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India and NATO: Partners in Arms?

The time is ripe for increased cooperation between India and the U.S.-led alliance.

By Hriday Ch. Sarma
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Since the end of Cold War, India and NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) have been on trajectories that will likely converge in the not-too-distant future. Scholars and strategists, like Michael Rühle, Robert Helbig, M.K. Bhadrakumar, David Scott, and a few others argue for India and NATO to come out of their respective shells and openly partner to deal with issues of common interest and concern. This article looks into the present undercurrents relating to an India-NATO partnership, and argues that the process has already begun but needs to come out in the open.

Recent Turnaround Events

On March 22, 2016, U.S. Congressman George Holding, co-chair of the House India Caucus, introduced the U.S.-India Defense Technology and Partnership Act (HR 4825). The bill proposes to amend the Arms Export Control Action in order to formalize India's position a major partner, on par with America's NATO allies and closest partners. Holding told the House, "The legislation will cement the process that has already been made and will lay a foundation for future cooperation and growth." The bill has been referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and is currently under consideration for being passed into a law.

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On May 20, 2016, the U.S. House of Representatives approved an amendment to the National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA)-2017, which in principle has elevated U.S. defense ties with India. This bipartisan legislative move aims to bring India on par with NATO allies in terms of defense equipment sales and technology transfers. The two countries are now at an advanced stage of negotiation over the transfer of Predator combat drones, which India formally asked the United States for during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the country in June this year. Moreover, Washington leaned on the other member countries of Missile Technology Control Regime to include India as its 35th member nation on June 27, 2016. This forward leap clears up the pathway for the Predator transfer deal come to fruition.

In addition to India's deepening of bilateral strategic relations with the United States, the country is also expanding the scope of its strategic and military activities with other NATO member countries while keeping a closer eye on the Indian Ocean and endeavoring to boost its firepower along its vast land borders with Pakistan and China. For example, on September 9, 2016, India signed a formal agreement to buy 36 Rafale fighter jets from France's Dassault Aviation, for a reported 7.9 billion euros (\$8.4 billion). This deal qualifies as India's first major acquisition of combat aircraft in two decades.

Thus, India's highest decision-making echelon is opening up to the idea of collaborating with NATO states to meet its enhanced national security needs, both in its neighborhood and in distant regions. NATO meanwhile sees this as an opportunity to share international responsibilities with an emerging global power on a note of mutual trust and cooperation.

Fundamental Commonalities and Emerging Synergies

India is emerging as a global power to be reckoned with under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The country has started asserting its influence at various international forums in order to augment its national interests. This was illustrated, for example, by Modi's early focus on states in South Asia and high-level meetings with China, the United States, Japan, Australia, and Russia after becoming the prime minister. Unlike in the Cold War era, today India stands tightly integrated into the international economy and global political system. On the one hand its foreign trade accounts for over half its GDP; on the other hand, it is an active party to all major contemporary global issues of concern, like climate change, countering Islamic extremism, and terrorism, and so on.

India is now facing rising commercial competition with China in the economies of the Indian Ocean littoral and growing Chinese claims over the South China Sea. This is instilling a sense of rising paranoia among the country's military circles and domestic companies operating on the high seas. New Delhi is trying to address this with "soft power balancing" strategies, however doing so is a struggle under the might of Chinese global and regional dominance.

Meanwhile, NATO as a security alliance is currently undergoing a transformational change from within. It is now involved in an array of capacity-building measures in order to re-fashion itself to suit the necessities of the day, while also preserving its fundamental identity and values. Some

of these measures include technology upgrades, increasing interoperability, and so on. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, this collective security institution has been unable to define a common threat for all of its member states – especially any enemy state/states. However, it is now foreseeing the rise of a Russia-China strategic alliance as a prospective threat for the sustenance of the established world-order. So, in order to counterbalance the rising influence of these dissenting great powers on the seas and across different continents, NATO is gearing up with essential changes to its strategic doctrine.

India and NATO both uphold a shared set of values, like democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, human rights, and international law. In fact, many of India's constitutionally defined principles and practical actions on its national and international fronts tally with NATO's own values and actions. While NATO has fought for the universalization of democracy and people's rights, India has a clean track record of upholding international laws, human rights, individual liberty, and other moral values. Moreover, at the strategic front India has extended its neighborhood framework beyond the Indian subcontinent over the past decade. This has brought it closer to NATO, which has forayed eastwards from the Mediterranean with its "out-of-area" operations during the same time.

Hence, the fundamental commonalities and emerging synergies are bringing the two parties together, both at the political and military levels. This is also acting as a strong catalytic force for initiating policy reformulation and strategic reorientation on both sides as they foresee this strategic partnership coming up in the near future. However, even today there exist certain thwarting forces and obstacles that are holding them back from joining hands outright.

Roadblocks for Cooperation

India and NATO experienced a distinctly cool relationship throughout most of the post-Second World War period and for 20 years following the end of the Cold War. However, they have failed to translate the current uptick in the relationship into any meaningful collaboration, which would have otherwise imbued them with mutual benefit. They are still caught up in a longstanding imbroglio.

First, neither of two parties has ever attempted to give away concessions which would have satisfied the minimum terms for mutual engagement. The U.S. administration has pushed to make India a partner of equal status to other NATO allies for the United States. However, as of yet, the U.S. government has not fully embraced India as a strategic partner over any of its existing partners in South Asia, including India's arch-rival Pakistan, and elsewhere. On the other hand, India continues to swing toward Russia and China in its attempt to show the international community that it remains outside of the U.S.-led bloc.

Moreover, India's traditional stance of non-alignment is preventing it from positively reciprocating the welcoming gestures of the U.S. administration to work in a well coordinated manner. The country's political-military establishment has always held a cynical attitude toward aligning with any military bloc or superpower under the notion of safeguarding national sovereignty. On the contrary, India did informally align with the Soviet Union for most of the Cold War years out of practical need for ensuring its security.

Both parties have gained in other ways while resisting open cooperation and partnership. India, on the one hand, has fully enjoyed its flexibility to engage with any state/non-state party on its own terms. It sided with the majority of the international community in criticizing the United States and those of its NATO allies who executed a military intervention in Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein. Similarly, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) — a NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan — continued to freely engage with Pakistan in its War on Terror in Afghanistan despite India's hue-and-cry toward calling Pakistan a terrorist state.

Where To Next?

The genesis of the India-NATO partnership can be traced to the Strategic Concept laid out in the 2010 Lisbon Summit Declaration, which agrees to further enhance the Alliance's existing partnerships and to develop new ones with interested countries and organizations. The gestation period of this conception took more than five years; however, it has now slowly come out in the open.

There is an imperative need on part of both parties to collaborate immediately. The big question remains how they can move in this direction. One prospective way forward may be found in heeding an old Chinese proverb: "It is better to take many small steps in the right direction than to make a great leap forward only to stumble backward."

At this juncture, NATO needs to explain to New Delhi's strategic community how it has changed since the Cold War and clearly convey its intentions to forge a "partnership of equals." Moreover, NATO needs to make Indian policymakers realize that it is a win-win situation for both parties to enter cooperation and collaboration. On the other hand, India needs to come out of its Cold War mindset and consider NATO a potential partner.

The more time the two parties take chewing over matters relating to this emerging partnership, the higher the pain they will endure in the process. Hence, at this juncture, it is both prudent and rational for India and NATO to deliberate on the idea of full-scale collaboration, including formulating an official road map without delay.