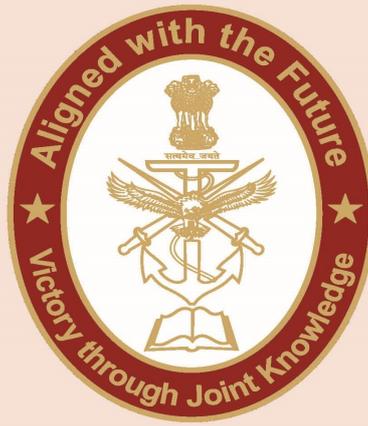


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DOES GROWING INDIA-US RELATIONSHIP ENHANCE OUR SECURITY

BY

MAJ GEN HARSHA KAKAR (RETD)

The India-US strategic relationship is moving at a pace much faster than envisaged. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which opened doors for providing refuelling and replenishment in designated military facilities was the first step taken by India indicating it favouring the US camp. LEMOA covers four areas, joint exercises, port calls, training and humanitarian and disaster relief. It is now in talks to sign almost the same with Russia, the opposite camp.

The second agreement was COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement). This opened doors for India to obtain critical defence technologies and access critical communication network to ensure interoperability between the US and Indian armed forces. It initially did worry India as it would open Indian bases for US inspections, but post allaying of fears, was signed during the 2+2 dialogue this year.

The recent visit by the defence minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, to the US had a positive impact on defence ties. The statement issued during the visit stated, 'Both sides agreed to further strengthen bilateral defence cooperation, building on the discussions and outcomes of the 2+2 dialogue held in Sept 2018.' Thus, India and the US are moving closer, despite differences on issues.

For the last two months, since India signed the S-400 missile deal with Russia there have been statements that India may not come under US sanctions imposed under CAATSA, though no formal announcement has yet been made. Due to its investment in the Chabahar port and its unwillingness to bend to US pressure, India has been left out of US sanctions on import of Iranian oil. The reason given is the benefit the port would have for Afghanistan. While India moved deeper into the US camp, it continues maintaining relations with Russia and Iran, two of the US's main adversaries.

India and the US also have differences. The US for once has begun separating its economic and strategic relationships. Thus, while it expands its strategic relations with India, there are differences on trade and H1B Visa issues, which remain as thorns in the relationship.

There are also differing views on the QUAD and the role of the Indian navy in the ASEAN region. The US had desired that the QUAD be upgraded to Foreign Secretary level thus enhancing its importance, which India disagreed on. India, aware that the QUAD is directed towards China, which remains concerned about its development, is avoiding antagonizing it. It therefore even rejected the participation of Australia in the Malabar exercise. The rejection came post Wuhan, where PM Modi had a strategic dialogue with Xi.

In the ASEAN region, India does not seek to be projected as a counter weight to China, which the US desires and is therefore treading cautiously. The US Vice President, Mike Pence on the other hand advised ASEAN nations against joining the BRI and losing strategic assets to China. The differences between India and the US grow as the US seeks to challenge China and India seeks to adopt a conflict-avoidance strategy against it. Reports also indicate that India-Japan and India-Australia are joining hands to counter Chinese expansion through its BRI. This is enhancing economic cooperation, rather than military.

India is aware of the economic, diplomatic and military support being provided by China to Pakistan, ensuring that India always perceives a two-front war. There are also reports that China is pressurizing Pak to improve its relations with the West and India, considering its depleting economy. Contradictory reports project increased Chinese military support to Pak to counter growing Indian military conventional power.

The South China Sea as also the trade war heating up between the US and China, despite an agreement reach in the G 20 summit for a 90-day truce, are likely future flash points. The US is eager that India supports it fully, including by participating militarily in its Freedom of Navigation Operations,

while India avoids. It is evident that in case of any US-China conflict, Russia would support the Chinese.

The US continues to back India by insisting that Pak act against all terror groups on its soil, including those directed against India. It was Trump who tweeted in support of India on 26/11 and asked Pak to act against the perpetrators of 26/11. Simultaneously, it has been seeking Indian development assistance in Afghanistan. While it desires a greater role for India there, it is also aware that without support from Pak, peace can never come to Afghanistan. Hence, it is compelled to play both sides.

While India-China relationships may be indicating a positive trend, there is no end to border issues in sight. Thus, incursions would continue, China would keep claiming Arunachal, while building the CPEC through POK, ignoring Indian concerns. Threat from the Dragon would always remain a major concern.

For India, the reality is clear. While it may be in the US camp, it would have to face any threat from China on its own. Chinese forays into our own backyard will need to be countered by us alone. In case India acts against Chinese interest in the ASEAN region, it is likely to reciprocate in our backyard, where it has made substantial gains.

Militarily and economically, India remains behind China. Hence, while it develops its counter-balance to China and grows economically it cannot afford a military conflict with China. It is also aware that in case of any military conflict, it would be compelled to battle alone, treaties with the US notwithstanding.

It can only expect the US to enhance pressure on China in the South China Sea and provide India with military and diplomatic support, as Indo-US agreements are not akin to NATO, where Charter 5 can be invoked. India would also be forced to consider a two-front war, with Pak taking advantage of the situation.

Thus, while India may enhance its strategic ties with the US, sign a collection of agreements, it would ultimately have to face its adversaries by itself. For India, maintaining ties with China, Russia and the US are equally important. Ideally for now, conflict-avoidance strategy with China is paramount. Hence, it may be a strategic partner of the US, yet it needs to be cautious in its participation in US led initiatives.

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