

**MARK R. WARNER***U.S. Senator from the Commonwealth of Virginia*[Back](#)

News Clips

Mar 26 2012

## [Congressional Quarterly: Courting a Reluctant Ally](#)

By Jonathan Broder

For many in the Obama administration and on Capitol Hill, India is the perfect ally for the difficult military and strategic challenges that lie ahead in South Asia after the Afghanistan War. As President Obama prepares to begin drawing down U.S. troops in Afghanistan next year, India is now seen as the only power that is both stable and reliably committed to maintaining peace in the region.



DELEGATION: Democrats Warner, Rep. Joseph Crowley of New York (co-chairman of the House India Caucus), Sen. Michael Bennet of Colorado and Rep. Cedric L. Richmond of Louisiana visit New Delhi in January. (SAJJAD HUSSAIN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES)

Over the past few months, India's strategic importance to Washington has grown as relations with Kabul have continued to deteriorate over civilian deaths and cultural insensitivities, and a corrosive distrust has deepened between the United States and Pakistan.

Indeed, the administration has high enough hopes for such an alliance that India was the only country cited by name in the Pentagon's most recent global strategy document as meriting a full-blown "strategic partnership" with the United States. On Capitol Hill, lawmakers' enthusiasm about the economic prospects for that partnership is reflected in the growth of the congressional India caucus, now one of Congress' largest advocacy groups on behalf of a foreign country.

"What you're seeing is that our interests and India's interests align on so many issues," says Virginia Democrat Mark Warner, co-chairman of the Senate's 38-member India caucus. Citing India's shared concerns about China's rise, its growing middle class as a market for U.S. exports and, of course, its democratic traditions, he added: "On most issues, I think we'll end up on the same side."

Yet despite such hopeful predictions, India's response has been, in effect, "not so fast." In New Delhi, officials are balking at joining the tough new Western sanctions against Iran, a top U.S. priority. They broke with Washington on its push for regime change in Libya and Syria after brutal suppressions of demonstrators in both countries. India is also reluctant to align itself too closely with Washington's efforts to contain China or to assume too great a role in a postwar Afghanistan. Meanwhile, growing differences over trade are frustrating U.S. commercial expectations of the relationship.

Perhaps most significant, Indians, with their long tradition of non-alignment, bristle at Washington's habit of viewing allies as junior partners who are expected to behave accordingly.

New Delhi spurned U.S. companies on several recent arms deals, largely because Washington was holding back its most advanced technology, a reminder of how far U.S. officials are from seeing their vision of an alliance with India fully realized.

Washington and New Delhi have made great strides in their strategic and economic relations since the frosty days of the Cold War, when the United States aligned with India's main rival, Pakistan, and the socialist leadership in New Delhi tilted toward the former Soviet Union. U.S. and Indian warships now regularly conduct joint naval exercises, and two-way trade and investment reached \$100 billion last year.

But India's wariness of getting too close to the United States adds to the burden that Washington currently faces in the Asia-Pacific region as it prepares for its troop drawdown in Afghanistan and jockeys with China for influence on the global stage. Indian officials call the guiding principle behind their foreign policy "strategic autonomy" or "non-alignment 2.0," an updated version of India's theoretical refusal to take sides during the Cold War. Today, India clearly sees itself as a rising economic and military power in a multipolar world, and regional experts caution it is not about to tilt in any direction that doesn't advance its ascent.

"India has no desire to be an American ally, to be tethered to an American strategy, to take orders from the United States, to be America's deputy in Asia," says Jonathan Pollack, an Asia expert at the Brookings Institution. "It simply runs against the grain of Indian strategic thinking and Indian interests."

### Resisting Iran Sanctions

While the idea of a close alliance with India has excited many lawmakers, the reality is already falling well short. New Delhi's continued purchase of Iranian oil and natural gas in defiance of U.S. moves to sanction Tehran's energy clients is a case study in the limits of the U.S.-India relationship. Indian officials say such oil purchases from Iran are a matter of economic necessity, given India's dependence on imported oil. In partial deference to U.S. requests, India has reduced its orders from Iran. But it still depends on Iran for about 12 percent of energy needs, making it Tehran's top oil customer.

Warner says he raised the issue of India's oil purchases from Iran with several government ministers in New Delhi during a January visit. But he acknowledges he made little progress in convincing the Indian government to side fully with the United States against Iran.

As U.S. frustrations mount, some lawmakers are growing impatient with India's position. In a February letter to India's ambassador to the United States, Nirupama Rao, New York's Republican Rep. Richard Hanna and Democratic Rep. Steve Israel, both strong supporters of Israel, expressed concern over India's oil purchases from Iran and urged New Delhi to "stand firm" with the United States and other countries pressuring Iran to abandon its nuclear program.

At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing last month, New Jersey Democrat Robert Menendez advised Nancy J. Powell, who was nominated to be the next U.S. ambassador to India, that if confirmed, her first priority should be to warn the Indian government that the United States will punish Indian companies if they continue to buy Iranian oil.

Menendez, who has helped push through some of the toughest new sanctions against Iran, noted that India "seems to be rebuking the sanctions and looking for workarounds," first by paying Iran for its oil through a Turkish bank that fell outside American sanctions and most recently by agreeing to pay for roughly half of its Iranian oil imports in Indian rupees — thus avoiding the need to pay in dollars through Iran's Central Bank — and the remainder of the debt through barter.

"This is going to be a very important topic and one of those that I will be dealing with very seriously and very early in my tenure," pledged Powell, who still awaits Senate confirmation.

Not surprisingly, India sees things differently. Indian diplomats point out that in addition to New Delhi's dependence on Iranian oil, it is in India's interest to maintain good ties with Iran, which

shares deep historical, cultural and religious connections. They note that India is home to 18 million to 26 million Shiite Muslims, according to estimates from the Pew Research Center.

Most important, India maintains that its economic relations with Iran do not contradict New Delhi's policy of opposing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

"Iran is our near neighbor," Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai said during a recent visit to Washington. "Our relationship with Iran is neither inconsistent with our nonproliferation objectives, nor is it in contradiction with the relationships that we have with our friends in West Asia or with the United States and Europe."

Other South Asia analysts say India's ties to Iran go beyond oil dependency to involve the future of Afghanistan. For one thing, India and Iran cooperated to support anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan before the 2001 U.S. invasion, but they grew apart as American forces settled in. Now, through oil purchases, increased trade and India's ongoing construction of a major railroad in southeastern Iran that will carry iron and other metal ore from Central Afghanistan to an Iranian port on the Arabia Sea, India hopes to strengthen ties with Iran as a hedge against an uncertain future in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal.

"With 2014 looming closer, India's inclination is to keep its Iranian relationship healthy," says Lalit Mansingh, a former Indian foreign secretary.

New Delhi also has had major differences with Washington over the Arab upheavals in Libya and Syria. When the U.N. Security Council voted in March 2011 to approve a no-fly zone over Libya, India — a current member of the council — abstained. And Indian officials subsequently criticized the U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign, charging its goal was no longer simply humanitarian relief but driving Libyan strongman Muammar el-Qaddafi from power.

India also abstained on a U.S.-backed Security Council resolution last October to condemn Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for his violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. Five months later, New Delhi switched course and voted to support a second anti-Assad resolution. But the move had little to do with U.S. pressure. Instead, India was swayed by Saudi Arabia and other Arab League countries, from whom India eventually may have to buy more oil if Iran sanctions start to bite.

### Don't Stand so Close to Me

Long before U.S. differences with India over Iran and the Arab Spring, Washington and New Delhi were effectively on opposite sides during the Cold War.

Back then, Washington looked to Pakistan to help contain the Soviet Union's expansion into South Asia. As a result, India turned to Moscow for its arms purchases. During the 1971 India-Pakistan war, President Richard Nixon rearmed Pakistan and positioned an aircraft carrier battle group in the Bay of Bengal to dissuade India from further military action.

But after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, relations between Washington and New Delhi began to thaw as Indian leaders jettisoned their socialist traditions and embraced free-market policies. Under President Bill Clinton, the two countries held talks to build economic ties. The relationship intensified after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. President George W. Bush lifted India sanctions that had been in place since its 1998 nuclear test, and U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies cooperated closely against Islamic terrorists.

In July 2005, the two countries signed a landmark civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, which Congress approved the following year. The law, which allowed direct civilian nuclear cooperation with India for the first time in 30 years, transformed relations with New Delhi and opened the way to deeper cooperation in matters of regional security, including the joint military exercises and U.S.-Indian naval patrols off the coast of Somalia to halt piracy.

Ever since then, U.S. officials have promoted the idea of a strategic alliance with India. "The United States and India are natural partners, destined to be closer because of shared interests

and values and our mutual desire for a stable and secure world,” the Pentagon said in a November 2011 report to Congress on U.S.-India security cooperation.

One common concern is China’s growing military strength and influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing suspects the United States is trying to build an alliance with India to contain China — a charge that U.S. officials strongly deny. At the same time, however, some senior U.S. officials play up India’s differences with China in what appears to be an effort to highlight the logic of closer strategic ties with the United States.

“Despite public statements intended to downplay tensions between India and China, we judge that India is increasingly concerned about China’s posture along their disputed border and Beijing’s perceived aggressive posture in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region,” Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. said in his Jan. 31 global-threat assessment.

After noting India’s support for a strong U.S. military presence in East Asia, Clapper went on to say that the Indian military is strengthening its forces, “working to balance Chinese power projection in the Indian Ocean,” which also happens to be a key, if unspoken, objective of U.S. policy in the region.

Indian officials readily concede their difficulties with China. The two countries fought a border war in 1962, and New Delhi says Chinese troops still occupy some of its territory. Moreover, Indian strategic experts have expressed concerns about China’s expanding presence in the Indian Ocean, including its construction of major port facilities in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, an island nation just off India’s southern tip. “We have miles to go before we’re comfortable with each other,” says Mathai, the Indian foreign secretary.

But India is not eager to confront China in any way that would aggravate those tensions. If anything, Indian officials insist, New Delhi is going out of its way to smooth relations with Beijing by cooperating in areas of mutual interest, such as conducting their own joint naval patrols against pirates in the Indian Ocean. Most important, India has made it clear that it is unwilling to join the United States in an alliance whose main goal would be containing China.

“Nobody believes India should poke a finger in China’s eye,” says Sadanand Dhume, a resident fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Adds Mathai: “China has been reassured by India’s belief in its strategic autonomy. We are not interested in being absorbed into an alliance directed against another country.”

That’s not to say that India isn’t concerned about China’s growing military might. But, at the moment, Indian strategists believe China’s top naval priority is control over the western Pacific waters off the Chinese coast. And India is happy to see an increased U.S. naval presence in the Pacific, as India builds up its own naval power in the Indian Ocean. But these experts stress India is not going to fan China’s concerns over containment.

“China looks upon India not as a threat in itself, but as a ‘swing state’ whose association with potential adversaries could constrain China,” a semi-official study by a group of respected Indian strategic experts said in a 70-page report released this month. “The challenge for Indian diplomacy will be to develop a diversified network of relations with several major powers to compel China to exercise restraint in its dealings with India, while simultaneously avoiding relationships that go beyond conveying a certain threat threshold in Chinese perceptions.”

The study warns: “If China perceives India as irrevocably committed to an anti-China containment ring, it may end up adopting overtly hostile and negative policies towards India, rather than making an effort to keep India on a more independent path.”

The report comes amid a larger debate under way in India over the future of its foreign policy, says Stephen Philip Cohen, an expert on South Asia at the Brookings Institution. He notes India’s reluctance to side too closely with any one big power also may be a sign of indecision at the top. India’s foreign policy establishment is riven by factions, some of whom favor closer ties with the United States, others who look toward China and still others who favor Russia.

“The Indians are fiercely debating these issues, and they’re coming down firmly on all sides,” says Cohen.

### A New Great Game

Despite New Delhi’s reluctance to ally itself too closely with the United States, Republican Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, a prominent voice in the Senate on foreign policy issues, envisions a special role for India in Afghanistan.

Kirk says India should take over the role of stabilizing that war-torn country once U.S. troops withdraw in 2014.

“It makes strategic sense,” he said in a January interview before suffering a debilitating stroke. “India has close ties with Afghanistan and gives it a lot of economic aid. It trains Afghan security forces. And most importantly, India has a big interest in ensuring Afghanistan remains stable once our troops leave. We should be looking to India to play the role of the status quo power in South Asia.”

It’s not hard to see why Kirk, as well as several other lawmakers, finds an expanded Indian role in Afghanistan so attractive. India provides Afghanistan with nearly \$2 billion a year in economic and development aid, making it Kabul’s second largest donor after the United States. Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California, chairwoman of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, notes that India regards Afghanistan as its gateway to economic ties with other countries in Central Asia.

But with the Afghan army costing about \$11 billion a year, India cannot afford to pick up such costs once U.S. troops leave, says Karl F. Inderfurth, a former assistant secretary of State for South Asian affairs during the Clinton administration and now an India specialist at the Center for International and Strategic Studies.

Moreover, India experts say, New Delhi wouldn’t assume such a role even if it could afford it. India’s domination of Afghanistan would realize Pakistan’s worst fears of being hemmed in by India on both its eastern and western borders. Such a development would likely destabilize Pakistan, which has already fought four wars with India over the past seven decades.

“A failed state in Pakistan creates even more dangerous potential on India’s border,” says Bharat Karnad, a national security expert at New Delhi’s Center for Policy Research. “Who knows who would fill such a black hole?”

In the new “great game” between India and Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan, India is far more likely to continue its training of Afghan security forces and providing substantial economic aid as part of a broader international assistance effort for Afghanistan, which the United States has pledged to support following the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

But experts also believe India will continue supporting anti-Taliban forces in an effort to block any attempt by Pakistan’s proxies to subvert the government in Kabul. In the short term, Pakistan may wield stronger influence in Afghanistan than India because of its ability to facilitate peace negotiations between the United States and some of these proxies. But over the long run, a diminished U.S. military presence and interest in Afghanistan will mean Congress is unlikely to continue providing Pakistan with large amounts of military aid.

And in this vacuum, Indian experts see a strategic advantage. “This,” says the Indian report, “may provide us with additional levers to influence [Pakistan’s] behavior.”

### Inflated Expectations

Mansingh, who also served as ambassador to the United States, cautions the administration against inflating its vision for any U.S.-India strategic partnership, particularly if it involves dictating U.S. expectations to what Washington sees as a junior partner.

“Sometimes Washington misses the point and believes that because they have a strategic

partnership with us, they expect India to behave in a certain way,” he says.

Mansingh emphasizes that India’s strategic partnership with the United States is not exclusive. “We have strategic partnerships with a dozen countries,” he says. “These include some old friends such as Russia, Germany, France and Britain; some new friends, including Australia, Japan, Brazil, South Africa; and even old adversaries such as the United States.”

India drove home that point last April when it rejected one bid by Boeing Co. to sell New Delhi its F/A-18 warplanes and another by Lockheed Martin Corp. to provide its F-16 jets. Some Asia analysts say that after decades of frosty relations during the Cold War, many in the Indian defense establishment still remain wary of U.S. intentions, particularly American military aid to Pakistan, which they say only emboldens Islamabad’s hostility toward India.

In February, India awarded the \$20 billion contract for new fighter planes to France’s Dassault Group. “They don’t feel sufficiently indebted to the United States that they have to buy American weapons systems,” the Brookings Institution’s Pollack says.

Indian officials have reassured U.S. armsmakers that the loss of one major contract doesn’t mean the end of New Delhi’s potential as a U.S. arms customer. India, which has become the world’s largest arms importer, is planning to buy \$100 billion worth of new weapons during the next 10 years, and many in Washington hope the United States will become one of India’s top military suppliers, after Russia and Israel. So far, India has purchased some \$9 billion worth of U.S. military hardware, including Patriot-3 missiles, Boeing C-17 military transport aircraft and P-81 maritime patrol aircraft.

Despite such hopes, Washington’s reluctance to share some of its military technology with strategic partners has placed yet another limit on the U.S.-India relationship. Export controls prevented the inclusion of advanced codes, avionics and other equipment in the proposed Boeing and Lockheed Martin warplane packages, weakening their appeal to the Indians.

“The Indians hear all this talk about a strategic partnership, but when they consider buying something from us, we tell them that technology is not available,” says Woolf P. Gross, a retired Army colonel and independent consultant on South Asia security affairs. “Something’s got to give or this partnership is not going to work.”

U.S. leaders complain such restrictions could jeopardize future arms sales to New Delhi. “We need to continue to work on U.S. release policies,” says Ron Somers, president of the U.S.-India Business Council.

The Obama administration and business groups have been pushing to revise those Cold War-era export control regulations, but the effort has run into resistance from some House Republicans who are concerned that changes in the system might make it easier for China, Iran and other potential adversaries to get sensitive U.S. technology. Little movement is expected on the administration effort this year.

Other U.S. commercial expectations in India also have been put on hold, this time because of legal complications at the Indian end.

In the wake of the 2005 civil nuclear energy accord, American manufacturers of nuclear power plants, including Westinghouse Electric Corp. and General Electric Co., hoped for big orders from India. But with lingering memories of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, in which a gas leak at a Union Carbide chemical plant killed nearly 3,800 people, the Indian parliament now has laws that hold liable the makers — not the operators — of any foreign-built plant for any accidents that might occur. So far, these laws have discouraged U.S. nuclear plant manufacturers from bidding for contracts in India.

Also, in what some U.S. business leaders describe as Indian protectionism, New Delhi isn’t allowing big U.S. multibrand retailers like Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to open retail stores in India. And the Obama administration is now appealing to the World Trade Organization to force India to drop its ban on U.S. poultry imports. U.S. officials complain that India is using unwarranted

health concerns to disguise additional trade restrictions.

Still, even with such differences, Asia experts believe their high expectations for the U.S.-India relationship are not unrealistic, arguing there is plenty of room for growth — from trade and arms sales to greater military cooperation. Teresita Schaffer, a former U.S. ambassador and now a South Asia expert at the Brookings Institution, says the confluence of U.S. and Indian interests in East Asia has the potential to become a “first step in turning our bilateral partnership into something more than that.”

Timothy J. Roemer, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana who served as U.S. ambassador to India from 2009 to 2011, returns to an old theme. “We are building a strategic partnership where there are vital shared interests,” he says. But he also adds: “There will be occasional disagreements with regard to geopolitical interests. They’re a half-world away from the United States in a very difficult and challenging neighborhood.”

Roemer’s understated caution is a reminder that both the administration and India’s advocates on Capitol Hill may have to set their sights more realistically for any strategic partnership.

“I think India will be a much more consequential power, and we have an enormous set of incentives to work with the Indians toward that goal,” says Pollack. “But let’s not go off on these fanciful scenarios of how India will do our bidding. It might be useful if we check with the Indians about this.”

Permalink: <http://www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/mobile/2012/3/congressional-quarterly-courting-a-reluctant-ally>

Full Site