

The Obama Administration and United States-India Defence Relations

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Abstract

The United States-India defence relations have moved from a stagnant to a rapidly moving relation in the past few decades. This improved relations which found a new beginning under the then U.S. President Bill Clinton was further enhanced under George W Bush administration. The relations also received major impetus under the Obama administration. This could be attributed to the changing global strategic environment and the compulsions thereafter which necessitated the two nations to realign their goals and thus, bringing them closer. This improved relations was marked by an increase in the defence trades between the two countries paving ways for India to bid for defence items from the U.S. and importing defence articles from U.S. and its allies. With the end of the Obama administration the paper attempts to relook into the various areas of improved defence relations which took place under the Obama administration while attempting to understand whether there would be continuity or change under the new Trump administration in Washington.

power. In Asia, Indian leadership is expanding prosperity and the security across the region. And the United States welcomes and encourages India's leadership role in helping to shape the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Asia (Obama 2009).

Just months into the Obama administration, the then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited India in July 2009 in which both countries finally reached an agreement pertaining to the “end-use monitoring” which in the past was a significant hurdle to the sale of U.S. defence articles and services to India. The State visit of President Obama in November 2010 was significant as it was perceived as a reassurance that the improved relationship between the two countries would continue. Senior officials in the Obama Administration's infact assured New Delhi that the United States was “fully committed to strengthening ties through the enhancement of our defence relationship”. The Obama administration also made it clear that U.S-India relations were committed to their strategic partnership. In May 2010 the National Security Strategy (NSS) report noted that, “The United States and India are building a strategic partnership that is underpinned by our shared interests, our shared values as the world's two largest democracies, and close connections among our people. India's responsible advancement serves as a positive example for developing nations, and provides an opportunity for increased economic, scientific, environmental, and security partnership. Working together through our Strategic Dialogue and high-level visits, we seek a broad-based relationship, in which India contributes to global counterterrorism efforts and non-proliferation” (White House, NSS Report 2010).

I. INTRODUCTION

U.S.-India defence relations over the years have grown from just military to military links to a relationship that include dialogue, defence sales, technology transfer, security information sharing and counterterrorism operations. There is infact a more practical cooperation like never before in the past. The improved defence relation under the Bush administration was further enhanced by the Obama administration by elevating the U.S.-India defence relationship to a higher level.

II. FIRST OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

United States -India relations has moved from mistrust to increasing levels of engagement formally termed as “strategic partnership” which is rooted on shared values and interest. It was not a coincidence that the then U.S. President Barack Obama hosted his first inaugural state dinner for the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the White House. President Obama acknowledged the importance of India in bringing security in Asia during his press conference with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in which he stated, “India today is a rising and responsible global

President Obama's historic speech to a joint session of the Indian Parliament in 2010 characterized the U.S.-India partnership as serving three broad purposes: (1) promoting prosperity on both countries, especially through greater trade and two-way investment, and food security and health-related initiatives; (2) enhancing shared security by working together to prevent terrorist attacks, and; (3) strengthening democratic governance and human rights (The White house, 2011). A number of significant developments occurred during Obama's visit to India, prominent among which was the U.S. decision to take

the state-owned Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and four of its subsidiaries and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and its subsidiaries off its Entities List. Even the state-owned Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) with its four subsidiaries has been lifted from the Entities List. Since BDL is related to missile technology activities, the removal of BDL from the Entities List suggests greater U.S.-India cooperation on missile technology. Obama and Singh released a joint statement in November 8, 2010 that discussed the “transformation” in bilateral defence cooperation and indicated “resolve” to promote “trade and cooperation in defence equipment and technology.” The Obama administration promoted defence sales to India as a way to foster closer diplomatic ties between the two countries and create jobs in the United States. Several commercial deals between U.S companies and the Indian government were discussed Obama’s visit.

The United States Department of Commerce Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) on January 24, 2011 through a Federal Notice, announced the removal of the nine Indian space and defence-related organizations from the Entity List namely, Armament Research and Development Establishment (ARDE), Defence Research and Development Lab (DRDL), Hyderabad Missile Research and Development Complex (DRDO), Solid State Physics Laboratory (SSPL), Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre (ISRO), Solid Propellant Space Booster Plant (SPROB) (ISRO), Sriharikota Space Centre (ISRO), Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (ISRO), Bharat Dynamics Limited. The removal of the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) sets the stage for a new era in U.S.-India civil space and defence cooperation to create an ambitious 21st century partnership in the civil space, defence, and high technology sectors. The Federal Notice further served to remove India from its previous inclusion in several country groups of the Export Administration Act. In removing India from these lists, the U.S. government elevated India out of the categories within the dual use regulations that formerly connoted India as a “country of concern.” This action by the U.S government was a clear statement of the close cooperative relationship that continues to grow between the U.S. and India while acknowledging India’s record of being a responsible steward of sensitive technologies. The United States also added India to a preferential Country Group (A: 2) under the U.S Export Administration Act. This Country Group, which for the first time now includes India, consists of members of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). The addition of India into this group recognizes India’s excellent global non-proliferation

record and India’s adherence to the MTCR (U.S Department of Commerce 2011).

India’s decision against purchasing an U.S. made fighter jet in its Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) competition was a big disappointment for those who have been optimistic on the potential of a U.S.-India strategic partnership. However this did not deter the defence cooperation as the Department of Defence “Report to Congress on U.S.-India Security Cooperation” stated that “the United States would be prepared to provide information on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and its requirements (infrastructure, security, etc.) to support India’s future planning. In fact, in a report accompanying the Department of Defence Authorization Act for FY2012 (S. 1253, S.Rept. 112-26), the Senate Armed Services Committee, in expressing its belief that a deepened strategic partnership with India will be “critical” for the promotion of core mutual national interests in the 21st century., Thus, this directed the Secretary of Defence to report to Congress a detailed plan to enhance U.S.-India security cooperation (Kronstadt 2012).

III. SECOND OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

As expected the second Obama administration continued these positive trends reflecting the potent durability of the bilateral relationship. The fact that the new administration continued to consider India as an important partner was reflected in the speech of the Secretary of State Kerr on 23 June 2013, when he stated that, “... *as we continue to develop this relationship, we look forward to opportunities for co-production and co-development of defence systems. India will soon have more C-17 aircraft than any country besides the United States of America. And that will allow it to respond more rapidly and more efficiently to natural disasters in the region and beyond. And as you heard from President Obama, and from Defence Secretary Hagel, and from me, India is a key part of the U.S. rebalance in Asia. And we are committed to that rebalance. I want to emphasize this point. Our security interests with India converge on a wide range of maritime and broader regional issues, and we value India’s role in our mutual efforts to ensure a stable and prosperous Asia*” (Kerry 2013). Subsequently the Department of State announced the importance and significant of U.S.-India defence cooperation. Its factsheet described defence cooperation as an important aspect of U.S.-India bilateral collaboration. The report stated that “the defence relationship encompasses military-to-military dialogues, exercises, defence sales, professional military education exchanges, and practical cooperation and that both sides plan to continue pursuit of defence cooperation for mutual benefit” (U.S. Department of

State 2013). The report further “reiterated that the defence establishments of both countries should remain engaged through the process of dialogues, regular staff talks, reciprocal high level visits, and other exchange” (Ibid). On the issue of defence trade, the report emphasized that the bilateral defence trade has also been expanding. The report stated that the induction of the C-130J and C-17 aircraft into the Indian Air Force and of the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft into the Indian Navy was an important milestone and that both sides concur on the need to go beyond buyer-seller relations towards a wider defence trade as well as industrial collaboration in areas of mutual interest (Ibid).

On January 2015, President Obama visited India for the second time and created history by becoming the first American President to visit India twice while in office. This visit was significant in the emerged U.S.-India relations. During this visit President Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed a memorandum to establish a hotline between them. A new dimension to the strategic bilateral ties emerged when they agreed to launch a Strategic and Commercial Dialogue and renew India-US defence partnership agreement (The Economic Times, 2015). However it is to be noted that since 2009 US-India Strategic Dialogue has been the primary forum to advance shared objective in regional security , economic cooperation , defence, trade and climate change but the elevation of U.S-India Strategic Dialogue to U.S.-India strategic and Commercial dialogue reflects that United States and India now share priorities on generating economic growth, creating jobs, and also create opportunities for United States and India to further strengthen their partnership to meet the challenges of the coming decades, from climate change to regional security, and to deepen the economic and commercial ties between the two countries (U.S. Department of State 2015)

A major boost to U.S.-India relationship emerged with the signing of “Framework for India-US defence relations” in 2015 by the then U.S. Secretary of Defence Ash Carter and India’s Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar. This framework builds upon the previous framework and successes to guide the bilateral defence and strategic partnership for the next ten years. The new framework agreement provides avenues for high level strategic discussions, continued exchanges between armed forces of both countries, and strengthening of defence capabilities. The framework also recognizes the transformative nature of the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). Both India and the United States have finalized two project agreements for joint development of mobile electric hybrid power sources and the next generation protective ensembles (U.S. Department of State 2015)

India and the U.S. on August 2016 signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) defence agreement which will increase the military cooperation between two countries. The agreement was finalized during the visit of the then Defence Minister of India, Manohar Parrikar to Washington and it was touted as a symbol of deeper defence ties between the two nations in an increasingly tense part of the world. In a joint statement, Parrikar and Defence Secretary Ashton B. Carter said discussions ranged from “increased strategic and regional cooperation, to deepened military-to-military exchanges, to expanded collaboration on defence technology and innovation.” The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement allows for exchange of logistics support, supplies and services between the two countries’ armed forces. This includes food, water, fuel, spare parts, repair, transportation, communication and medical services. However it was made clear that the agreement signed did not create any obligations on either party to carry out any joint activity. Further, it did not provide for the establishment of any bases or basing arrangements. The agreement applied exclusively to authorize port visits, joint exercises, joint training, humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief efforts. However this was a major boost to the improved relation between the two countries and the three defence forces which have been having joint exercises on land, sea and air over the past decade (The Washington Post 2016).

During the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington in June 2016, India was slated to be recognized as a ‘Major Defence Partner’ (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI 2016). This was finally finalized by the then defence minister of India Manohar Parrikar and U.S. Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter in New Delhi during the later visit to India in December 2016 (The Indian Express 2016). On December 24 2016, just few days before the end of his term, President Obama signed the National Defence Authorization Act 2107(NDAA) which entails steps to recognize India as a ‘Major Defence Partner’. The designation of India as a ‘Major Defence Partner’ is a status unique to India and institutionalizes the progress made to formulate defence trade and technology sharing with India to a level at par with that of the U.S. closest allies and would ensure enduring cooperation into the future. Senator John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Arms Service Committee further released the summary of NDAA that said ‘NDAA 2017 enhances Security cooperation between U.S. and India’. According to the NDAA, the U.S. administration will designate an individual who has credible experience in defence acquisition and technology to ensure the implementation of the U.S-India defence relationship

and boost defence trade, security and cooperation between the two countries (The Indian Express 2016a).

IV. TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

As the Trump administration took up office, the very question of what will happen to U.S.-India defence relations that was build over the past few decades emerged. Speaking at the Georgetown University on U.S.-India relations under Trump and Modi, Ashley J Tellis argues that it was unclear of what the relation would head towards. He examined three propositions on the future of U.S.-India relations of which one was that for the U.S.-India relations to accelerate, it depends on President Trump and the executive. He also stated that Washington and India should find a way to engage in practical measure like defence cooperation to secure a stable South (Ashley J Tellis, 2017). In India many argued that that the warmth that was seen under the Obama administration was missing while others argued that there was no major deviance from the Obama administration (Raghuvanshi 2017).

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington DC on June 26 2017 was an important landmark as it made clear what the leader of the two largest democracies had in mind for the future of its relations. In the joint statement after the meeting both the leaders affirmed that deepening of cooperation as a priority. Prime Minister Modi in the joint statement stated that the strengthening of India's defence capabilities with the help of U.S. was something which was truly appreciated. He also stated that the two countries have decided to enhance maritime security cooperation. The two leaders also spoke on strengthening bilateral defence technology and trade and manufacturing partnership (MEA 2017). Prime Minister Modi and President Trump met again in Manila, Philippines on November 17 2017, in a press release from the White House Press Secretary 'The two leaders discussed the comprehensive strategic partnership between the United States and India and their shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region. They pledged to enhance their cooperation as Major Defence Partners, resolving that two of the world's great democracies should also have the world's greatest militaries' (white House 2017). From the above statement it is evident that the Trump administration is aware of the improved U.S.-India defence relations, however how much will the administration do when it comes to sales of arms and technologies is the biggest question at hand. As President Trump pushes for 'America first' and Prime Minister Modi for 'Make in India', the question arises as; will India and America find a common ground to

push forward for enhanced defence trade and cooperation between the two countries.

V. CONCLUSION

Over the years, the United States and India have moved from their often described relationship of 'estranged democracies' to the now more appropriate description of 'engaged democracies'. Obama made it abundantly clear that he recognizes the transformation that had taken place in U.S.-India relations over the past two administrations and that his administration will continue the positive, upward trajectory of these ties; all these were specified during his visit to India through his speech made in the India Parliament. It is clear that over the past decade, there has been a rapid transformation in the U.S.-India defence cooperation from a nascent relationship between unfriendly nations to a strategic partnership between two of the preeminent security powers in Asia. Today, U.S. - India defence ties are strong and rapidly growing. The defence relationship involves a robust slate of dialogues, military exercises, defence trade, personnel exchanges, and armaments cooperation. The bilateral efforts over the past ten years have focused on relationship-building and establishing the foundation for a long-term partnership which is evident from the strong ties between the militaries of the two sides. United States and India have come a long way in the quest to have a cordial relationship with each other and none can deny the fact that they have been successful. This relationship has reached an unprecedented level of no return; backed and promoted by a strong U.S. Congressional bipartisanship. It is thus evident that U.S.-India defence cooperation over the past one decade has increased drastically and with the convergence of strategic interest it has moved from mere defence cooperation to strategic security engagement. The U.S.-India strategic partnership thrived during Obama's administration, and as the Trump Administration took charge it will be interesting to see how the improved U.S.-India relation shape up, as many argued that no matter what policies the new administration takes, India will always have a better place in the U.S. foreign relation policies as India is a vital partner U.S. has in Asia.

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