asia. Differences remain, including over the development of India’s nuclear and missile programmes, and the pace of India’s economic reforms. But while in the past these concerns may have dominated our thinking about India, today we start with a view of India as a growing world power with which we have common strategic interests”. Further, on India and Pakistan, it says, “Our involvement in this regional dispute, building on earlier investments in bilateral relations, looks first to concrete steps by India and Pakistan that can help defuse military confrontation.”

Compare the above with the National Security Strategy paper of 2015 which states “In South Asia, we continue to strengthen our strategic and economic partnership with India.<sup>3</sup> As the world’s largest democracies, we share inherent values and mutual interests..... We support India’s role as a regional provider of security and its expanded participation in critical regional institutions. We see a strategic convergence with India’s Act East policy and our continued implementation of the rebalance to Asia and the Pacific. At the same time, we will continue to work with both India and Pakistan to promote strategic stability, combat terrorism, and advance regional economic integration in South and Central Asia.” While it can be argued that the content is essentially the same (down to the hyphenation with Pakistan), clearly the enthusiasm of the early 2000s is muted. The realities of geopolitics over the preceding 15 years or so, domestic pressures in both countries as also the personal predilections of President Obama (as compared to George Bush, who was instrumental in pushing forward the Indo-US Nuclear Deal) seem to have left an imprint, with the potential of the relationship unrealised. This is borne out from the current state of defence cooperation between both nations which, at the end of the day has been restricted mainly to military to military exercises and a few equipment purchases without transfer of technology.

### **The US Rebalancing to Asia-Pacific**

Over the last two years, the United States's strategic rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific has acquired renewed impetus. Certain policy benchmarks, such as a corresponding reduction in the importance assigned to West Asia (specifically Saudi Arabia), a rapprochement with Iran, the search for reliable allies who will assist in maintaining the balance in the South China Sea in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness and President Obama's inclination towards 'surrogate warfare' both human and technological<sup>4</sup> to conserve American lives, constitute key aspects of the 'Obama Doctrine'.<sup>5</sup> Central to this is the call for all stakeholders to provide their share materially in full, towards ensuring security of common interests. The Asia-Pacific, where the US is preparing for full spectrum operations after a long spell of counter-insurgency, is the testing ground. And it is in this context that the visit of Ashton Carter needs to be viewed.

Further, indications of the current American mindset can be gleaned from remarks of the Secretary of Defence himself in April 2016 at an interaction at the Council on Foreign Relations which have since been widely publicised.<sup>6</sup> Mr Carter admits that China's actions are 'raising tensions in the region, leading to militarisation by its neighbours...'. He states that the US is making enormous investments in capability building, especially with deployment of the latest weapon platforms in the region and that '*...we will continue to fly and sail and operate wherever international law allows because we must continue the progress that has helped so many in the region to rise and prosper*'. This clear and unequivocal stand is in stark contradiction to the Chinese viewpoint articulated recently in the People's Daily that '... as long as China strengthens its presence in the South China Sea and the West Pacific, the US will respond with new military deployments....an ultimate solution will not come until the balance of power between China and the US witnesses a fundamental change in the West Pacific, which will take a long time to realise.....'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Implications of the American Outreach**

The American outreach towards India has thus acquired a sense of urgency, which is manifesting now through the LEMOA, a carry forward of a Logistics Support Agreement mooted earlier. The LEMOA once finalised will doubtless be subjected to scrutiny:

from all indications it does not afford the Americans any sort of '*carte blanche*' on Indian soil, but would be tailored to suit specific complementary Indian interests in the Indian Ocean and for other humanitarian reasons as articulated by the Government. Notwithstanding the above, the likelihood of India's neighbours in the immediate and extended vicinity perceiving this as the start of India getting drawn into a military alliance with the US is a real possibility, which could impact their subsequent interactions with India.

Chinese reaction to the proposed LEMOA has been subdued, both at their foreign office<sup>8</sup> as also by their outgoing ambassador to India.<sup>9</sup> Considering that India has publicly refused to carry out joint patrolling with the American Navy, the Chinese for the time being seem to be only watching an evolving situation. It will be another matter, however, if the LEMOA is used to extend the stay of American warships into the Indian Ocean on India's western and eastern seaboard, where they could be perceived as a threat to Chinese activity at Gwadar, or interference with its proposed maritime silk route. At the same time, a robust allied naval presence in the Indian Ocean through which a large percentage of world shipping still plies, would provide major leverages to India and security alternatives to smaller island nations.<sup>10</sup> Chinese reaction to such developments would be interesting to see, given their stand on freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean (epitomised famously by the saying that the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean). Of course, the irony in the totally opposite position taken by China on this very aspect in the South China Sea is not to be missed and could be another lever for future bargaining.

Another related issue pertains to the treatment received by Pakistan, China's enduring friend and all-weather ally. Pakistan continues to maintain close relations with the US and obtains various forms of aid from it (including F 16 fighters and helicopters), without raising Chinese hackles. It can, therefore, be argued that China should have no difficulty with India making its own arrangements with the Americans. Overall, such long term leverages would be far more effective for India as compared to pinpricks such as granting (and then revoking) visas to dissident Uighurs and others.<sup>11</sup> And for a balanced relationship between the two countries, leverages of various kinds are essential, so that both India and China can cooperate and progress on equal terms.

### **The Russian Factor**

In recent years, Russia has increasingly driven home its relevance in world affairs, be it in Europe (Georgia and Ukraine) or West Asia (Syria). Consequently there is now talk of a new 'Cold War' with visible attempts by the US to isolate Russia both politically and economically. The latest example is the American effort to extend sanctions against Russia, preventing it from exporting cheap gas to much of Europe.<sup>12</sup> Both Russia and the US are warming towards Iran as they compete for space in a geopolitically refigured West Asia. The equation is further complicated by their respective stances over Afghanistan, though there is congruence in attempting to rid the region of the ISIS. Russia has been making inroads into Pakistan as well for the last few years, again for different reasons with some success.<sup>13</sup> Thus, with US-Russia relations going through a grim phase, it is extremely important for India to nurture and sustain a strictly bilateral Indo-Russian relationship. While various aspects of the same (especially trade) need a fillip, that country still remains the major source for India to obtain its military weapon systems, be it *Sukhoi* fighter jets or *Smerch* rockets. Also, it is only the erstwhile Soviet Union and later Russia that have shared high level defence technology with India. It is, therefore, imperative for India to ensure that there are no negatives for the Indo-Russian relationship when sealing any agreement with the Americans. Thanks to its sheer size, mineral wealth, residual technological might and defence manufacturing capability, Russia will remain a great power and always extremely important to India.

### **The Regional Impact**

It is unlikely that any Indo-US strategic convergence will be viewed negatively by India's neighbours in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN, Australia, Japan, Vietnam and Korea are all broadly of one mind on the long term effects of China's rise. As for Pakistan, it is sure to up the ante with the US, by demanding some sort of equivalence with India or such like assurances, while fanning Chinese apprehensions on the issue. India's neighbours, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have mutually beneficial relations with both the USA and China, and would continue to do so. To unbiased observers it is, therefore, clear that in the security sphere at least, the convergence of Indo-American interests in the Asia-Pacific if formalised, would be mutually beneficial for both countries. India of course would

have to insert the fine print as per its own requirements to retain some strategic autonomy.

### **Managing Consensus at Home**

India has a long history of non-alignment with a tradition of spurning overtures from various blocs right from the commencement of the Cold War. Given such a historical mindset and the wildly divergent views of the Indian polity both mainstream, left and right of centre, managing a consensus on the prospect of aligning with the US on any issue has never been an easy task. While a precedent of signing a far more defence oriented pact, the Indo Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of August 1971 under the stewardship of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi does exist, it was done under the looming shadow of an inevitable war with Pakistan, and signed with a friendly communist regime which had stood guarantor for India on many occasions. At that time, there were no two questions on where exactly India's national interests lay, and the effect of the treaty on both American and Soviet actions during the liberation of Bangladesh is now history (however, this treaty too fuelled anti Americanism, thanks to then President Nixon's policies, and can be taken as a masterstroke of Soviet foreign policy). If such a consensus is to be arrived at today, the Government's long term regional policies would have to be further amplified. As a first step, the draft LEMOA could be shared with all parties and the content debated, so that concerns about possible loss of strategic autonomy are balanced against tangible gains, both immediate and long term.

### **Conclusion**

India is not an expansionist power and neither does it have the urge to dominate the world. We, therefore, come to the final question - at the end of the day, who needs the other more in the Asia-Pacific : India or the US? The answer to this will decide whether any other tangible benefits could accrue to India by playing this card. If the American need is more pressing, then there is scope for India to be more assertive on the issue. As noted earlier in this paper, the US's stated intent is to work with both India and Pakistan to create a stable and prosperous South Asia. If so, then this might be just the moment for informing the Americans that notwithstanding their constraints for sustaining the Pakistani state due to geopolitical realities, that country cannot be permitted to

blatantly foster terror in India and elsewhere any longer. For a change, the time has come for India to demand a clear *quid pro quo*, wherein instead of American reprimands cloaked in diplomatese, visible pressure, if not sanctions be put on Pakistan should it continue with its policy of facilitating the entire gamut of terrorist activity on Indian soil in any manner. LEMOA and other agreements could then be projected as truly in India's national interest by fulfilling multiple objectives, thereby becoming important milestones in India's march towards its rightful place in Asia.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Narayan Lakshman, 'One Handshake among Many', The Hindu, 21 April 2016.

<sup>2</sup> 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America', September 2002, pp.. 10-27.

<sup>3</sup> 'National Security Strategy', February 2015, pp.. 24-25.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Krieg, 'Externalising the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East', the Royal Institute of International Affairs, January 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine - How he's Shaped the World', The Atlantic Magazine, April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Speech by Ashton Carter at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 08 April 2016.

<sup>7</sup> 'Carter's No Show Highlights US Unease', People's Daily Online, 11 April 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on April 13, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> 'The way of China-India relations is still long, but promising', Ambassador Le Yucheng, Deccan Herald April 11, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Raja Menon, 'The Strategic Imperative', The Indian Express, April 13, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> 'Red faces in Govt, Uighur leader Dolkun Isa's visa cancelled after Chinese protests', Indian Express 26 April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> 'Obama says Russia sanctions must stay in place until Minsk implemented', Reuters April 25, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Joy Mitra, 'Russia, China and Pakistan: An Emerging New Axis?', The Diplomat August 18, 2015.