Standing Closer: The US-India Logistics Agreement

By Rupakjyoti Borah

With India and the US signing a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, military ties between the two powers will grow much closer in a range of areas. While India is not ready to be a formal US ally, writes Rupakjyoti Borah, this is a departure for New Delhi and signals Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s willingness to move relations to a new level.

THE SIGNING OF the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between the United States and India on August 29 marks a big leap of faith for India. Under this agreement, the two countries will be able to use each other’s military bases for logistical purposes, which includes refueling and repair. Previous governments dithered on the question of closer ties with the US, especially in the military realm. New Delhi decided to finally bite the bullet during the visit of US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter to India in April this year, and the deal was finally concluded during the visit of Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parikkar to the US at the end of August.

The present bonhomie is in sharp contrast to the Cold War period, when India and the US were on opposite sides of the divide. Relations later hit a nadir in the aftermath of the nuclear tests conducted by India in 1998. However, US President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000 began the new phase in the relationship.

The state visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US in early June showed how the bilateral ties have picked up steam under Modi. This was in sharp contrast to the latter stages of the United Progressive Alliance government of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, when relations soured after the shabby treatment given to an Indian diplomat in the US and the slowdown in the Indian economy. When Modi’s government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took over in 2014, relations quickly bounced back to the extent that US President Barack Obama became the first US President to visit India twice during his presidency when he was the Chief Guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations in January last year.

WHAT’S BRINGING THE US AND INDIA TOGETHER?

There are a host of factors bringing the two countries closer. First, they have shared concerns about China and its aggressive activities, especially in the Indian Ocean region, where Beijing has been flexing its diplomatic and military muscles. At the same time, the US “rebalance” toward Asia fits well with Modi’s “Act East Policy” of reaching out to the countries of Southeast and East Asia. The initiative has been welcomed by the US and countries that feel threatened by China’s actions in the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and military facilities that the commander of the US Pacific Command has characterized as China building a “great wall of sand” in the disputed sea.1 In the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region statement released during Obama’s January 2015 visit, the two sides affirmed “the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.” 2 This was a clear break from the past when New Delhi consciously avoided wading into the South China Sea dispute.

Second, New Delhi wants to play a bigger role in the Indian Ocean region and it has been worried about China’s attempts to wade into its “backwaters.” China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative — part of the ambitious One Belt, One Road — unsettles many Indian observers. New Delhi also has been further irritated by Beijing putting a technical hold on India’s efforts to designate Pakistan-based terror outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Maulana
Masood Azhar as a terrorist at the United Nations. In addition, China’s warm relations with Pakistan have been going from strength to strength, with Beijing pledging to invest nearly US$46 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that will connect Kashgar in Western China to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan on the Arabian Sea.3

Second, after the US drone-strike killing of the Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor inside Pakistan, Islamabad’s duplicity in the “war on terror” has weighed heavily on the minds of strategic thinkers in Washington. Relations also deteriorated after the US Congress decided not to subsidize the sale of US F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan. In many ways, Obama has taken up from where his predecessor George W. Bush left off when it comes to relations with India and Pakistan. The fact that Obama bin Laden was found hiding in Abbottabad in Pakistan also strained relations further.

Fourth, the growing influence of the Indian-American community in the US has helped bring elite Indian diaspora in the US nearly 3 million, with many prominent Indian-Americans holding prestigious positions in American society in academia, politics, business, technology and other fields.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR INDIA?
US backing is crucial for India’s various diplomatic goals. It wants to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and join exclusive clubs such as the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group, the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement. China has kept India from joining the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group, a move seen as a favor to Pakistan.

In addition to the diplomatic arena, bilateral trade between the US and India has been increasing. Between January and October 2014, the total bilateral trade stood at close to US$56 billion, with a surplus of US$21 million in India’s favor. Terrorism is another common threat facing both India and the US. New Delhi would certainly not mind US help as it seeks to bring Pakistan to task for its alleged support of terrorists acting with impunity from its soil. The US has also been sharing intelligence with India, especially after the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008, which claimed victims from the US and many other countries. The attack on the guided-missile destroyer USS Cole in Yemen in October 2010 also signaled the onset of a new and dangerous threat, maritime terrorism. In the case of the Mumbai attacks, the terrorists also came by sea.

In the Malabar naval exercises, which have been expanded to include Japan. As the US has been ramping up its ties with regional allies such as Japan, Australia and the Philippines, India’s relations with these countries have also been improving steadily. In a sign of the growing convergence of interests, India, Japan and the US have been holding a trilateral dialogue since December 2011.

WHAT DOES THE LOGISTICS DEAL MEAN?
The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement is one of three foundational agreements that the US and India are likely to sign — the other two being the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement and the Basic Exchange Co-operation Agreement. Co-operation under LEMOA is not only about military operations but could also involve humanitarian operations in the same way that the Indian and the US navies, along with those of Japan and Australia, pooled their resources after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 to provide relief and rescue efforts.

There are apprehensions being expressed by some in India that the signing of LEMOA could drag India into unnecessary conflicts. However, this is not the case. The agreement does not mean that New Delhi needs to join US-led military operations across the world. LEMOA also does not provide for the deployment of US troops on Indian soil, which would be anathema to any government in New Delhi. It must be remembered that after the US and India signed a civilian nuclear deal during the tenure of Manmohan Singh, there was so much opposition that the government almost fell. Similarly, if New Delhi were to move any closer to the US, there would be bound to be a political backlash of which the ruling government must be wary.

IS INDIA NOW FIRMLY IN THE US CAMP?
India has a strong tradition of “strategic autonomy,” and even under the present government there is no change in this essential stance. New Delhi has been wary of being seen as part of any overt anti-China grouping and has consciously devoted time and energy to its relationship with China. Modi paid a successful visit to China in May last year, and India is part of the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS grouping; an Indian will be the first head of the BRICS bank, the New Development Bank.

In addition, India and the US have significant differences on several issues. For example, India does not support US goals in Syria, just as it did not back the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Although India provided refueling facilities to the US during Operation Enduring Freedom in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, it did directly participate. India has also refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, despite pressure from the US and other countries.

Under Modi and his predecessors in the post-Cold War era, India has moved away from its traditional stance of non-alignment to one of multi-alignment. India was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, but leaned toward the Soviet Union, especially after the signing of the Indo-Pakistan Treaty of friendship and Cooperation in 1971. Although India still has cordial ties with Russia, a lot of water has flowed down the Ganges since the times when the Soviet Union was its biggest benefactor. New Delhi has also moved to strengthen its ties with many other countries.

What is clear is that there is an increasing convergence of interests between India and the US, which can also be seen in the personal equation between Modi and Obama. In the days and months to come, India will further strengthen its ties with the world’s sole superpower and will not shy away from being seen as increasingly pro-American, but not yet an American ally. As Modi said of India-US ties during his address to a Joint Session of the US Congress in early June: “There is a new symphony in play.”

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