

America, India and the outsourcing of imperial overreach

By [Siddharth Varadarajan](#)

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In offering to make India a 'major world power', Washington wants a 'low cost ally' whose support in 'low-end tasks' will help free its own military for the 'high-end' military operations central to maintaining its power in Asia.

If there is one document everyone should read to understand the direction relations between the United States and India have begun to take in the past few years, it is The Indo-U.S. Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions , a report commissioned by the Pentagon in October 2002.

Written by Juli A. MacDonald of the [Information Assurance Technology Analysis Center \(IATAC\)](#) , a Department of Defense-affiliated outfit, the 131-page report was based on in-depth, off-the-record interviews with 40 senior serving U.S. officials — including military officers — and around the same number of serving and retired Indian officials and officers. The aim: to “reveal the opportunities for and impediments to military-to-military cooperation” between the two countries.

Although the unclassified report was circulated in the upper echelons of government in both countries two years ago, its existence was never publicised by either side — presumably because of the frank manner in which U.S. officials spoke of the value of India in America’s emerging Asian strategy. Reading the report two years later, it is clear the Pentagon did not commission the study as an academic exercise. In 2002, U.S. officials believed the opportunities were infinite and the impediments relatively easy to overcome. Today, some of these “opportunities” are being realized, as the [latest U.S.-India Defence Framework agreement suggests](#).

Anticipating the much-hyped naval cooperation between the U.S. and India [in the aftermath of the Tsunami](#), the IATAC report argues that the “U.S. military seeks a competent military partner that can take on more responsibility for low-end operations in Asia, such as peace-keeping operations, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and high-value cargo escort, which will allow the U.S. military to concentrate its resource on high-end fighting missions” (emphasis added). The Pentagon’s [Global Posture Review 2004](#) suggests the era of permanent large-scale overseas deployment is over. Military action of the future requires small bases, or “lily pads”, and a network of close allies with compatible “capabilities”. This is where U.S. planners see India fitting in.

The ‘tethering’ of China

What the Pentagon’s planners want is a military alliance of the kind the U.S. has with South Korea and Japan. The U.S. is looking ahead at the next 50 years. Japan is a declining power

and Korea an unpredictable one. Alone in Asia, India offers the prospect of a power whose rise can be harnessed in order to help the U.S. deal with the strategic challenge of China. It helps that a section of the Indian economic and political elite believes China is a threat.

So confident is Washington of the inevitability of this new alliance — and of its utility on the China front — that it has begun speaking of India in the same breath as Japan and Korea. After [her speech at Tokyo's Sophia University on March 19](#), U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was asked about the challenge posed by China to the U.S.

“[As] we look to China’s life”, she replied, “I really do believe the U.S.-Japan relationship, the U.S.-South Korean relationship, the U.S.-Indian relationship, all are important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role than a negative role. These alliances are not against China; they are alliances that are devoted to a stable security and political and economic and, indeed, values-based relationships that put China in the context of those relationships, and a different path to development than if China were simply untethered, simply operating without that strategic context.” (emphasis added)

The use of the word ‘untethered’ is not fortuitous. George F. Kennan had just died and his intellectual legacy was weighing heavily on Dr Rice’s mind. ‘To tether’ means “to tie a rope or chain to an animal so as to restrict him to a particular spot”, precisely the aim Kennan hoped to achieve by ‘containment’ of the Soviet Union.

In her report, Ms MacDonald noted that while the Indians she interviewed were pre-occupied with “more immediate” challenges posed by China, “the American interviewees are focused on the longer term implications of the Chinese gaining a strategic position to threaten the U.S. position in Asia”. She stresses the reluctance of Indian and U.S. officials to recommend or argue openly that the Indo-U.S. military relationship be directed primarily against China. “A U.S. admiral reasoned that ... [t]he U.S. and India both view China as a strategic threat ... though we do not discuss this publicly”. She quoted one American colonel as warning against portraying India as a counter to China in U.S. strategy: “... Such a rationale for the relationship will make the task of selling the Indo-U.S. relationship to the Indian public exceedingly difficult.” At the same time, China is the key. “This statement is typical”, the IATAC report says:

“As the U.S. military engages India, as much as we say we do, we cannot separate our thinking on India from our thinking on China. We want a friend in 2020 that will be capable of assisting the U.S. military to deal with a Chinese threat. We cannot deny that India will create a countervailing force to China.”

India as hedge

The American officials quoted in the IATAC report also said the U.S. needs to prepare for the day its traditional relationships in Asia weaken. A State Department official notes: “India’s strategic importance increases in the event that U.S. relationships with other traditional allies (e.g. Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia) become more acrimonious or politically uncomfortable for both parties; or if access rights that the U.S. takes for granted become more restrictive... The U.S. needs to develop alternatives in Asia. India is the optimal choice if we can overcome the obstacles in building the relationship.”

Lack of access to U.S. weapons technology is seen as the biggest obstacle from the Indian side. “An American major general summarized the contrasting aims: ‘The Indians will laud the relationship as a success if they obtain the technology they want from the U.S. We will view the relationship as a success if we are able to build a constructive military cooperation program that enables us to jointly operate with the Indians in the future’.”

But these aims turn out not to be so contrasting after all. The sale of U.S. technology will improve the “inter-operability” of Indian and U.S. soldiers and allow for the kind of joint ‘multinational operations’ the new U.S.-India defence agreement speaks of. “U.S. military officers who want India to be a capable partner convey a uniform message: The US must allow the sale of US technology and equipment to India”, the IATAC report states. According to a U.S. general, “The only way to achieve any level of inter-operability requires the U.S. Government to sell India U.S. equipment. Not only will [this] help the two militaries communicate and operate together, they will also enable the U.S. military to more equally assess India’s military capabilities”.

The aim, of course, is not just to assess but to access Indian military capabilities. “Access to India would enable the U.S. military ‘to be able to touch the rest of the world’ and to respond rapidly to regional crises”, one U.S. Lt General told Ms MacDonald. And another senior officer argued that the U.S. Air Force “would benefit from having access closer to areas of instability (e.g. Central Asia, Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf). India’s well developed infrastructure could be useful for U.S. power projection into these areas”.

Indians who feel flattered by the growing number of port calls by U.S. warships and joint exercises at sea and in air should realize there is a purpose behind everything. “American military officers are “candid in their plans to eventually seek access to Indian bases and military infrastructure”, the IATAC report states. “The U.S. Navy wants a relatively neutral territory on the opposite side of the world that can provide ports and support for operations in the Middle East”, a U.S. officer is quoted as saying. “Over time, port visits must become a natural event... In the same vein, the U.S. Air Force would like the Indians to be able to grant them access to bases and landing rights during operations, such as counter-terrorism and heavy airlift support.” “Our ultimate goal”, another U.S. officer said, “is to be able to work together with the Indians to respond to regional crises, particularly in Africa. We (India and the U.S.) should be seen as partners in restoring order and promoting democracy in the region”.

If U.S. officials are candid about their expectations from India, they are also aware of the need to tie India down early. A U.S. colonel told Ms MacDonald: “The costs of building a relationship with India today are significantly lower than the costs of facing India as a spoiler in the future. Moreover, the costs of building a relationship with India will likely increase over time”. “Many Americans”, she notes, “advocated that ‘the low cost of building a relationship today will pay large dividends in the future’ by preventing India from acting in ways that could be counter to U.S. interests.”

In the process of helping the U.S. “tether” China, India is likely to find that it has tethered itself as well. This is the essence of the ‘offer’ [a senior U.S. State Department official made](#) in March this year to “help India become a major world power”. Such an offer is not only demeaning, it is aimed at ensuring India never plays a constructive role with China and others in developing a new, cooperative Asian security framework — a framework in which there is no room for outside powers to maintain a military presence in the continent under the guise of providing ‘balance’.

If he has not already done so, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would be well advised to go through the IATAC report before setting off for Washington on July 16. Last week, he told reporters India would never be a supplicant or client state. He is right. India is far too big — and its people far too proud — to allow this to happen. But as his government rushes into a ‘partnership’ with the U.S. on all fronts — especially military — there must be no illusions about just what it is Washington wants.

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