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“Convergence not congruence”-Analyzing India-US relations from a Kautilyan perspective

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“Convergence not congruence in a multipolar world”- Analyzing India-US relations from a Kautilyan perspective

“Men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.”

This quote by veteran Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, has been used by India’s foremost strategic thinker Shivashankar Menon in his acclaimed book “Choices” in the chapter where he provides his prognosis on India-US relations. The quote aptly captures the current strategic convergence between the two nations, considering China’s assertive rise in the Indo-Pacific and the great power rivalry that is unfolding between the US and China.

The current US-India convergence can also be explained by the analysis provided in EAM Dr.S.Jaishankar book “The India Way” where he opines that the current competitive geopolitical environment would promote groupings of nations who have shared interests on a common issue.(Jaishankar,2020).

Evolution of Indo-US ties

When a newly independent nation started formulating its nascent foreign policy, it was faced with a stark choice. The bipolar world order was undergoing a “tusnimyuddha (silent/cold war)” between the US and erstwhile Soviet Union. The US threw its weight behind India to join its camp , but India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru opted to stay out of great power politics and championed the cause of “non-alignment” as he believed that newly decolonized nations had pressing socio-economic issues to focus on and should not get mired in bloc politics.

This pushed the US closer to Pakistan's sphere of influence which resulted in robust defence cooperation between US and Pakistan in the form of pacts like CEATO, SENTO, etc. (Chikermane, 2023)

The era of India-US being on adversarial sides ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both India and US recalibrated their strategies post 1991, with the US realizing that their defence supplies had been used by the Pakistani establishment, to turn their geography into a weaponized radical state (Chikermane, 2023). This weaponized state had become an exporter of global terrorism. The 9/11 attacks and the US's global "War on terror" dovetailed with India's existing positions on cross-border terrorism which provided fertile ground for convergence between the two nations. India's liberalisation journey in 1991 under the prime ministership of Shri. P V Narasimha Rao provided fertile ground for economic cooperation between the two nations. US investments in the Indian private sector started rising during the period of 1991-2004. The bilateral cooperation between the two nations reached its crescendo in 2005 with the signing of the India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement. The epochal agreement on civil nuclear cooperation marked a major milestone in the upward trajectory of India-US ties.

If we have to define the progression of India-US ties in quantitative terms, it would be a positive linear relationship or an upward sloping graph. The friendship has evolved from 'strategic partnership' in 2004 to 'global strategic partnership' in 2009 to 'major defense partner' in 2016 and 'comprehensive global and strategic partnership' in 2020. There is growing consensus in Washington that the friendship between the two nations would not just define the future of the Asian continent but also the future of the 21st century. (Chaulia, 2024).

This assessment was aptly captured by remarks made by former US President Joe Biden in June 2023 where he said “ I’ve long believed that the relationship between the United States and India is one of the — will be one of the defining relationships of the 21st century [...] The challenges and opportunities facing the world in this century require that India and the United States work and lead together. And we are [...] two great nations,two great friends,two great powers that can define the course of the 21st century.” (House,2023)

India-US ties from an Arthashastra vantage point

Kautilya’s Arthashastra emphasizes the supremacy of artha (wealth or material gain) in several passages, particularly within the context of statecraft and governance. One notable sutra that encapsulates this idea is found in Book 9, Chapter 7, Sutra 60, where Kautilya articulates that "Material gain, spiritual good and pleasure: this is the triad of gain" (9.7.60). This statement underscores the importance of “artha (wealth)” as a fundamental aim of human life, alongside dharma (moral duty) and kama (pleasure).**Economic prosperity is a primary plank in Arthashastra, which is essential for the king to achieve yogakshema (security and prosperity) of its subjects.**

To execute this Kautilyan maxim on contemporary India-US relations, India needs to engage with the USA in the multifaceted domains of civil nuclear energy, defence, space, maritime security, connectivity,and critical technologies..It also needs to bolster its commercial partnership as the US derisks supply chains and strategic manufacturing from China. India can be the natural beneficiary of this derisking. South Block’s efforts to cooperate in these verticals would strengthen various aspects of the Indian economy and have a correlational effect on the

economic wellbeing of Indians. Improved economic prosperity of Indians through robust cooperation with the US as the ultimate objective, can be perceived as achieving yogakshema in Kautilyan vocabulary.

The Arthashastra lexicon: How would the current Indo-US relationship be classified in Kautilyan terms?

On the basis of Raja mandala (circle of states) theory, India as the rising power is the Vijigishu and the USA from a purely geographical perspective is the Udaisina (neutral king). But this neutrality is only because the US is not part of the Asian continent. In terms of relative strength, the US has superior technological, space and defence capabilities than India, which makes it in India's best interest to collaborate with the US, since they are both locked in an adversarial relationship with China and driven by the aim of containing China's disruptive rise and its great power ambitions.

In addition, the power asymmetry that exists between the two nations makes the cost of an adversarial relationship with the US unaffordable for India, due to capability asymmetry in the fields of defence, economic hard power & soft power prowess of the US. Based on this reasoning and India-US convergence in the domains of defence, technology, cultural & diaspora connect, energy & climate cooperation, the USA in Arthashastra terms, can be classified as a mitrabhavin (friendly) and a chitrabhoga mitra (one helping with various resources) to India.

But what is the US deriving out of being a 'mitra' to India? Why should the US reciprocate? Apart from acting as a counterweight to China to stem its hegemonic rise, India is

the answer to execute the USA's friend-shoring as part of its overall "de-risking strategy". Coupled with India's desire to deepen economic linkages with like-minded countries with transparent economic systems. On the defence cooperation front, America's infamous defence-industrial complex stands to immensely benefit from gaining access to the mammoth Indian defence market. The US accounted for 11% of India's total military imports from 2017-2022. (Chaulia, 2024) This breaks the stereotype that the US is trying to woo India to its corner by being overly generous and charitable. The two powers may be unequal in capabilities but their exchanges are fair and equal.

Defining the trajectory of India-US ties in Kautilyan terms

During the Cold war, the USA was consumed by its grand strategy to contain the Soviet Union to such an extent that it viewed all developing countries through the prism of whether or not they will side with it to contain the spread of evil communism. This coloured their assessment of India which opted to stay non-aligned and not join the Western or Eastern bloc. American policymakers dismissed India's leadership of a third neutral bloc that was equidistant from both centres of power (Washington and Moscow) as 'immoral and short-sighted' and believed that 'non aligned countries were more dangerous than the communists because of their "veiled" function as "friends of communism"' (Chaulia, 2024).

On the other hand, Pakistan acted as a pliant partner to join the US crusade against communism in exchange for weapons and defence aid. These turn of events prompted Washington to alienate India and positioned the US at that time, as an Aribhavin (hostile) to India. When the cold war effectively came to an end with the disintegration of the Soviet

Union, the world saw a unipolar moment where the US was the sole superpower. This provided impetus for the two sides to start afresh and redefine their relations. Thus, the USA transitioned from being an Aribhavin (hostile) to Mitrabhavin (friendly) to India at the beginning of a new century.

Strategic Convergences and Divergences with India

The India-US convergence began with the Bush Jr. administration that signed the India-US Defence Framework Agreement in 2005. This agreement paved the way for advanced military equipment to be shared with the Indian armed forces. India-USA have inked four foundational agreements to bolster defence ties: the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA); the General Security Of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) and the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) (Tourangbam, 2021).

Other areas of cooperation include joint military exercises to promote interoperability, intelligence sharing & co-development of defence technologies. Second vertical of cooperation would be in the maritime domain where India can act as a “net security provider” in the Indo-Pacific region. The two nations can contribute to anti-piracy efforts, combat marine pollution, logistics support and contribute towards disaster relief & humanitarian aid efforts for small island developing states (SIDS) in the Indo-Pacific region. Example of these convergences materializing are the Malabar exercise, Blue Dot network, etc. (Upadhyay, 2021). The next domain is technological cooperation. The 2023 Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), and the India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue (IUSSTD) to co-develop in critical domains like

semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, space, telecom, defence, biotech, etc. The US anxiety of being overly dependent on Taiwan for semiconductor chips has opened pathways for it to invest in India and enable India to become 'an electronics hub' and a solution-provider to the demand-supply gap in semiconductors. (Das, 2023). The last frontier of space is another interesting avenue of cooperation between the two nations. In June 2023, India signed the Artemis Accords, drafted by NASA and the U.S Department of State. The Artemis Accords, which are grounded in the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, are a set of non-legally binding principles to guide sustainable civil space exploration. ((*The Republic of India Signs the Artemis Accords - United States Department of State*, 2023). Building on being a signatory of the Artemis Accords, NASA and ISRO have jointly launched an observatory mission called NISAR (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar) to monitor and photograph changes of the entire earth's land and ice surfaces (Chaulia, 2024). Lastly, the most important vertical is convergence on "shared democratic values" to uphold the international "rules-based order" to counterbalance the expansionist designs of revisionist powers.

On the trilateral front, convergence can be achieved on the basis of a common Ari (enemy) i.e. China, whose hegemonic behavior poses serious risks to a rules-based international order. For the US, India will act as a natural counterbalance to an increasingly aggressive China. Viewed from the Russian lens, India aims to reduce its dependence on Russian origin weapons, which is where the US defence industrial complex comes into the picture. They can be the supplier of sophisticated weapons to India. But this does not mean that the path is clear for the US defence manufacturers to capture the mammoth weapons market. US manufacturers may still be hesitant to share critical defence technologies with India, considering the historical warmth in our relations with Moscow that continues to endure. Excessively high cost valuations can throw

a spanner in the works of a vibrant weapons trade ecosystem building between India and the US. Another potential roadblock can be the “legacy systems” that have developed in the India-Russia weapons trade. In weaponry, it is essential to maintain uniformity in weapons and its components in today’s world of joint military operations and exercises. For e.g the weapons of a state should complement themselves. The bullets should be the same for all weapons of the same type (Srivastava,2024). This ensures interoperability and improved coordination between armed forces. Russia benefits from the large share of Soviet and Russian legacy systems in the Indian arsenal. The prospect of a Russia-China axis developing post Russia’s invasion of Ukraine which could adversely affect India’s defence cooperation with Moscow as it could be pushed closer to Beijing’s sphere of influence is a variable that has prompted India to diversify its weapons purchases. But this diversification will be difficult to achieve, let alone attain fruition, due to the phenomenon of legacy systems explained above.

There is a growing realization in Washington after Kabul’s fall to the Taliban that Islamabad cannot be trusted as a responsible ally who can further US interests in the Asian continent. The US has recognized Pakistan’s double game in aiding the Taliban by transferring US weapons and material aid to them. Pakistan will not get unconditional support from the US now, until it acts decisively against state and non-state actors that foment terror on its soil. With the US shifting away from its policy of being entangled in theatres like West Asia in “forever wars” and recognising the Indo-Pacific as a crucial theatre to contain China as their primary goal, India will act as a centrepiece in the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US.

Divergences that can hamper the relationship is the US assuming an inward orientation in its immigration policy affecting a substantial number of H1-B visa applicants (Upadhyay,2020).

Recently, we have also seen the US State Department express concerns about declining religious and press freedom in India, which is the breach of a clear red line for Delhi. New Delhi follows a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of any country and expects the same from its partners. The most recent flashpoint was allegations of Indian state agents conspiring to neutralize Gurpatwant Singh Pannu, a fundamentalist Khalistani Sikh activist carrying out anti-India activities on American soil. Attempts of extrajudicial killings on American soil can act as an irritant in bilateral ties. There also exists a strong lobby of left-leaning Indian diaspora who allege India's backsliding in democratic indicators after the ascent of current political dispensation. This lobby continues to apply pressure on the US government to condemn India but has not been successful in derailing the strategic partnership. Their activities need to be consistently monitored and countered as ideological affiliations should not act as a roadblock in a promising bilateral partnership.

Another area of friction that has been witnessed is that often New Delhi and Washington back different political horses and resultantly implement policies that are odds with each other. For e.g. The USA allegedly undermined Sheikh Hasina's hold on power in the name of promoting democracy and decrying her human rights record while it has had no qualms in partnering with military dictators and totalitarian regimes in the past to further its own interests. Aiding Sheikh Hasina's ouster was a American foreign policy decision that dealt a strategic blow to India as her administration was a steadfast Indian ally. Similarly, imposing economic sanctions on Myanmar's ruling military junta as they orchestrated a coup in February 2021 and captured power, is a move that is inimical to India's interests. It has pushed Naypyidaw closer to Beijing's sphere of influence, leaving India to deal with this eventuality. Differing

strategic calculations in assessing pliant and inimical regimes that exist in India's neighbourhood and the resulting US policy, is an area of contention which can act a major irritant in bilateral ties.

The recent development of the Adani group being indicted in the US for allegedly offering bribes worth \$ 250 million to Indian government officials to secure solar power contracts has the potential to have a bearing on India-US relations. A US court alleged that the Adani Group orchestrated a scheme to pay various Indian government officials to lie to investors and banks to raise billions of dollars and obstruct justice. According to Brahma Chellaney, a professor of strategic studies at the Center for Policy Research, said that the indictment is being seen as politically driven in New Delhi. He also predicted that it will have a bearing on US-India collaboration and mutual trust unless the incoming Trump administration drops the prosecution (Outlook Business Desk, 2024). Both sides have responded to the Adani case in a measured and balanced manner by distancing themselves from the development and reiterating the strong foundation of India-US relations that is anchored in people-to-people ties and cooperation across a range of multifaceted issues (Roy, 2024). But the underlying friction area is that New Delhi would see this as a clear case of overreach by the US as the case involves bribes paid in India to Indian officials. What remains to be seen is whether the Indian dispensation will send feelers to the Trump administration, who'll have the power to change the prosecuting officers in this case, after it comes into office from 20th January' 2025. How the Adani saga plays out and its impact on India-US relations is something that remains to be seen.

Making it work: Policy recommendations to strengthen India-US relations

Considering a fractious geopolitical environment, scholars have touted the India-US partnership as having the potential of being “one of the foremost defining partnerships of the 21st century”. The roadmap that needs to be followed to sustain the momentum in ties is as follows:-

1.Continued emphasis of high level strategic dialogues to discuss critical issues in the 1+1(Head of government) and 2+2 (Foreign and Defence minister) formats.

2.Joint exercises in the military and collaborative ventures in the technological space (e.g. IFC-IOR in Gurugram) should be stepped up.

3.Reinvigorate the channels of Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy to give a strong broad-based ballast to the ties, which involves participants from civil society.

4.Constitute joint working groups to discuss issues like vaccines, climate cooperation, infrastructure, space exploration, critical technologies like semiconductors and supply chains.

5.Harness the power of the Indian diaspora - Indian diaspora’s extraordinary success has added a powerful human element to the bilateral relationship.The diaspora comprises 1.5% of the USA’s population but make up 6% of its taxpayers.They have come to occupy top government and corporate positions and have emerged as key vote bank for both Republicans and Democrats (Chaulia,2024).The diaspora plays a pivotal role in ensuring that US policy decisions do not go against India's national interest.By being organised in lobbying groups, Caucuses and

associations, the Desis (Indian diaspora) act a key player in fostering closer business, political & cultural convergence between the two countries. Sustained and continuous engagement with these groups should become a primary instrument in the toolkit of Indian practitioners who are responsible for handling the bilateral relationship. Regular contact with the diaspora through official and unofficial channels should be given equal emphasis along with other measures as it has usually been observed that Indian state has been inefficient in recognising and utilizing the power of its diverse diaspora.

A “win-win”: How can both sides achieve Yogakshema for their constituents?

To achieve Yogakshema for its citizens, pragmatism and a shared understanding of why the two countries need each other is required. As the US pivots to Asia, it must understand that it will not be able to impose a unilateral agenda on India and would have to respect India's policy choices driven by strategic autonomy. Similarly, India should walk the talk and respect the territorial integrity & sovereignty of nations and refrain from executing any extra-territorial operations. To avoid any escalation in the Asian continent, both nations have agreed on a joint vision for the IOR that is driven by the principles of freedom of navigation and overflight (Tourangbam, 2021). Security of the Indian population would play a vital role in achieving Yogakshema. India's rising middle class and disposable incomes creates a market ripe for American businesses to tap into, augmenting the American economy's profitability which has been under stress due to Covid-19 induced factors.

To conclude, both nations are defining their partnership through the 3Cs framework of comfort, candour and convergence. There is realization on both sides that this partnership will

require deft balancing as the two entities approach the world and its issues from different vantage points & levels of development. The partnership does not need to straitjacket itself by taking the form of a rigid alliance. India will practice issue-based alignment according to its interests, even to the chagrin of its allies. Its allies should prioritise the future of the Indo-Pacific region and the Asian continent over narrow self-interest. The trajectory of the India-US strategic partnership would determine the course of how geopolitical rivalries play out in a world order which is in a state of flux.

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