

INDIA AND THE U.S., OCEANS APART

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The U.S. has sold nearly \$15 billion worth of arms to India over the last 10 years. So the Donald Trump administration's displeasure at India's recent decision to buy the S-400 missile system from Russia puts a question mark about the future of India-U.S. cooperation in the Indo-Pacific for three reasons. Washington perceives Russia as a security threat. It stresses interoperability with U.S. armed forces. And, believing that the U.S. makes 'the best military product in the world', Mr. Trump aims to help American defence firms compete successfully against Russian and Chinese arms manufacturers.

Some in New Delhi have interpreted Washington's use of the label "Indo-Pacific" to mean that the U.S. has made India the central point of the Indo-Pacific. But neither Mr. Trump nor the National Security Strategy (NSS) document of 2017, (which outlined America's top security concerns, have corroborated the Indian interpretation.

When Mr. Trump first spoke about the Indo-Pacific at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017, he hailed Vietnam as being at "the very heart of the Indo-Pacific". The NSS 2017 views the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and APEC as "centerpieces of the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture".

The Indo-Pacific, as described in the NSS, represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world and "stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States".

That strategic vision does not cater to India's interests. The NSS 2017 has omitted some of India's most vital interests, including the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Also left out is the Strait of Malacca, which links the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is India's gateway to trade with Southeast Asia, Japan and South Korea.

Mr. Trump's concept of the Indo-Pacific seeks to counter China's assertiveness in Asia. China is the main security threat to U.S. primacy in Asia. It also has a long-standing border dispute with India. That gives India and the U.S. a shared interest in countering China's growing military power and territorial revisionist tendencies. But do they agree on how it could be done?

For Mr. Trump, economic security is national security. The NSS 2017 recognises that China's military power rests on its economic progress and its focus is on blunting China's competitive edge.

Mr. Trump's ideal of "America first" is about protecting American jobs, ensuring reciprocal bilateral trade practices, and the key role of the private sector — not the state — in directing investment. Do these priorities align with India's economic and trade policies?

Business engagement is at the centre of the Trump administration's strategy for a "free and open Indo-Pacific". For India, defence cooperation is the most significant dimension of the India-U.S. strategic partnership.

India itself is unclear about what it means by the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi has tended to present the term "Indo-Pacific" as raising India's strategic stature. But at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed ASEAN as the foundation of the Indo-Pacific and asserted that a geographical definition could not be a strategy to contain any country.

How useful is India to the U.S.? The NSS says: “Prosperous states are stronger security partners who are able to share the burden of confronting common threats.” Is the current talk of India’s economic prowess more about potential than reality? China’s economy (\$14 trillion) is nearly five times bigger than India’s, and its defence spending (\$228 billion) is far more than India’s \$63 billion.

Mr. Trump wants India to offer more investment to Asian countries. But India needs Chinese investment to upgrade its own infrastructure and is nowhere near competing successfully against China as an investor in Southeast Asia. In 2016, two-way trade between India and ASEAN moved up to \$71.6 billion. In contrast, two-way trade between China and ASEAN stood at more than \$452 billion. Moreover, Mr. Trump’s contemptuous labelling of India as the “tariff king” points to strong differences over trade practices.

At another level, maritime power is the key to international clout in the 21st century. About 90% of India’s trade passes through the Indian Ocean. India has less than 20 submarines in service; China 78. That is one reason why India needs the intelligence-sharing and drones promised by the U.S. at the 2+2 Dialogue in September to detect Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean. Significantly, of India’s three services, its Navy gets around 15% of the defence budget. The U.S. Navy and Marines get the lion’s share of the U.S. military budget.

Moreover, in April 2017, China successfully launched its second aircraft carrier, which was domestically built. But it will be many years before India’s second home-built aircraft carrier becomes operational. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. is sceptical about India’s capacity to counter the growing influence of China in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Dependent on the U.S. and Russia for most of its arms — and on the U.S. and China for much of its trade — India’s simultaneous efforts to cultivate good relations with the U.S., Russia and China highlight the conceptual differences between New Delhi and Washington on the Indo-Pacific and on how best to counter China in Asia. India-U.S. ties could also be encumbered by India’s need for greater economic strength, its red tape and its trading methods.

Sovereignty is, above all, sovereignty in foreign policy, said Jawaharlal Nehru. The extent to which India’s purchase of the S-400 will widen the gap between it and the U.S. on the Indo-Pacific will soon become apparent.

Anita Inder Singh is a Founding Professor of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution in New Delhi

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