

OPINION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

India's most important bilateral relationship is with the US. The two democracies have been uniquely molded together since India's Independence in 1947. Since then, the US has been a partner to India, helping the country set up the early Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), spurring India's Green Revolution, and fostering educational exchange through the 200,000 Indian citizens studying in the US today. Trade between the two countries rose to \$126 billion in 2017, and there are approximately 4 million Indian-Americans in the US enhancing this strategic relationship, which extends far beyond trade. The partnership has developed into more than a friendship between two democracies and their leaders. In every aspect, this relationship has never been more relevant to geopolitics.

There are those in India who downplay the importance of the relationship. Opponents of the US-India relationship harken back to India's long-standing policy of non-alignment—a policy recently expressed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Shangri-La speech in Singapore in June, when he noted that India does not pick favourites when it comes to foreign policy. These critics also remind us that the US sanctioned India for its nuclear tests back in 1998, though the relationship, especially with regards to defence, has changed drastically since then through the countries' Major Defense Partnership, which has been in effect since 2016.

Critics may argue that nothing has changed if CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions are imposed when India receives an S-400 from Russia, but this issue was recently resolved, thanks to Secretary James Mattis' herculean efforts to convince the US Congress to carve out a waiver "allowing" the S-400 purchase without sanctions. India should rest assured that Mattis' work won't go to waste. It would not make sense for the Donald Trump administration to spend significant political capital on India with the US Congress, only to have the US State Department not grant a waiver—especially after India signed COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement)—a decade's old ask of the US and the key deliverable of the recent 2+2 dialogue—allowing the US to transfer secure communications and data equipment to India and offer real-time data-sharing with the Indian military over secure channels. This victory for the bilateral demonstrates that India understands that its non-alignment rhetoric should not push India closer to Russia or China.

China's desire to contain India is so well documented that a distinct metaphor has been created to explain it. The "string of pearls" theory posits that China surrounds India—a potential challenger—by gaining access to strategic ports, roads and territory in India's backyard. China has access to ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Myanmar, which it can use for civilian and military purposes.

China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), runs through Indian territory in Kashmir. China is investing in the Maldives as part of BRI. During uprisings in the Maldives in March 2018, India had planned to intervene, but stood back as China indicated that it would not look kindly on Indian involvement. The message to India was: If you come too close, we are not too far away. China consistently encroaches into Indian territory in an attempt to intimidate and grab Indian land, Doklam being a recent example. Disputes with China are not just a strategic loss for India, but an economic one. GMR Group—an Indian infrastructure enterprise—secured the tender to build the Maldives' international airport, yet the island nation cancelled the tender unexpectedly and gave it to a Chinese company instead. Such a move comes as no surprise when 70% of the Maldives' debt is owed to China, and the interest alone is more than 20% of the Maldives' budget. The same story has played out in Africa and Pakistan.

On the Russian front, India is not in much better shape. Yes, India has historically purchased about 70% of its defence imports from Russia, but it should think twice about deepening the relationship. Russia cannot be trusted to perform routine maintenance on existing defence systems unless India buys new ones. That's a classic shakedown that should give India a pause. As should the pact for naval cooperation between Russia and Pakistan and Russia's purported \$2 billion loan to Pakistan for the construction of an 1,100-kilometer pipeline to transport LNG from Karachi to Lahore.

This is to say nothing of Russia's moves toward China as a hedge against the US, as evidenced by a recent *The Washington Post* report that for the first time "Moscow has integrated Chinese forces into its annual strategic exercises typically reserved for Russia's closest allies". Despite some suspicion between Russia and China, it is only logical that they pose a greater threat to the US' superpower status if they are united. Such a union leaves India as the third *chakra*.

This is what is meant by the "strategic convergence" between the US and India, and why it is in the US' and India's national security interests to be each other's greatest partner. What's more, the US has long made clear that it supports India's indigenous defence industry, its aspiration to be a regional power and its sovereignty. As the string of pearls tightens, it is time for critics to recognize the US as the one trustworthy companion that can help India counter threats in the region, fostering a more secure world.

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