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## The Strategic Significance of the US-India Logistics Agreement

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**Manjeet S. Pardesi, Asia Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Contrary to international relations theories, the signing of the LEMOA demonstrates that India is seeking regional primacy, not hegemony, and this is compatible with America’s strategic interests in South Asia/ Indian Ocean.”**

The United States and India signed the bilateral Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016 that gives the two countries reciprocal access to their respective military bases for supplies and fuel. This is a significant development in India’s foreign policy given that New Delhi was extremely uncomfortable with America’s naval presence in the Indian Ocean throughout the Cold War. The LEMOA is all the more surprising because some international relations theories assume that a rising power such as India would try to establish hegemony in its home region. However, by trying to keep the United States engaged in the strategic affairs of its home region of South Asia and the Indian Ocean, a rising India is seemingly defying the logic of regional hegemony that is believed to be common to all rising powers. What explains India’s strategy to keep America engaged in regional affairs while also clarifying America’s strategic embrace of India? Contrary to such international relations theories, the signing of the LEMOA demonstrates that India is seeking regional primacy, not hegemony, and this is compatible with America’s strategic interests in South Asia/Indian Ocean as this is a region of secondary interest for Washington.

The United States is not just a global superpower, it is also the only regional hegemon in modern history. After all, the United States is the only great power in its home region in the Western Hemisphere, where it is also the dominant military power. Since the end of the Second World War, America’s global position has been a function of maintaining its hegemonic status in the Western Hemisphere, while creating and maintaining a balance of power system that favors the United States in three critical regions – Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. Europe and East Asia are major centers of industrial and technological powers, and a hegemon in these regions will be able to directly challenge America’s global preponderance while being a formidable military challenge across the Atlantic or the Pacific. Similarly, the Middle East is home to the world’s energy supplies that fuel modern economies and militaries. By contrast, South Asia/Indian Ocean is a region of secondary interest for the United States as the regional configuration of power there does not directly impact America’s global position.

The United States has three main interests in South Asia/Indian Ocean. First, the United States wants to have access to this region if the need arises as in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. India had offered “unlimited support” to Washington after 9/11, including the use of specific airbases. While appreciative of India’s strategic gesture, the United States chose to work with Pakistan instead given the exigencies of

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geography for conducting military operations in Afghanistan. Second, the United States wants to be able to have access to South Asia/Indian Ocean to have military access to the Middle East and East Asia if the need arises (as these two regions are critical for America’s global position). Notably, India had allowed American aircraft from the Philippines to refuel at airbases in India during the First Gulf War. Perhaps more surprisingly, “non-aligned” India had even allowed America the use of Indian airspace and a military base for the U-2 program to spy on China (1962-67). Third, the United States does not want South Asia/Indian Ocean to be dominated by an extra-regional great power, whether the Soviet Union during the Cold War or China today.

But why is a rising India not trying to exclude the United States from this region as well? Ever since the Cold War, the Indian leadership has understood that an India-centered regional hegemonic order in South Asia/Indian Ocean is not viable for two main reasons. First, despite India’s material lead over Pakistan – with more than seven times the GDP and five times the military budget in 2015 – Islamabad continues to challenge India. The presence of nuclear weapons and support for militants, along with Pakistan’s strategic relationships with China and the United States, undercut India’s regional dominance. Second, the presence of the United States in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War meant that an India-centered hegemonic order was impossible by definition because of the presence of another great power in the region. Furthermore, China is also present in South Asia/Indian Ocean today, and China’s One Belt One Road Initiative will further entrench Chinese power in the region.

Consequently, the Indian leadership is aiming for regional primacy instead of hegemony. India wishes to be treated as *primus inter pares* in the strategic affairs of South Asia/Indian Ocean by maintaining a clear lead along all dimensions of power – political, diplomatic, economic, and military – vis-à-vis other regional players. In 2005, the then Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran stated that India would not like to see its regional neighbors “seek association with countries outside the region or with regional or international organizations ... to counterbalance India.” More recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted that India was willing to work with extra-regional powers “with strong interests and stakes in the region.” However, the subtext is clear – the extra-regional powers have to give precedence to Indian interests in South Asia/Indian Ocean. Unlike a hegemonic order, regional primacy allows for the presence of extra-regional great powers.

Indian regional primacy seems acceptable to the United States because New Delhi is not trying to exclude America from this region of secondary importance as demonstrated by the LEMOA. This agreement will also provide India access to American bases in East Asia (Guam) as New Delhi begins to engage this region more purposefully. This will create uncertainty in China even in the absence of a US-India alliance and force Beijing to take New Delhi more seriously. It will also allow the United States to ensure a favorable balance of power in East Asia as India emerges as the third-largest economy behind China and America by 2030. However, Indian regional primacy in South Asia/Indian Ocean is not a foregone conclusion even as the United States is promoting India as a regional economic anchor and security provider. Unless New Delhi finds a way to deal with Pakistani recalcitrance while economically integrating its smaller neighbors with its much larger economy, the China factor will loom large in Indian diplomacy and will undercut India’s bid for primacy in South Asia/Indian Ocean.

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