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A Glimpse of a ‘Strategic Handshake’: Towards a New Indo-US Partnership

*The latest decision of the United States to treat India as a “Major Defense Partner” is not surprising. This denouement was virtually anticipated, during the 15th Asia Security Summit, organised in Singapore by The International Institute for Strategic Studies in early-June 2016. Significantly, the new Indo-American **entente** will be a key factor in conceiving an Asia-Pacific (Indo-Pacific) security order, depending on how long the US-India ‘strategic and technological handshake’ lasts.*

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The United States has recognised India as a “Major Defense Partner”,² following talks between US President Barack Obama and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington on 7 June 2016. An advance intimation of this Indo-US alignment of defence interests was evident at the 15th Asia Security Summit, organised by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in Singapore on 4 and 5 June itself.

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² The remarks by US President Barack Obama and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi are cited from the official statements released by the two governments during Modi’s visit to Washington on 7 and 8 June 2016.

This summit, as also the preceding annual conferences of the same kind in Singapore, are stylised as Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), named after the hotel-venue. Significantly, the latest SLD also revealed a nuanced but burgeoning Sino-Indian ‘sentiment’ about cautious engagement. To the discerning delegates at the SLD, Japan figured on the side of the US and India in this complex milieu of crafting an Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific order, which is increasingly defined by the Sino-American competition for leadership.

US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter gave the Singapore SLD a glimpse of the now-happening “*strategic handshake*”³ between his country and India. “With the United States reaching west through its rebalance, and [with] India reaching east in Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Act East policy’, our two nations are exercising together by air, land and sea. There is also a [US-India] *technological handshake*; we are moving toward a deeper and more diverse defence co-development and co-production. The United States is working very hard on ... changing India’s status in the US export control system”.

The “handshake” is designed to ensure that “Prime Minister Modi’s ‘Make in India policy’ and our [American] technology policies ... come together in the same way that the rebalance and the ‘Act East’ come together”. Carter’s effusiveness at the SLD can be interpreted as follows. Depending on how long the American *handshake* lasts, India may gain greater access to US’ dual-use civil-military knowhow and hardware as well as sophisticated weapons-technology.

‘An Anchor of Stability’

When Carter spoke in Singapore, there was already a buzz at the US Capitol that India be treated as America’s non-NATO major partner, and brought under the wings of the Eagle in the Asia-Pacific theatre to face China. [NATO is the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization.] Viewed in this light, and in a change of metaphor, Obama and Modi have now agreed upon the words, major defence partner, which portray India as an autonomous player, albeit in the close company of Uncle Sam. The US and India now say that their new defence relationship “*can be an anchor of stability*”. The details of this new US-India *entente* will require a separate study.

³ The remarks by the US, Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Russian defence ministers or officials are cited from the author’s notes on the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore as well as his interactions with these and other delegates on 4 and 5 June 2016.

At the Singapore SLD, India's Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had noted that the-then anticipated status "could [indeed] give India an easy handle for fast-tracking [the military-to-military relationship]". Going beyond this, and hailing the latest Indo-American "symphony", Modi told a joint sitting of the US Congress on 8 June: "In every sector of India's forward-march I see the US as an indispensable partner. ... Our relationship is primed for a momentous future".

While Beijing is not identified as the antithetical target of this new US-India *entente*, the potential China-factor in this context was on the minds of some delegates at the Singapore SLD earlier. In tune with the currently cautious engagement between China and India, the two sides struck sober notes. China's Admiral Sun Jianguo said "[t]he Chinese and Indian defence and military leaders have exchanged visits within six months, jointly ushering the bilateral military relations into a new phase". Parrikar downplayed the speculation about a Sino-Indian rift over the stealthy movement of Chinese submarines close to India's coastline. Noting that such issues could be discussed with Beijing, he said "we [Indians] are interested in engaging with China in maritime security dialogue", which "is at an initial stage".

Japan and Russia are particularly relevant to the growing US-India equation in the context of China's continuing rise. Japan's Defence Minister Gen Nakatani said, at the SLD, his country "is very, very positive" about the US-India *entente*. He said Japan "should be able to cooperate [with the US and India] in order to protect ... two major seas [Indian and Pacific Oceans]". At a different level, Admiral Sun said China and Russia, treaty allies, "held their first joint computer-based missile defence war game recently" – a sign of new sophistication.

Straddling Two Fora

The US-India-Japan (USIJ) forum, and the Russia-China-India (RCI) group feature this evolving context. Following the new Indo-American defence *entente*, the USIJ gains greater traction, also because of the long-standing Japan-US alliance. In the RCI, Russia, with its long-standing equation with India in reasonable repair, is "not scared" of the Indo-American bonhomie. But China, with its chequered relationship with India, will be watchful.

The US and Japan are treaty allies, while China and Russia are similarly allies. India, which alone straddles these two trilateral fora, will therefore monitor how the US-China equation expands or contracts. Chinese President Xi Jinping, addressing Sino-American officials in

Beijing on 6 June, reiterated the imperative of developing a new model of major-power relationship between the two countries⁴ – euphemism for a US-China Group of Two (G2) for global governance. However, Carter had earlier said, at the SLD, such a G2 is not on America’s agenda. So, the dust has to settle before an Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific security order can be conceived.

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⁴ Chinese Foreign Ministry.