A Pivot towards the United States?
Growing Power Politics in Asia and the India-US Strategic Partnership
By Stephen Burgess
US Air War College

Introduction
The US-India strategic partnership has been reaffirmed in the Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia. The Department of Defense emphasized India’s role in the rebalancing in the 2012 Strategic Guidance: “U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia to the Indian Ocean region and South Asia...The United States is also investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to be a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean.” The guidance makes it clear that the United States views India as the southwestern cornerstone of its rebalancing. In focusing on India, the Obama administration is building upon the Bush administration’s 2001 opening to India, the 2004 “next steps in the strategic partnership”, and the 2008 civilian nuclear energy agreement in which the United States recognized India as a legitimate nuclear energy state that also possessed nuclear weapons but had not acceded to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In March 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the Bush administration’s intention to assist India in becoming “a global power.” In November 2009, President Obama called India and the United States “natural allies” because of their shared free market-democratic values and “core goal of achieving peace and security for all peoples in the Asian region”.

India responded to US actions by continuing its unilateral nuclear testing moratorium, begun after nuclear tests in May 1998. After the 2008 nuclear deal, the Obama administration expected that India would work with the United States in arms control efforts in Asia. India participated in the Obama administration’s “nuclear security initiative” to prevent violent extremists from obtaining nuclear weapons material. In addition, New Delhi voted in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meetings in 2005 and 2009 against Iran’s lack of transparency in its nuclear program. India worked with the United States in efforts to start negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) and a nuclear weapons convention. Washington and New Delhi have been cooperating to realize India’s intention of joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement on nuclear export controls, and the Australia Group on chemical and biological export controls. The United States will soon succeed in helping to secure Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Among Indian experts, there have been no regrets in India about the 2008 deal, and some count it as one of India’s greatest foreign policy achievements. On the US side, one disappointment is that no US nuclear power stations have been sold to India because of liability issues.

In 2005, New Delhi and Washington negotiated the New Framework in the India-US Defense Relationship. This marked a significant leap forward in military cooperation, including
India’s purchase of billions of dollars’ worth of US military hardware and several joint exercises every year. The Indian military now has more joint exercises with the US military than with any other country, which has led to comments about an “exercise partnership”. The partnership raised concerns in China about containment and the eventual formation of a US-India alliance. In addition, since 2001, the United States and India have worked together to develop missile defense for India, including strategic dialogue about the utility of missile defense and purchase of US systems and technology as well as technical cooperation. In the meantime, India continues to pursue the development of its own rudimentary missile defense system.

In spite of the progress that has been made in US-India relations, it is questionable if India will move from being a partner of the United States towards becoming an even closer partner or even an ally. Seven decades of non-alignment and a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union from 1971-91 established patterns in India’s foreign policy that have been slow to change. India has a long-established relationship with Iran, which tends to complicate New Delhi’s partnership with Washington. In addition, the US tendency to lean towards India’s long-time adversary, Pakistan, has fostered Indian suspicions of US intentions. These suspicions were regenerated, after 11 September 2001, when the United States was compelled by the war against Al Qaeda along the Afghan-Pakistan border to renew its partnership with Pakistan as a “major non-NATO ally”. These and other factors have made it difficult for India to draw closer to the United States.

After a dramatic rise in relations in the last decade, capped by the 2008 nuclear agreement, the trajectory of the growing partnership has slowed and reached a plateau. In 2009, the Obama administration prioritized strategic dialogue with China over focusing on moving the strategic partnership with India further forward. On the military front, India decided not to purchase US F-16 fighters in 2011. The purchase of American fighters could have marked a major step forward in interoperability between the two air forces and in Indo-US relations. However, some Indian leaders and bureaucrats were wary of interoperability and appeared to equate it with alliance formation. In November 2011, the Obama administration announced the US “rebalance” to Asia and emphasized India’s prominence. However, the Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reacted cautiously to US appeals for a closer relationship. In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi swept to power with the promise of a “stronger India”, which could bode well for the US-India strategic partnership. The BJP also will form the strongest government in India for more than three decades without having to rely on coalition partners.

The thesis of this paper is that India’s national interest has been propelling the country towards becoming a valuable, cooperative partner with the United States. The national interest is driven by the challenge that a rising China poses to India. It is also motivated by the rise of the Indian middle class, which helped vote the BJP into power and which wants to see a stronger economy with greater opportunities and a stronger nation in the face of external challenges.

The paper analyzes Indian perspectives on the US rebalance to Asia and India’s role in the partnership. These perspectives help to explain why the trajectory of US-India strategic
relations reached a plateau, in spite of the 2008 nuclear deal, and why it might start to move upwards again. The paper incorporates the perceptions of Indian foreign and security policy experts about the rebalancing and nuclear deal and their impact on India’s positions on a range of issues as well as on the partnership. These experts hold various theoretical and policy positions on India’s security and provide varying perspectives on different issues facing India. These perspectives on several issues are used to determine the direction in which India-US relations might head.20

Previous research has been conducted using Indian think tank experts to reflect that country’s policy positions. In 2011 Murray Scott Tanner of the Center for Naval Analysis conducted research on Indo-Chinese relations, using interviews with such experts.21 His findings were that China’s virtual alliance with Pakistan was the greatest source of concern for Indian experts. On border issues, Tanner found that experts in both India and China believed that the other country was not respecting the status quo and was trying to undermine their country’s strategic position. Both sides cited nationalist opinion at home as a key obstacle to compromise. In regard to Tibet, experts on both sides believed that Chinese installation of a new Dalai Lama would increase tensions with India but would not spark a military conflict. Indian and Chinese security specialists both feared long-term erosion of their country’s strategic position as a result of the other country’s buildup of border deployments, conventional capabilities, and strategic forces. Indian experts expressed greatest concern over China’s military-logistical buildup along the Sino-Indian border. Indian naval analysts regarded the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) efforts to improve sustainment, tactical air cover, and basing as critical indicators of Beijing’s future intentions toward the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).22 Tanner concluded that the United States should assess the impact of China-India tensions on China’s balance of strategic attention, resources, and force structure between its “main strategic direction” (its eastern coast and Taiwan) and its “secondary strategic direction” (the south and west), including India.23

Opportunities for Greater Partnering

Shifting Indian domestic politics and the changing Asian balance of power provide opportunities for an expanded US-India strategic partnership. First, victory by the BJP may draw India closer to the United States. The BJP espouses Indian nationalism and great power realism and is concerned with increasing India’s power and countering the Pakistan-China virtual alliance.24 A BJP-led coalition governed India from 1998 to 2004 and initiated the strategic partnership with the United States as part of efforts to grow Indian power and counter Pakistan and China.25 A BJP-led government will place India’s national interest above non-alignment, take a strong stand towards Pakistan and China, and undertake economic reform that could regenerate rapid growth.26 The BJP would like to bring the private sector and companies, such as Tata, into the formulation of India’s foreign and defense policy.27 Accordingly, the private sector would energize Indian foreign policy and commercial relations.28 Given past performance and current rhetoric, a BJP-led government will probably be more willing to allow a closer partnership with the United States and greater interoperability with US forces.29
Second, the changing power balance in Asia provides the basis for an enhanced strategic partnership and eventual tripolarity. Aaron Friedberg, in *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, has provided an authoritative account of the growing bipolar balance of power. He points out that US efforts to maintain its previously dominant position are being increasingly challenged by China, which is pursuing its national interests in various parts of the continent. The United States has declined in relative power in Asia, especially since the financial crisis of 2008, while China has grown in power and influence. Therefore, it is probable that India, as a rising regional power, and the United States will be pursuing opportunities for greater partnering.

The regional balance of power is complicated by other actors. Russia appears to be gravitating towards a closer relationship with China, partly in opposition to the US rebalance. Japan is moving to adopt a more assertive defense and security stance, as it faces increasing challenges from China. The United States must play an “away game” in Asia and depend on allies in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia to help maintain a presence on or near the continent. In an emerging multipolar Asia, the question is how much China’s increasingly assertive behavior might compel the United States and India towards forging an even stronger relationship. The power relationship that is developing among China, the United States and India will be a highlight of Asian and global security this century.

To many Chinese observers, the “pivot” to Asia means increased US and allied efforts to contain China. To many American observers, China’s ultimate goal appears to be to push the United States out of Asia and the Western Pacific and make the region safe for Chinese hegemony. In order to challenge the United States over its commitment to Taiwan and confront Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, China is pursuing an anti-access and aerial denial (A2/AD) military strategy intended to blunt the effectiveness of the US Navy and Air Force in East Asia and the Western Pacific and push the United States away from the Asian continent.

In order to succeed in its strategy, China wants to avoid conflict with India, while trying to keep its southern neighbor inferior in power and position. Also, China wants to prevent India from mounting a challenge over border issues and supporting the desire of Tibetans for self-determination. China also continues to increase trade interdependence with India, raising the stakes of a military confrontation. China’s close relationship with Pakistan has reaped strategic rewards in relations with India. The regime in Islamabad has distracted New Delhi from devoting more of its attention to Beijing and broader Asian affairs. This also allows China to focus on East Asia. In addition, Pakistan is providing China with access to the Indian Ocean. China is in the process of developing the port of Gwardar in Baluchistan and plans to develop an overland route from western China.

Indo-Chinese relations remain unsettled, as China’s enduring strategic partnership with Pakistan and ongoing disputes over border issues and the buildup of forces along the border continue to concern Indian policy makers and security experts. Many Indian strategic thinkers interpret China’s close bonds with Pakistan, growing relations with Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and access to ports in the Indian Ocean as a Chinese “string of pearls” and as part of a
strategy to encircle and contain India. As India engages in soft balancing by strengthening relations with states that are concerned with the rise and expansion of China, Indian strategic thinkers are urging “harder power” partnerships with the United States, Japan and other states.  

The United States would like to manage the rise of China and develop a long-term partnership and share leadership of the Asian order with China and perhaps India. The rebalance to Asia emphasizes diplomatic and economic instruments of power to avoid alienating Chinese leaders. However, the US defense establishment is also preparing for an eventual military confrontation with Beijing. This is a principal reason why the United States is rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific. In response to China’s A2/AD strategy, the US Air Force and Navy have proposed the “air-sea battle” operational concept, and an office has opened in the Pentagon to put the concept into practice.

Some American strategists recommend that the United States hedge its bets by leaning more towards India in order to balance power in relation to China, without escalating the security dilemma. This would be a difficult equilibrium to achieve. Washington cannot be certain that New Delhi will be willing to balance harder against Beijing. Until China exerts sufficient pressure, India will continue to soft balance and take measured actions against Chinese border incursions.

India would prefer the United States end its “major non-NATO alliance” with Pakistan and prevent a Taliban takeover in Kabul. However, Washington must also maintain its major non-NATO alliance with Islamabad in order to prevent Afghanistan from falling to the Taliban and threatening Pakistan. If Washington diminished its ties with Islamabad and the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, violent extremists would surge and threaten all of South Asia and perhaps take control of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. The best that can be done would be for the United States and India work together after 2014 to prevent the Taliban from coming to power in Afghanistan and to manage relations with Pakistan.

An issue for the United States and India is how Asian peace and security can best be maintained as the continent moves towards multipolarity and as rising powers challenge the US-led Asian security order. In regard to keeping the peace in Asia, the question is how much international cooperation will be effective and how much the region must rely on power balancing. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has prevented conflicts between member states and has promoted dialogue among major powers in Asia through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). However, there is no sign of an emerging Asian collective security organization, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which would bring Asian countries together to provide mutual defense against a common adversary. In the absence of such an organization, China has preferred to deal with most of its neighbors on a bilateral basis and exploit their differences. In particular, China is challenging Japan in the East China Sea and Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea, which China claims as its own, and has been reluctant to engage in multilateral dispute resolution. ASEAN has tried to persuade China to abide by a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea but to no avail.
Power balancing through an alliance or partnership with greater or equal power than the rising power and its allies appears to be the primary, workable way to maintain order and stability in Asia by deterring a rising power like China. The United States could choose to balance power by strengthening existing alliances and partnerships and building up US military presence in the region. However, Washington cannot push too hard in balancing to the point where China acts to counter containment, causing a security dilemma and an escalation spiral. In particular, the United States cannot inadvertently encourage its allies, especially the Philippines and Japan, to act recklessly towards China. Also, the United States must manage each of the bilateral relations carefully and in isolation from each other, especially given the animus between Japan and South Korea. In sum, US “hub-and-spoke” alliances in Asia are weaker in dealing with a rising China than the NATO collective defense alliance that faces Russia. Given this dynamic, Washington is proceeding cautiously in building its partnership with New Delhi in order to avoid unnecessarily provoking Beijing. However, in the unlikely event that China was to attack India, the door would be open to the formation of an alliance with a mutual defense pact with the United States.

Also, Asian powers, such as India and Japan, could balance against China without US assistance. In Asia, a number of bilateral security ties have been formed, which might serve as the basis for balancing against and deterring a rising China. However, an alliance of India and Japan without the United States would not have the military power to deter China in the East China Sea or South China Sea, and the countries are too dispersed to act concertedly.

Friedberg raises the possibility of the development of a tripolar balance of power involving the United States, China and India. Such an arrangement existed in Asia in the 1970s and 1980s when China “tilted” towards the United States in order to counter the Soviet Union without forming an alliance. It is likely that India will try to play the United States and China off against each other, occasionally tilting towards the United States and against China, without entering into an alliance.

In regard to military capabilities and partnering, the Indian Navy will be important in helping to achieve the US strategic rebalance to Asia and central in attaining objectives in securing the Indian Ocean region (IOR). At present, the Indian Navy is able to help provide security with anti-piracy and anti-submarine patrols, especially in the sea lanes running from the Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca. The United States and Indian navies have formed what can be termed as an “exercise partnership” - developed through frequent joint interactions over the last decade. The United States would like to see more interoperability with the Indian military and, especially between the US and Indian navies. For example, progress could be made in developing naval interoperability in disaster relief operations and then using this as a stepping stone towards greater interoperability.

The future path of the Indian Navy will determine how much security India will be able to provide in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). In regard to modernization, the aircraft carrier Vikrant and the nuclear submarine Arihant should be operational by 2020. The Navy has a more solid foundation and a longer-term perspective to develop than the other services. The Navy
tends not to purchase many ships outside of India, as it has an expensive and large-scale shipbuilding program inside the country. The Indian Navy could allow the US Navy to shift its attentions eastward from the IOR in the 2020s. Also, India may find that it is eventually confronted by China’s anti-access and area denial (A2AD) strategy in the Indian Ocean and may have to develop its own “air-sea battle” operational concept that will require modernization and assistance from the United States.

India fits tangentially into the US rebalance strategy that is focused on the East China Sea and South China Sea. Though India does have increasing trade with Southeast Asian countries and has adopted a look east policy, India’s interests largely stop on the eastern side of the Strait of Malacca. For India to enter the South China Sea and establish a permanent presence, perhaps with berthing rights in Vietnam, would constitute an overreach beyond its capabilities and a provocation to China. However, if tensions escalate, India can serve US strategic interests by distracting Chinese ground and air forces towards the Himalayas and away from the Asia-Pacific. The Indian navy can also inhibit the flow of oil and minerals to China through the Indian Ocean in case of a confrontation in East Asia. China is vulnerable in the Indian Ocean, as much of its energy and mineral supplies pass through its waters. Given China’s vulnerability, the prospect of conflict in the Indian Ocean is low in spite of China’s “string of pearls”.

Much more likely is a conflict in the Himalayas, especially with ongoing border issues and with China building military bases in Tibet. Also, China has projects under way to dam the Brahmaputra River and other streams that could deprive parts of India of vital water sources. Finally, Tibet remains restive, and unrest by supporters of self-determination could spur conflict in the Himalayas. Thus far, the two sides have remained cautious and not escalated beyond skirmishes.

The US rebalance is aimed mainly at strengthening influence in Northeast and Southeast Asia. To some extent, US rebalancing activity in Southeast Asia will be complemented by India’s “look east” policy. India’s policy achieved its greatest success in its engagement with Myanmar-Burma, which contributed to the democratization of the country. The policy helped open the door to US engagement and will enable the United States and India to work together to compete for influence with China. For example, the United States and India could cooperate in developing the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which would greatly increase Indian access to the country.

The United States and India both have partnerships with Vietnam, and it is possible that the three countries will cooperate with joint exercises and other activities in the future. India plans to eventually help build an “east-west Indo-ASEAN/Ganges-Mekong overland corridor.” It will connect India with Vietnam and provide greater Indian involvement and influence in mainland Southeast Asia. However, at the moment, deliberations about the corridor are considered by some to be largely a “talk shop”. Finally, the United States is interested in India’s eventual inclusion in the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which aims to establish a multilateral free trade area among more than a dozen countries.
The United States hopes that India will assist in patrolling the Strait of Malacca. More than half of Indian shipping and Indian trade pass through the strait. India has an interest in becoming involved in helping to maintain security in the strait, since most of India’s trade passes through the strait. In the future, unmanned and unarmed aerial surveillance vehicles based in India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands could help patrol the strait. In regard to the South China Sea, India has participated in joint exercises there, but the sea is too far away for the Indian Navy to patrol persistently given the Navy’s limited reach and power.

In regard to the Philippines’ confrontations with China over the Scarborough Shoals, the United States has been criticized in India for not being supportive enough. In the long run, the United States will have to balance support for its allies and partners with the need to maintain cordial relations with China and avoid escalation of tensions and a spiral towards conflict. Ideally, the United States and ASEAN nations need to convince China to accept a multilateral approach to resolving disputes, especially in the South China Sea.

The US rebalance in East Asia is aimed at strengthening its alliances with Japan and South Korea and forestalling Chinese hegemony. India’s strategic partnership with those two countries may complement the US rebalance in “soft balancing” in relation to China. India is building closer relations and cultivating its strategic partnership with Japan. On its part, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Japanese government are pushing hard for a stronger partnership with India. However, there is little that India can do to assist Japan and the United States in the East China Sea. The distance from the Indian Ocean to the East China Sea is too great for India, given the limited scope of its interests and capabilities.

In regard to the ongoing US-China strategic dialogue, India would like the United States to avoid any moves towards cooperation with China in “solving Asian security problems”. In particular, India rejects any outside meddling in the Kashmir dispute. India asserts that it is well on the way to resolving the Kashmir issue itself and that dialogue with Pakistan will eventually bring peaceful resolution.

India was a close partner with Russia during the Cold War. Today, India is concerned about Russia’s direction, leaning towards China and away from the West. Russia still wants to sell military hardware to India, but the relationship is no longer as close as it was. There is concern that China and Russia will collude through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to keep India out of Central Asia. However, India-Russia defense ties and joint weapons production remain strong.

India is concerned about the more assertive stance of China’s new leadership. This concern is especially provoked by persistent Chinese violations of border areas as well as a military buildup north of the border. In response to a recent Chinese border incursion, the Indian Air Force sent to the border region a C-130J transport plane, purchased from the United States. The perception in India is that China is sensitive about Tibet and the resistance of Tibetans which has been quietly supported by India since 1959.

A number of Indian security experts have been thinking about what the United States could do to support India as part of the US rebalance to Asia. They assert that it is possible that
India eventually will ask the United States for assistance and that the United States could do more in the meantime to support India. For instance, some Indian security experts think that the United States should work to prevent China from strengthening its already close relations with Pakistan. The United States could go beyond recognition of India’s claims on the McMahon Line in the northeast of the country and recognize India’s claims on its border with China in Kashmir in the north.

Given the new BJP government, at issue is what more the United States can do to assist India beyond helping to modernize India’s air force, army and navy and develop the “exercise partnership” and greater interoperability. A strengthening of the strategic partnership with the United States is as far as India is prepared to go; an alliance with the United States would put India in a difficult position with China. Therefore, a strengthened partnership is the most likely step forward in which the United States would reduce ties with Pakistan; recognize more of India’s claims against China; and continue to support Afghanistan and India’s interests.

**India’s Limitations in Partnering with the United States**

A principal limitation is India’s weakness relative to China. Even though India has grown significantly in power over the past two decades, China has grown faster. Therefore, India remains inferior to China in terms of geostrategic position and economic and military capabilities. It appears to observers that India will never catch up with China and will never be able to stand up to China on equal terms. Therefore, India will always be limited in assisting the US rebalance to Asia.

Another limitation is India’s attachment to “strategic autonomy”, which means that India’s leaders will be careful not to be drawn into an alliance with the United States. Indian policy makers and experts consistently stress the importance of strategic autonomy and do not feel compelled to move from the current partnership towards an alliance. Only sustained aggression by China would compel India to ally with the United States and move from the current state of “soft balancing” towards China towards “hard balancing”. Therefore, India’s leaders are willing to continue partnering with the United States in patrolling the Indian Ocean and ensuring freedom of navigation, but they will be careful in allowing high levels of naval inter-operability.

In regard to anchoring the South Asian economy, India’s high rate of growth over the last two decades has benefited most South Asian countries, except for Pakistan. However, The Congress Party-led government’s failure to adopt further economic reforms has contributed to slower growth rates, inflation and devaluation of the rupee. Also, trade with and investment in Pakistan has never taken off due to recurring crises between the two states. The prospects are uncertain for India driving growth in Pakistan as long as tensions continue.

After a remarkable period of growth in the US-India partnership from 2001 to 2009, crowned by the 2008 civilian nuclear agreement, relations settled on a plateau. The relationship slowed after the Congress Party won reelection in 2009 to form a government for a second term. Afterwards, the government drifted leftward towards its “Nehruvian” roots, characterized by
support for nonalignment, strategic autonomy and global disarmament. Experts with views that fall into the Nehruvian category encountered in this research project were wary that the US rebalance would bring intensified pressures for an elevated partnership and even an alliance with the United States. In the Congress Party, there has been a divide between an anti-American wing that clashed with more accommodating centrists. The Defense Minister from 2009 to 2014, A.K. Antony, was seen by many as part of the anti-American wing and as the leading figure in the slowing of defense cooperation with the United States. In addition, the Indian bureaucracy remains small and slow-moving, Nehruvian in orientation, and reluctant to change India’s traditional foreign policy positions. The new BJP government will be faced with the task of working to implement its foreign and security policies in the face of these obstacles.

India is limited in its ability to partner with the United States because of doubts about the US rebalance and credibility. For example, as Japan and Philippines have clashed with China over territorial claims, there is a perception that the United States has not come sufficiently to the aid of its allies. Some believe that the United States is “leading from behind” and that the rebalance will not lead to a dramatic change in its behavior. Others see the United States as a resident power in Asia already and that the rebalance is not so significant. Furthermore, several Indian experts noted that US budget cuts may reduce the scale of the rebalance. In addition, the US strategic and economic dialogue with China leaves India and other US allies and partners fearing that deals may be made concerning their interests without their knowledge. Finally, there is a belief in India that the US rebalance will mean less attention to the transition in Afghanistan and constraining Pakistan.

The past Indian government viewed the development of interoperability between the US and Indian navies as the path to a possible alliance, which would impinge on India’s strategic autonomy. The new BJP government may be more open to greater interoperability. Currently, there are debates about how capable and modern the Indian Navy is in regard to doctrine, warships and weaponry. There are also concerns about where and if the Navy fits in India’s unwritten national security strategy.

Even as the importance of the navy to India has grown along with its widening maritime interests – most strikingly the rapid rise of seaborne imports of oil, gas and now coal – the navy’s share of defence expenditure has fallen by 16%.... India has no naval strategic doctrine. There is little coordination among the many government agencies. Over the past 12 years, the creation of a national maritime advisor, a cabinet committee on maritime affairs and a maritime commission has been recommended within the government. None of these have been implemented.

The Indian Navy is less capable than the Chinese Navy, though the latter is engaged mainly in the East and South China seas. However, China is increasingly involved in the IOR through the “string of pearls”. Indian Navy exercises with other Asian navies, including the Australian Navy, constitute a form of “soft-balancing” towards China but do not threaten China or the Chinese Navy. Nevertheless, China has protested in the past against India-initiated multilateral naval...
exercises, and those protests have caused India, on occasion, to alter its plans. The explanation has been that India must live in the same neighborhood as China and must take into account its protests.

Some Indian observers term the relationship between US-India as a “transactional partnership” in which the United States continually tries to sell India military hardware with no real benefit to the Indian economy. India would like to see more US technology transfer and production of US defense items inside the country. In 2012 and 2013, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, worked with the Indian government on these issues. However, progress has been slow due partly to bureaucratic barriers on both the Indian and US sides. Greater US technology transfer and local production are measures that will strengthen the partnership, while not provoking China.

The problem that India faces is that weapons production and procurement processes are not capable of producing advanced weapons systems. As Debar Mohanty observes, India is capable only for replenishment not modernization and capability development and that modernization and advanced technology capabilities are inadequate. Nidhi Goyal finds that “In spite of these encouraging policy pronouncements, the indigenous defence industry continues to face challenges in terms of the existing policy and regulatory environment such as industrial licensing, offsets, imports and exports licences, regulations, tax regime, and so forth.”

The reason is vertically rigid security institutions that do more harm than good for military transformation. Capability-oriented modernization tests the politico-strategic resolve of the Indian decision-makers.

Four distinct institutional pillars – political class (government of the day and opposition parties), civil bureaucracy (MoD and related ministries), military bureaucracy (armed forces headquarters), defence scientific bureaucracy (DRDO) – and lack of inter-institutional interactions among themselves have perpetuated the pathetically inefficient course of military modernisation in India. Private industry, media and academia have been practically kept out of this quadrangular, virtually unaccountable system.

Therefore, even if the United States wanted to transfer technology and promote local production, India may not be capable of producing advanced weapons systems.

**Challenges of an Enhanced Partnership**

The US rebalance to Asia and India’s look east policy could be hampered by security challenges from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran’s nuclear ambitions and intentions in the Gulf could continue to keep the United States and its Navy busy. India and the United States diverge on how to deal with Iran, with India favoring engagement and the United States sanctions and containment. India needs to maintain relations with Iran in order to maintain access to Central Asia and Afghanistan and meet growing energy needs. Both the United States and India hope that the Rouhani government in Tehran can negotiate in good faith.
India’s ability to partner with the United States will be hampered by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and by the resurgence in militancy in Afghanistan and Pakistan after 2014. Afghanistan 2015 remains a major source of concern in New Delhi. The negotiation of a status of forces agreement with the Karzai government in Kabul is essential to keeping 5,000 to 10,000 US troops in Afghanistan and helping to fortify the government against the Taliban. There is the danger that – as in the 1990s – the dominoes will fall with Afghanistan succumbing to the Taliban, large parts of Pakistan falling to the Taliban, and a rise in violent extremist activity in Kashmir. There is also concern about the rise of violent extremists within the rest of India.\textsuperscript{89} India has problems of access to Afghanistan (it must go through Iran to resupply its aid activities there). In regard to the idea of placing Indian forces in Afghanistan, this would cause a crisis with Pakistan. There could be no more than a couple hundred Indian military advisors in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{90}

Indian attitudes towards the US “major non-NATO alliance” with Pakistan fall into two camps. There are those who would want the United States to woo Pakistan away from its close partnership with China. Others would like to see the United States move away from Pakistan and move closer to India.\textsuperscript{91} The United States must maintain its alliance with Pakistan in order to continue to have access to Afghanistan and press Pakistan to continue to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the long run.\textsuperscript{92} Over time, the United States will continue to grow closer to India and move away from Pakistan.

The US alliance” with Pakistan will remain to guarantee access to Afghanistan. The United States will continue to press Pakistan to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda, work to prevent loose nukes, and counter China from monopolizing relations with Pakistan. Indian perceptions are that the US-Pakistan alliance will slow the advance of the Indo-US partnership. For both India and the United States, Pakistan will continue to be a distraction that will inhibit rebalancing to the east.

The partnership between the US and Indian navies, which is part of the US rebalance, will not be greatly affected by distractions coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the situation could change as a result of China’s activities in the Pakistani port of Gwardar and partnership with Pakistan’s navy.

**Policy Options for the United States and India**

The most likely option for the BJP government is to pursue a more nationalist line than the previous government and work to build up the economy and military and take a tougher line against Pakistan and China. In such a case, India would engage selectively in relation to US overtures, as it did from 2001-4. Therefore, it is possible that intensive US overtures, such as greater naval interoperability, will bear fruit. The United States could reengage on trying to sell F-16 fighters to India. If this happens, the United States could intensify its overtures, which could lead to a stronger partnership.
A less likely option for the BJP government would be to continue the previous government’s coolness towards the strategic partnership. If this happened, the United States could lessen its engagement, which would lead to deterioration in the strategic partnership. However, the BJP government needs to engage the United States in order to draw it away from its alliance with Pakistan and dialogue with China.

Another less likely option is for the BJP government to adopt a “great power realist” position and quickly move India closer to the United States, which would propel the strategic partnership towards developing into an alliance. The United States would welcome India’s advances but would be faced with the choice of consummating an alliance or stopping short. Moving quickly to an alliance could alienate China and damage US engagement and dialogue policy.

Finally, the United States could decide to engage in balancing off-the-shore of Asia. The question is, how far off shore the United States should position itself? By maintaining bases in Japan and the Philippines, the United States could still be able to intervene inside the “first island chain” in the South China Sea and East China Sea and in defense of Taiwan as well as dominating the “second island chain”. In such a case, India would have to reach out to the United States and convince US leaders to maintain the strategic partnership.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented proof for the thesis that India’s national interest has been propelling the country towards becoming a valuable, cooperative partner with the United States. The proof revolved around the growing power of China and the new BJP government. An expanding China is impinging on Indian interests in South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and is pushing India to look for partners, especially the United States. The BJP is committed to advancing India’s national interests and growing India’s power. It is likely that the BJP government will bring a return of nationalism and closer relations with the United States.

Therefore, US-India relations might develop more in line with the US vision of an enhanced strategic partnership and its role in the rebalance to Asia. The US-India “exercise partnership” now has a better chance of moving towards military interoperability and a stronger strategic partnership. India will be more willing and able to be a partner with the United States in the rebalance to Asia, primarily by maintaining security and stability in the Indian Ocean region. This is especially evident through the US-India exercise partnership and development of India’s naval forces. In this vein, India will continue to press for transfer of technology and local production of weapons and other defense items. In regard to arms control, India will continue to work with the United States but a multilateral effort is needed for further arms reductions measures.

In regard to anchoring economic growth in South Asia, India is already playing a role. However, it could do much more if economic reforms are implemented and if India is able to overcome differences with Pakistan and engage more economically. To some extent, US activity focused in Southeast Asia will be complemented by India’s “Look East” policy. There is the
prospect of Indo-US cooperation in partnerships with Myanmar, Vietnam and other ASEAN nations.

Many US officials still see India as a geopolitical underperformer, which may not be able to deliver as much in the way of a strategic partnership. Conversely, it will be a struggle for the United States to reassure partners, such as India, and allies, such as the Philippines and Japan, that it will follow through on its security commitments. US credibility will remain suspect, especially while it engages China in strategic and economic dialogue and trade and attempts to mitigate Chinese fears of containment.

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran will continue to distract the United States and India from “looking east” together. However, naval forces that are crucial to the rebalance, partnership and look east policy will not be greatly affected, unless there is a threat to the Strait of Hormuz by Iran. Therefore, the US plan to rely on the Indian Navy to help maintain stability and security in the Indian Ocean stands a good chance of coming to fruition.

In sum, the rebalance should add to the US-India strategic partnership. The United States has committed itself to focusing increasing attention on Asia. The major flashpoints in Asia are and will remain the East and South China seas and less so the Indian Ocean. India may eventually ask the United States for military aid and security assistance in dealing with China over their border dispute. However, moves toward a US-India alliance are unlikely unless China pushes India too far. Much depends on how China behaves on the border and conducts relations with Pakistan and other South Asian countries.

DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of the US Air War College, the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US Government branch.

Notes

1 Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” Foreign Policy, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century. In the article Secretary of State Clinton refers to the “pivot” to Asia. The term was later changed to “rebalance”.


guarantee program could “major non-conflict to Asia. India should develop missile defense, based upon arguments about whether or not missile defense will bring stability or

Analyses, New Delhi, 23 August 2013.

Studies, December 2012, 1 successful peacekeeping operations; abilities of the Armed Forces to respond quickly to disasters, including in combi

production, and research and development; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; defeat terrorism; multinational operatio

US Secretary of Defen

chemicals, organisms, materials, equipment, and technology (SCOMET) list.

strengthening
course

treaty involving Russia, China, France, and Britain, though there is no sign of negotiations on the horizon.

counter US space cap

http://www.indlawnews.com/newsdisplay.aspx?93aaac88-0690-4130-9287-93d95a8141ce . However, the FMCT has been blocked for years by Pakistan and China, because China wants a space weapons treaty (PAROS) in part to counter US space capabilities. Eventually, the United States and India could collaborate on a multilateral START treaty involving Russia, China, France, and Britain, though there is no sign of negotiations on the horizon. In due course, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea could be brought into negotiations.

Joint Statement: Fourth U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue,” U.S. Department of State, 24 June 2013, http://www.state.gov/t/tpa/prs/ps/2013/06/211084.htm. In addition, the United States and India are cooperating on strengthening cyber-security, and the United States has welcomed India’s March 2013 update to the special chemicals, organisms, materials, equipment, and technology (SCOMET) list.

The New Framework in the India-US Defense Relationship signed by the Defense Minister of India and the US Secretary of Defense on 28 June 2005 charted a course for defense relations. Under the New Framework, India and the United States agreed to: a) Conduct joint and combined exercises and exchanges; b) Collaborate in multinational operations if it is in common interest; c) Strengthen capabilities of militaries to promote security and defeat terrorism; d) Promote regional and global peace and stability; e) Enhance capabilities to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; f) Increase opportunities for technology transfer, collaboration, co-production, and research and development; g) Expand collaboration relating to missile defense; h) Strengthen abilities of the Armed Forces to respond quickly to disasters, including in combined operations; i) Conduct successful peacekeeping operations; and j) Conduct and increase exchanges of intelligence.


Interview with C. Raja Mohan, Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, 27 August 2013.

Vinod Kumar, presentation on ballistic missile defense and stability in Asia, Institute for Defence and Security Analyses, New Delhi, 23 August 2013. Among Indian security experts, there continue to be debates about whether or not India should develop missile defense, based upon arguments about whether or not missile defense will bring stability or conflict to Asia.


“Bush names Pakistan as ‘major ally,”’ BBC, 17 June 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3814013.stm. Pakistan as a “major non-NATO ally” became eligible for priority delivery of defense material; could stockpile US military hardware; could participate in defense research and development program with the United States; and could benefit from a US loan guarantee program. The alliance sealed a working relationship and not a mutual defense pact.
“Indians are technologically advanced and able to confront the United States at a more advanced level.”

However, China will be more assertive challenge to the United States as it will in the next two decades, because of the “graying” of China. By 2030, at least thirty percent of China’s population will be over the age of sixty, and the rate of economic growth will slow and the number of young people available for military service will also drop. However, China will be more technologically advanced and able to confront the United States at a more advanced level.

The views of Vivekananda Foundation experts most closely represent those of the BJP.

According to the authors, the BJP includes “hyper-nationalists” and “great power realists”. In the think tank world, “hyper-nationalists” include Bharat Karnad of the Centre for Policy Stand Rajiv Nayan and “great power realists” include C. Raja Mohan.

The BJP opposes the nuclear deal, taking a nationalistic line.

In contrast to Indian experts, Chinese experts contended that China has adopted a more balanced approach toward Pakistan and India since 1999, which has greatly eased Sino-Indian tensions. However, Beijing still desires a strong, stable Pakistan, in order to secure its Muslim west, build bridges to the Muslim world, and maintain leverage against India. Chinese military analysts portrayed India as an increasingly offense-oriented power seeking to dominate the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Given the views of Indian and Chinese experts, Tanner concluded that the United States may need to revisit its diplomatic, economic, and security strategies in the region to take account of the impact of India and China’s competition.


Interview with Major General (retired) Dipankar Bannerjee, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, 13 August 2013.

Interview with Sushant Sareen, Research Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, 21 August 2013. The views of Vivekananda Foundation experts most closely represent those of the BJP.

Interview with Bharat Karnad, Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, 21 August 2013.

Interviews with Dipankar Bannerjee, 13 August 2013 and Sushant Sareen, 21 August 2013. The BJP opposed the nuclear deal, taking a nationalistic line that the Congress Party-led government was “giving away too much” to consummate the deal.


Feng Wang, “Racing towards the Precipice,” China Economic Quarterly, April 2012 http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2012/06/china-demographics-wang. After 2030, China may not pose the same assertive challenge to the United States as it will in the next two decades, because of the “graying” of China. By 2030, at least thirty percent of China’s population will be over the age of sixty, and the rate of economic growth will slow and the number of young people available for military service will also drop. However, China will be more technologically advanced and able to confront the United States at a more advanced level.


will keep the United States engaged on or near the Asian continent. This would make it difficult for the United States to reenter Asia. China’s anti-access and aerial denial (A2/AD) strategy is designed to prevent US reentry. US alliance commitments to Japan and South Korea will be difficult to end and will keep the United States engaged on or near the Asian continent.


48 Haggard, “The Organizational Architecture of the Asia Pacific,” 195-221. The principal Asian security organization is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its offshoot the ASEAN Regional Forum which includes the United States, China and other Asian powers. However, ASEAN has not adopted a mutual defense pact in the nearly five decades of its existence, and there is little hope that it will ever become the Asian NATO. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), focused on Central Asia, is overshadowed by the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).


52 Stuart, “San Francisco 2.0,” 202-218. As for the United States, a balancing strategy that is too far off-shore would make it difficult for the United States to reenter Asia. China’s anti-access and aerial denial (A2/AD) strategy is designed to prevent US reentry. US alliance commitments to Japan and South Korea will be difficult to end and will keep the United States engaged on or near the Asian continent.

58 Interview with Bharat Karnad, 21 August 2013.
59 Comments by think tank experts at presentation by the author at the Institute for Defence and Security Analyses, New Delhi, 14 August 2013.
61 Interview with C. Raja Mohan, 27 August 2013.
62 Interview with Bharat Karnad, 21 August 2013.
63 Concerns about Russia’s intentions were raised at the six presentations that the author gave in New Delhi in August 2013.
65 Interview with Monika Chansoria, Senior Fellow & Managing Editor, CLAWS Journal, The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), 13 August 2013.
66 Interview with C. Raja Mohan, 27 August 2013.
67 Interview with C. Raja Mohan, 27 August 2013.
68 Interview with Bharat Karnad, 21 August 2013.
71 This was the prevailing view of most think tank experts who were interviewed in August 2013. In addition, many of the comments made and asked during presentations by the author to six different think tanks reflected this view.
73 T.V. Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” International Security 30, no. 1 (2005), 46-71. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/international_security/v030/30.1paul.html (accessed July 15, 2013). “Soft balancing” is a practice in which India has excelled, which has been an important part of India’s soft power. It involves the formation of limited coalitions, especially in international bodies.
74 For many years, 45 rupees bought one US dollar. In 2013, the rupee fell in value against the dollar to 60 to one and inflation rose to close to ten per cent per month.
According to the authors, “Nehruvians” are also known as “standard nationalists”. Also, in recent years, a group of “neo-nationalists” has arisen in the Congress Party who place domestic needs over international engagement.

In recent years, a group of “neo-nationalists” has arisen in the Congress Party who place domestic needs over international engagement. This is opposed to China, which decides quickly and moves on its decisions.

 Presley Thomas, “A Navy under Neglect: Cinderella Service; Governmental apathy leaves the force in a miserable condition,” Hindustan Times, 22 August 2013, 1.


 Nidhi Goyal, Indigenisation to make India self-reliant”, The Indian Express, special section, “Indian Defence: The Pace of Modernisation”, 22 August 2013, 1.


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 Some US officials observe that India’s problem with developing the partnership with the United States is a general inability of government officials to make decisions. This is opposed to China, which decides quickly and moves on its decisions.

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