

Sumit Ganguly is a professor of Asian studies and government at the University of Texas at Austin. This fall, he will become director of the India Studies Program and the Rabindranath Tagore Professor of Indian Culture and Civilization at Indiana University, Bloomington.



The Start of a Beautiful Friendship?

The United States and India

Sumit Ganguly

Last May, Indian commandos and American Special Forces took part in a joint military exercise, “Balance Iroquois 02-1,” in the city of Agra, the home of the famed Taj Mahal.¹ This was the first such endeavor between the two militaries in four decades. A few months later, in September 2002, American and Indian troops participated in exercise “Geronimo Thrust 02” at Fort Richardson and Elemendorf Air Force Base in Alaska. Subsequently, the navies and air forces of the two countries conducted separate joint exercises, “Malabar” and “Cope India 02.” The first involved flying operations, antisubmarine warfare, and replenishment at sea. The second was an air transport exercise between the Indian and American air forces. As joint military exercises go, these were of limited strategic significance. Their importance lay in the political realm. Not since the aftermath of the military debacle of the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, when there was a fleeting moment of Indo-U.S. defense cooperation, had Indian and American troops taken part in a joint military exercise.

The Indo-U.S. relationship, which throughout the years of the Cold War was often contentious and sometimes turbulent, now appears more balanced. The choices policymakers in New Delhi and Washington make on a number of bilateral and global issues in the coming months are likely to decide which way the relationship will tip. A robust Indo-U.S. relationship could help promote stability in South Asia and its deeply troubled environs. Washington and

New Delhi both have an interest in combating terrorism, avoiding war between India and neighboring Pakistan, and resolving the festering Kashmir dispute—all of which are inextricably linked—and in future strategic cooperation against a potentially revanchist China.² It goes without saying that a contentious relationship between the two powers would undermine the pursuit of these goals.

New Delhi’s recent willingness to expand military-to-military contacts with the United States signaled a dramatic shift. During much of the Cold War, the United States and India were at odds on many issues. At a regional level, their differences mostly revolved around India’s principal adversary, Pakistan. New Delhi was angered by America’s early military assistance to Pakistan and its ambivalence with respect to the Indian position on Kashmir. The United States also cared little for India’s preference for a state-led strategy of economic growth. At a global level, the two sides were at odds over a central element of American grand strategy, namely the containment of global communism. The difference in strategic outlook was evident in India’s dependence on the Soviet Union as its principal arms supplier, despite New Delhi’s professed commitment to nonalignment.

The Palimpsest of the Past

Even before the end of the Cold War, the United States and India had made cautious and fitful attempts to improve relations. The Reagan administration sought to wean

India away from its military dependence on the Soviet Union with the promise of expanded technological cooperation. Yet the palimpsest of the past weighed heavily on both sides. Washington deemed India to be incapable of breaking its military ties to the Soviet Union, unable to dismantle the labyrinthine controls on its economy, and unwilling to jettison its commitment to the creation of global regimes based on regulatory, as opposed to market, mechanisms.

The Cold War's end led to the gradual erosion of most of these irritants in Indo-U.S. relations. After the Soviet Union collapsed, India fitfully embraced a more market-friendly economic policy and became less intransigent on issues ranging from trade to global climate change. Differences on key issues continued to dog the relationship, however. During the Clinton administration, the two sides remained at loggerheads over Kashmir and over India's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

It was during the waning days of the Clinton administration, especially after the Kargil war between India and Pakistan, that a new warmth emerged in Indo-U.S. relations. The Kargil war began in mid-May 1999, when Indian troops discovered that Pakistani troops and irregular forces supported by Pakistan had made incursions along the Line of Control (the boundary between India and Pakistan in the disputed territory of Kashmir) at Batalik, Dras, and Kargil, at altitudes exceeding 16,000 feet. The military confrontation lasted into mid-July. In a break from past practice, the United States took an unequivocal stand, condemning Pakistan for having sent troops across the Line of Control, and it played a key role in brokering a cease-fire agreement.

The changed American stance was not lost on New Delhi. Indian policymakers were not only pleased with Washington's willingness to condemn Pakistani aggression but also correctly assessed it as a shift in American policy toward the region. Their

assessment of this shift was reinforced when President Clinton, in his visit to the subcontinent in March 2000, spent the bulk of his time in India. He pointedly spent only a single day in Pakistan and used the occasion to upbraid Gen. Pervez Musharraf for having engineered the October 1999 coup that had brought the general to power and to criticize Pakistan for its seemingly inexorable slide toward becoming ungovernable. When India's prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited the United States later that year, in September, his meetings with President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, despite the discussion of such contentious issues as Kashmir and nuclear proliferation, were remarkably free of acrimony.

The inauguration of George W. Bush for the most part brought a continuation of the policies on which the Clinton administration had belatedly embarked. Even prior to assuming office, key Bush policy advisers had signaled that India would be accorded a higher priority in Washington's foreign policy calculus.³ The new administration was unhappy with Pakistan because of its unwillingness to sever its extensive ties to the scrofulous Taliban regime in Afghanistan and because of Islamabad's unremitting support for the Muslim insurgents who were terrorizing Indian-controlled Kashmir. On the other hand, much to the delight of both New Delhi and Islamabad, the Bush administration chose to downplay the issue of nuclear proliferation. Shortly after coming to power, President Bush lifted many of the proliferation-related sanctions that had been placed on India after the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998, and soon after lifted the sanctions on Pakistan.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, forced the administration to reexamine its policies toward Pakistan. Pakistan's extensive links to the Taliban and its geographic proximity to Afghanistan meant that its cooperation would be vital for the prosecution of the upcoming military cam-

paign against both the Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network. Yet an uncritical embrace of Pakistan risked undoing the recent carefully forged ties with India. To avoid a rupture in Indo-U.S. relations, senior American officials sought to reassure their Indian counterparts that a closer relationship with Pakistan would not come at India's expense.⁴ However, a series of terrorist acts against Indian targets carried out by Pakistan-supported insurgents sparked a war of words between India and Pakistan. Actual war between the two countries appeared imminent.

Washington in the Middle

On December 13, 2001, terrorists widely believed to be members of the Pakistani-based Lashkar-i-Taiba extremist group attacked the Indian parliament. Fortunately, the quick reaction of an unarmed but alert parliamentary guard thwarted their plans to enter the central hall where parliamentarians meet. Indian commandos killed all of the terrorists in a protracted gun battle. Shortly after this incident, Indian authorities claimed that they had obtained telephonic intercepts that incontrovertibly linked these terrorists to Pakistani intelligence services.⁵ Accordingly, India withdrew its ambassador from Islamabad, demanded that Pakistan hand over some 20 individuals wanted in India for acts of terror, and shut down road and air links between the two countries.⁶ It also embarked on a massive military mobilization designed to pressure Pakistan to end its support for Kashmiri separatist organizations. Senior Indian officials pressured the U.S. government to induce the Musharraf government to acquiesce to India's demands.

The brazen attack on the Indian parliament and India's subsequent demands put the United States in a quandary. American officials could hardly continue to overlook Pakistan's complicity in the terrorist activities of Kashmiri separatist groups. In an attempt to protect American interests while

addressing India's concerns, the Bush administration developed a two-pronged strategy: it counseled restraint on the part of India while placing Lashkar-i-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, another Pakistani extremist group, on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations and freezing their assets in the United States.⁷ Washington also strongly urged General Musharraf to renounce Pakistani government support for the insurgents. Faced with sustained American pressure, Musharraf made a speech on January 12, 2002, which was widely broadcast in Pakistan, in which he denounced the activities of a number of radical Islamic organizations that had been operating from Pakistani soil, and then arrested some of their leaders. However, he refused to renounce his government's support for the Kashmiri cause, insisting that "Kashmir runs in our blood." The United States hailed his speech as a fundamental shift in Pakistani policy. New Dehli, however, took a more circumspect view; some among the leadership referred to the speech as little more than a sop to the American Cerberus.⁸ Much to the frustration of policymakers in Washington, Indo-Pakistani tensions remained high as both sides bolstered their forces along the Line of Control.

Over the following months, a parade of senior U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, visited India and Pakistan in an effort to preserve good relations with both states. But this was a trying time for American diplomacy, as terrorist attacks continued sporadically and Indo-Pakistani relations continued on their downward slide. Indeed, after a terrorist attack on May 14 at an Indian military base at Kaluchak in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, it appeared that war was again imminent. Once again the United States stepped into the breach.⁹ It remains an open question whether it was the American intervention, the lack of adequate Indian conventional military capabilities, or the fear of a

nuclear exchange that led the two sides away from the brink, but war was averted.

A New Strategic Relationship?

Given its objective of improving its ties with India, the Bush administration realized that it would have to offer India other inducements apart from exerting pressure on Pakistan to curb its support for the insurgents in Kashmir. To this end, it undertook to initiate military-to-military cooperation with India, and it renewed discussions with the Indian government on the transfer of dual-use technology, long off limits to New Delhi. These negotiations culminated in a new technology-transfer regime in early 2003.¹⁰

On the military-to-military cooperation front, the shift was nothing short of dramatic, given the two sides' history of mutual acrimony, distrust, and petulance. The foundations of these cooperative endeavors were laid during the Clinton administration, when Secretary of Defense William Perry signed the "Agreed Minute on Defense Relations" with his Indian counterpart, S. B. Chavan, in January 1995. However, the Clinton administration's preoccupation with questions of nuclear nonproliferation had inhibited any significant expansion of military-to-military cooperation or dual-use technology transfers. Of course, the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998 made such ties impossible and prompted the administration to impose economic and military sanctions on India.

The Bush administration, for its part, took a more pragmatic and measured view of India's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. In turn, India's restraint in light of the Bush administration's decision to abandon the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty came as a most welcome surprise in Washington.¹¹ This new willingness of both sides to pursue a nonideological approach to bilateral relations opened the path to greater security cooperation. There is little question that the Bush administration's quest to develop bet-

ter security ties with India stemmed in part from concerns about China's future role in Asia. While most Indian policymakers are skeptical about joining an American-led effort to limit Chinese strategic influence in Asia, now that they have largely discarded their ideological blinders they see significant advantages in pursuing a new defense relationship with the United States. In addition to expanding the scope of military-to-military contacts, the Bush administration has signaled a willingness to sell India various forms of weapons technology, including previously embargoed aircraft engines and artillery-locating radar, and has initiated regular diplomatic consultations on such matters of common interest as terrorism, peacekeeping operations, the protection of sea lanes, and piracy.¹²

The willingness of the Bush administration to develop this new military relationship with India reassured New Delhi that the U.S. reliance on Pakistan in the war against terror will not be to India's detriment. Yet it is unclear how long Washington will be able to maintain this balancing act. India's leadership has both publicly and privately aired misgivings about America's coddling of Pakistan, particularly in view of Islamabad's persistent dissembling about its support for Kashmiri insurgents and its proliferation connection with North Korea. (It is thought that Pakistan may have given the North Koreans nuclear weapons technology in return for ballistic missile technology.)¹³

Treading Lightly

Have Indo-U.S. relations tipped far enough toward the positive that these important policy differences can be set aside while the two nations continue to broaden and deepen the bilateral relationship in other areas? A small segment of India's "attentive public" remains deeply dubious of American goals and interests in the region. Trapped in the miasmatic ideology of nonalignment that pervaded Indian policymaking during the Cold

War, their worldview may be characterized as “post-Nehruvian.” In their assessment, despite the end of the Cold War, the United States mistakenly continues to see Pakistan as India’s equal, has failed to recognize India’s economic and political resilience, and is deeply opposed to India’s preferred vision of a multipolar world, in which regional powers should have some room for maneuver.¹⁴ Suspicious of Washington’s intentions, they see the recent warming trends in Indo-U.S. relations as window dressing. They believe that India should avoid drifting too close to the American orbit and continue to improve relations with other regional powers such as Iran, Russia, France, and China. In their view, such a loose constellation of middle-range powers could offer a credible alternative to American global dominance.

The key foreign policy players in India’s Bharitiya Janata Party–led ruling coalition (National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishrap, Finance Minister Jaswant Singh, and, to an extent, Prime Minister Vajpayee) share some of the concerns of this post-Nehruvian camp. Yet their outlook is far more pragmatic and single-minded. Unlike their Nehruvian predecessors and post-Nehruvian contemporaries, the foreign policy stalwarts in the BJP coalition have embraced a very different set of intellectual precepts to guide India’s foreign and defense policies. For example, they explicitly recognize the significance of military and economic prowess as elements of national power, are far less inhibited about the use of force, and are not nearly as concerned about upholding multilateral norms where India’s perceived vital interests are concerned.¹⁵ Consequently, they have quietly but vigorously pursued India’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, bolstered its conventional capabilities, fitfully but determinedly pursued economic reform (opening up the economy and embracing more market-oriented principles of economic growth), and shown a willingness to avoid a confrontation with the United States on the vexed question of Iraq.

The latter deserves comment. The Indian decision-making elite preferred a strategy of containment of Saddam Hussein and opposed regime change. Substantial numbers of Indians work in the Persian Gulf, providing much-needed foreign exchange for India’s coffers. More to the point, while harboring no illusions about the vicious quality of Saddam’s regime, they nonetheless saw the Iraqi leader as a secular bulwark in a region rife with Islamic radicalism. To this extent, they remained deeply skeptical about the Bush administration’s strenuous attempts to link Saddam with al-Qaeda. Consequently, at the Non-Aligned Summit held in Kuala Lumpur in late February, Prime Minister Vajpayee cautioned against the use of force to disarm Iraq.

However, the American-led war against Iraq will probably not strain the Indo-U.S. relationship to the breaking point. Some members of India’s ruling coalition may well upbraid the United States for its flagrant disregard of the U.N. Security Council and the opinion of its allies in deciding to go to war against Iraq, but pragmatism and the willingness of the major players in the Indian government to embrace the utility of force in international affairs will eventually carry the day. Whatever tensions arise over Iraq, the Indian government will not allow them to slow the momentum of the Indo-U.S. relationship.¹⁶

Will an issue closer to home, namely the unresolved question of Kashmir, again come to haunt Indo-U.S. relations? The neuralgic Indian reaction to any third-party intervention in the dispute is well known. Nevertheless, the United States, contrary to the fears of many in New Delhi’s policymaking circles, is unlikely to get involved in resolving the Kashmir question without the explicit request of both India and Pakistan. In recent years, both Democratic and Republican administrations have stressed the importance of bilateral negotiations for settling the dispute. It is most unlikely that American policy on this issue will undergo a dra-

matic shift in the foreseeable future. Washington in all likelihood will keep jawboning General Musharraf to end his regime's support for the insurgents while simultaneously urging New Delhi to improve its governance of Indian-held Kashmir—to address human rights violations by its security forces, promote economic development, and restore public order and security. The largely free and fair legislative elections that took place in Indian-controlled Kashmir last fall offer a modicum of hope that order may be restored, now that there is a legitimately elected government in place.¹⁷ If the United States can induce General Musharraf to end the infiltration of insurgents into the state, and India can restore a degree of political normalcy there, renewed negotiations toward a settlement of this thorny issue may yet be possible.

Indian political analysts frequently lament the fact that the world's two largest democracies have so often been at odds. Today, freed from many of the constraints of the Cold War, the United States and India share a number of common concerns and interests. Both have much to fear from global terrorism, share concerns about a rising China, are desirous of maintaining access to the oil resources of the Persian Gulf, and have important trade complementarities. These areas of potential cooperation may enable the two countries to bury an often acrimonious past. ●

—*March 20, 2003*

Notes

1. Personal correspondence with Maj. Kent Breedlove, United States Pacific Command, Hawaii. See also Josy Joseph, "India, US Hold Biggest-ever Joint War Exercise at Agra," *India Abroad*, May 24, 2002, p. 8.
2. Josy Joseph, "India, U.S. to Discuss China Formally for First Time," *India Abroad*, October 11, 2002, p. A13.
3. On this point see Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79 (January/February 2002), pp. 45–62.

4. Patrick E. Tyler and Celia W. Dugger, "Powell's Message: America's Courting of Pakistan Will Not Come at India's Expense," *New York Times*, October 18, 2001.

5. Celia W. Dugger, "Group in Pakistan Is Blamed by India for Suicide Raid," *New York Times*, December 15, 2001.

6. Tara Shankar Sahay, "India Hands Over List of 20 Wanted Terrorists to Pakistan," *India Abroad*, January 11, 2002, p. 1.

7. David E. Sanger and Kurt Eichenwald, "Citing India Attack, U.S. Aims at Assets of Groups in Pakistan," *New York Times*, December 21, 2001.

8. B. Raman, "Will He Walk the Talk?" *Outlook*, January 14, 2002, available at www.outlookindia.com.

9. Farhan Bokhari and Edward Luce, "Bombers Kill 33 in Kashmir as US Envoy Visits India," *Financial Times*, May 15, 2002.

10. Chidanand Rajghatta, "U.S. Opens High-tech Tap to India," *Times of India*, February 7, 2003.

11. Dennis Kux, "A Remarkable Turnaround: U.S.-India Relations," *Foreign Service Journal*, October 2002, pp. 18–23.

12. Celia W. Dugger, "Wider Military Ties with India Offer U.S. Diplomatic Leverage," *New York Times*, June 10, 2002.

13. G. Parthasarathy, "Pervez, the Proliferator," *India Abroad*, November 1, 2002, p. A32.

14. For an early and articulate statement of this position, see S. D. Muni, "India and the Post-Cold War: Opportunities and Challenges," *Asian Survey* (September 1991), pp. 862–74.

15. For a discussion of the markedly different intellectual premises now shaping Indian foreign policy, see Jaswant Singh, *Defending India* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

16. See for example, Thomas L. Friedman, "Vote France Off the Island," *New York Times*, February 9, 2003.

17. Pankaj Mishra, "Kashmir: One Cheer for Democracy," *New York Review of Books*, February 27, 2003, pp. 25–27.