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# Deepening India-U.S. Partnership: Implications for South Asia

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Overcoming years of historical baggage over the past two decades, India-U.S. relations have been developing on a positive trajectory. The recent exchange of high-level visits—at a time when balance of power equations are in a flux due to the global impact of COVID-19 on public health and economy— confirms this robust momentum in relations. Although India-U.S. Ministerial Dialogue has been a routine affair since 2018, the latest 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue stands out. With the signing of Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)<sup>1</sup>, the troika of bilateral foundational pacts – prerequisite to deepening military cooperation with the U.S.—is complete. The overall bilateral ties, which were elevated to the level of comprehensive global strategic partnership earlier this year in February<sup>2</sup>, would also get a boost. In the run up to the 2020 Presidential election, a rare bipartisan consensus was visible on the importance of India as a strategic partner to the United States<sup>3</sup>—with both the Republicans and Democrats competing to project themselves as more suited to

improving existing ties. With President elect Joe Biden at the White House, it is likely that his administration will follow the approach outlined in his policy paper<sup>4</sup>—released during his campaign—which spoke of increasing cooperation with India specifically in areas of terrorism, climate change, health, and trade. Given the high priority the U.S. places on strengthening Indo-U.S. relations, and New Delhi's own economic and strategic interests aligning closely with those of Washington's, this partnership is only expected to get stronger in the future.

Although the U.S. no longer sees India exclusively through the “South Asia” lens of being a credible counter to Chinese influence in the region, the impact of this deepening partnership will undoubtedly be felt in South Asia. During the Cold War, South Asia did not figure predominantly in US strategic thinking and a military alliance with Pakistan was seen as sufficient guarantee to ensure its extra regional presence. However, following U.S. preoccupation

with the war on terror post-9/11 attacks, the Afghanistan region – from where Osama bin Laden masterminded the attacks – became important in US national security agenda. It was around this time that Indo-U.S. relations also got a fillip as India announced its liberalisation measures which generated optimism in America, given the business potential of the world's second largest market. More recently, another rationale is emerging in U.S.' renewed attention towards South Asia—the growing salience of the Indo Pacific.

### **South-Asia in Indo-Pacific**

With Indo-Pacific decisively emerging as the epicentre<sup>5</sup> of the ongoing great power competition between US and China, Washington is honing its Indo-Pacific strategy. In a speech made in October 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defined the Indo-Pacific as “the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them” and described India and US as the “eastern and western beacons” of the Indo-Pacific<sup>6</sup>. However, in December of the same year, the National Security Strategy defined “Indo-Pacific” as “the region which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”<sup>7</sup>. In the words of a senior official at U.S. Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Alex N Wong, the altered geographical contours of Indo-Pacific indicate “the historical reality and the current-day reality that South Asia – and in particular India – plays a key role in the Pacific and in East Asia and in

Southeast Asia”<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, deepening partnerships with the smaller South Asian nations bodes well with the U.S.' “Free and Open Indo Pacific” strategy by building normative support for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, reducing threats of terror attack from Afghanistan; but most importantly, countering Chinese influence in the region. As COVID-19 has had a catalytic effect on U.S.-China rivalry, U.S. has also ramped up its diplomacy with these countries. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun completed a three day visit to Bangladesh in October this year where he called Bangladesh a “key partner” of the US in the Indo-Pacific<sup>9</sup>. Throughout his visit, he alluded to “shared prosperity” and “common vision” of a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and secure Indo-Pacific region<sup>10</sup>. The visit came on the heels of a historic visit by Mike Pompeo—the first by a U.S. Secretary of State in 16 years—to Maldives where he signed a “Framework for a Defence and Security Relationship” which, according to the U.S. Department of Defence press statement, outlines US’ “intent to deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean”<sup>11</sup>. The US Secretary of State travelled to Colombo during the same tour to “advance Indo-Pacific ties” and made direct references to “predatory” nature of Chinese investment in the country<sup>12</sup>. Given Sri Lanka's geographical position at the nexus of the Indo-Pacific, he described a “strong, sovereign Sri Lanka” as a “powerful and strategic partner for the United States” which could emerge as a

“beacon for a free and open Indo-Pacific”<sup>13</sup>. Chinese capital and infrastructure funding in building and capturing Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port indicate Beijing’s larger strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Evidently both U.S. and China are trying to leverage the advantage endowed to the smaller countries in the region by natural geography by drawing them into their sphere of influence.

### **Leveraging Indo-US ties**

Being India’s immediate neighbourhood, and given its geographical position in the region, South Asia has been New Delhi’s traditional sphere of influence. Although the presence of an extra regional power like U.S. would normally cause some discomfort, however, given the broad convergence in goals and interests in the region, U.S. presence is more likely to catalyse existing ties than be a disruptive force. The positive upswing in India-U.S. relations has paralleled a steep downfall in India-China relations—reaching its nadir following Beijing’s unprovoked aggression in Ladakh<sup>14</sup>. United States has come out vocally in support of India against China. Beijing’s increasing presence in South Asia has been a constant source of tension for New Delhi. However, Washington deploying its diplomatic arsenal in the region to counter the Chinese has raised confidence in India that it will reduce Chinese influence in the region. It is a win-win situation for both India and the US, as Washington, in turn, can use India’s healthy relations with countries in the region with which

it has underdeveloped ties, such as Bhutan, to advance its own interests. In fact, when Deputy Secretary Beigun was in Delhi, he held an informal meeting with the Bhutanese ambassador to India, as Bhutan does not have diplomatic representation with the permanent five members of United Nation Security Council<sup>15</sup>.

However, this is not to suggest that it is an easy task for U.S. or India. For starters, the South Asian countries for long have been trying to develop independent ties with the U.S. by trying to position themselves as independent actors in the region. There are fears that securitisation of Indian Ocean visibly through the QUAD is leading to the rise of exclusive military alliances in the region<sup>16</sup> – something that needs to be deftly addressed by the ‘major powers’ of the region. Despite being the major donor and the biggest market for South Asian nations<sup>17</sup>, the U.S. has not been able to match Beijing’s enthusiastic push in these countries to market its vision of the region. Until the United States can convince the countries of its robust commitment to the region and reassure them of the mutual benefits in working together for the security of the region, Beijing will continue to have the upper hand. Together, India and the US represent the democratic, transparent, developmental forces that the region needs in contrast to the opaque, debt trap diplomacy.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily*

*reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies  
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**Notes**

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<sup>2</sup> Staff, The Wire. 2020. "India and US Upgrade Ties, Agree to Start Talks for 'Bigger' Trade Deal." *The Wire*. February 25, 2020. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/donald-trump-narendra-modi-delhi-ties-trade-deal>

<sup>3</sup> PTI. 2020. "Strong Bipartisan Support for Indo-US Ties: India on US Election." *Business Standard India*, November 6, 2020. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/strong-bipartisan-support-for-indo-us-ties-india-on-us-election-120110601808\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/strong-bipartisan-support-for-indo-us-ties-india-on-us-election-120110601808_1.html)

<sup>4</sup> PTI. 2020. "Biden Administration Will Place High Priority on Strengthening Indo-US Relationship, Says Policy Paper." *The Hindu*, November 8, 2020, sec. International. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/biden-administration-will-place-high-priority-on-strengthening-indo-us-relationship-says-policy-paper/article33051257.ece>

<sup>5</sup> PTI. 2020. "Indo-Pacific Epicentre of 'great Power Competition' with China: Esper." *Business Standard India*, August 27, 2020. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/indo-pacific-epicentre-of-great-power-competition-with-china-esper-120082700534\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/indo-pacific-epicentre-of-great-power-competition-with-china-esper-120082700534_1.html)

<sup>6</sup> Tillerson, Rex W. 2017. "Remarks on 'Defining Our Relationship With India for the Next Century.'" United States Department of State. October 18, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-defining-our-relationship-with-india-for-the-next-century/>.

<sup>7</sup> Trump, Donald. 2017. "National Security Strategy of the United States of America." <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.Pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Wong, Alex N. 2018. "Briefing on The Indo-Pacific Strategy - United States Department of State." United States Department of State. April 2, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/briefing-on-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>

<sup>9</sup> "Bangladesh a Key Partner in the Indo-Pacific Region: US | DD News." 2020. *Ddnews.Gov.In*. October 15, 2020.

<http://ddnews.gov.in/international/bangladesh-key-partner-indo-pacific-region-us>

<sup>10</sup> OFFICE OF THE SPOKESPERSON. 2020a. "Deputy Secretary Biegun's Visit to Bangladesh." United States Department of State. October 16, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-bieguns-visit-to-bangladesh/>

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Dept of Defence. 2020. "The Maldives and U.S. Sign Defense Agreement" U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE. September 11, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2344512/the-maldives-and-us-sign-defense-agreement/#skip-target>

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Spokesperson. 2020b. "Secretary Pompeo Travels to Sri Lanka to Advance Indo-Pacific Ties." United States Department of State. October 27, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-pompeo-travels-to-sri-lanka-to-advance-indo-pacific-ties/>

<sup>13</sup> Pompeo, Michael R. 2020. "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena at a Press Availability." United States Department of State. August 28, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-sri-lankan-foreign-minister-dinesh-gunawardena-at-a-press-availability/>.

<sup>14</sup> Stobdan, P. 2020. "As China Intrudes across LAC, India Must Be Alert to a Larger Strategic Shift." *The Indian Express*. May 26, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-ladakh-warning-india-china-border-dispute-6427131/>

<sup>15</sup> Roche, Elizabeth. 2020. "US Calls for 'Enhanced Cooperation' among Quad Partners." *Mint*. October 14, 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/us-calls-for-enhanced-cooperation-among-quad-partners-11602693167168.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Mitra, Devirupa. 2020. "Sri Lanka Worried About Indian Ocean's Securitisation, Impact of Quad Military Alliance." *The Wire*. October 30, 2020. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/sri-lanka-worried-about-indian-oceans-securitisation-impact-of-quad-military-alliance>.

<sup>17</sup> "South Asia Trade | WITS Data." 2018. *Worldbank.org* 2018. <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/SAS>.