

USAPC Washington Report
November 2010

Interview with Amb. Karl Inderfurth

USAPC: President Obama's early November visit to India successfully followed up the inaugural meeting in June of the US-India Strategic Dialogue. Most experts have described the United States and India as "natural allies," but not necessary "treaty allies." The conclusion of a formal security alliance does not appear to be on the horizon. Would you please explain why this is the case?

Inderfurth: Former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who governed from 1998 to 2004, first expressed the view that the United States and India are "natural allies." I think that still best captures where we are heading in this relationship.

A formal treaty with India would not be appropriate. Such an arrangement reflects old thinking rather than new thinking about relationships in the 21st century. We want to continue to join forces with India in various undertakings, but these activities do not require conclusion of a formal alliance.

In particular, we want to assist and support India in becoming a full stakeholder in the international community. This would entail India joining all of the key organizations and groupings that will be making decisions about the broad array of challenges confronting us in the years ahead.

And indeed, India has been demonstrating its interest in taking an active part in global affairs by participating in the G-20, which has replaced the G-8 as the principal international economic forum. In addition, India was a key player at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 along with the United States and China.

New Delhi also took part in the international nuclear summit hosted by President Obama this past April. Before the conclusion of the US-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2007, we probably would not have seen India take part in that kind of summit. Now it is becoming an integral part of the global nonproliferation mainstream.

Many of us believe strongly that India should be made a permanent member of the UN Security Council. I was therefore delighted that President Obama used the occasion of his speech to the Indian parliament to endorse the elevation of India's status in the United Nations. As the president suggested in his remarks, the time is ripe for this change, which is consistent with our desire to see India become a full stakeholder in the international community. It also would reflect more properly the power realities of the 21st century.

So these are the ways we should be looking to engage India -- not within the structure of a formal alliance, but within various international forums where it would have a seat at the table along with the United States and other key international actors.

USAPC: With respect to a permanent seat for India on the UN Security Council, how might that affect US relations with India within the United Nations, which have not always been harmonious?

Inderfurth: The United States and India sometimes have traveled a rocky road in the United Nations. Much of that friction traces back to Cold War days when India pursued a foreign policy that had not yet evolved to its current approach, which is more internationalist and favors engagement with major parties. Just as our foreign policy has evolved since the end of the Cold War, so has India's.

The very good news is that the United States and India increasingly have been moving closer to each other within the United Nations. This convergence will be apparent both within the Security Council – India recently was elected to a non-permanent Security Council seat – but also within the General Assembly. In reality, most of our disagreements have occurred in the General Assembly.

There will continue to be differences between the two countries largely because neither country will behave as the junior partner to the other. But I think that by working together in the Security Council -- hopefully one day with India as a permanent member -- we will grow closer in our approach to international issues. I am convinced that the United States will have far more to gain with India as a permanent member of the Security Council than any costs involved in the occasional times that we may part ways.

USAPC: How would India's status as a permanent member of the Security Council possibly influence Asian regional dynamics, particularly its relationship with China?

Inderfurth: One of the most interesting developments of the early years of the 21st century has been the rise of both India and China as the two great mainland Asian powers, both of which have global reach and aspirations. These two countries will make a major contribution to Asia if they are part of a regional balance of power and can work together on the Security Council.

In fact, having both of these rising global powers on the Security Council actually will enhance the work of the Council and make it more legitimate in the eyes of overall UN membership. India's participation on the Security Council therefore will contribute quite positively to the Asian region.

USAPC: What more could the Obama administration do to dispel lingering skepticism in India about its strategy to withdraw from Afghanistan?

Inderfurth: It is very important for the United States and India to continue to have in-depth consultations about Afghanistan and its future and what the two countries can do individually and together to assist Afghanistan in becoming a stable, secure, and prosperous country. India already has made valuable contributions to Afghanistan's development and hopefully can do more over time.

The United States needs to assure India and others in the region that we have a long-term commitment to Afghanistan. Right now we are in the midst of a troop build-up in response to a very strong and resilient insurgency. This is a difficult period. But we are going to have to work through this because without some success in the security area, it will be very difficult for the economic development, infrastructural improvements, and other things that the Afghan state needs to take root.

So the United States needs to assure India and others that we will stay with the task of building up the Afghan security forces so they can take over the responsibility of providing security throughout the country. This will take some time.

In December 2009, President Obama delivered a major address on the U.S. role in Afghanistan, in which he set July 2011 as a date to begin pulling U.S. forces out of the country. But what the President was talking about is the beginning of the transition to the Afghan security forces, not a withdrawal of American forces *en masse*. It will take some time to realize a complete pull out of U.S. forces. Afghan President Hamid Karzai himself has suggested that the security transition may not be complete until 2014.

The concerns of many in the region about the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan stems from post-1989 developments there. The Soviet Union was defeated following nine years of war and withdrew its troops. The international community also departed. This left Afghanistan and Pakistan to sort through the subsequent chaos and instability. The United States must reassure both India and Pakistan that that experience will not be repeated.

USAPC: India historically has sought to foster a stable Afghanistan. How might the United States support and encourage this without antagonizing Pakistan?

Inderfurth: As I say above, we always must bear in mind that the Pakistanis are very concerned that Afghanistan will return to the kind of chaos and anarchy they witnessed following the Soviet-Afghan war – upheaval that affected their country’s own stability.

In that regard, it would be very helpful if India and Pakistan would talk directly to each other about their security needs and their suspicions of each other. The most appropriate role for the United States would be to encourage that kind of dialogue. But India and Pakistan themselves must conduct these discussions.

Personally, I believe there is a great deal of misunderstanding and exaggeration in Pakistan about India’s role in Afghanistan. But as long as that is Pakistan’s perception, that will be its reality. I believe the most successful way to correct these misunderstandings is for the two countries to address them directly.

USAPC: Earlier, you mentioned the U.S-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation agreement, which many experts regard as a landmark achievement in U.S.-India relations. But implementation has stalled owing to Indian laws that would make U.S. equipment suppliers potentially liable for any problems that might arise. There did not appear to be any progress on this issue during President Obama’s trip. Where do we go from here?

Inderfurth: India recently took an important step in un-stalling the agreement by adding its signature to the Convention on Supplementary Compensation in Vienna. President Obama also was told in Delhi that India is committed to ensuring a level playing field for US companies that want to enter the Indian nuclear energy sector. So let’s see how this all plays out. Both sides demonstrated the will to conclude the civil nuclear agreement. Now they must find the way to get it fully implemented. Then can.

USAPC: President Obama’s visit held great promise for both military- and non-military-related sales. But there are regulatory impediments in both countries that limit both of our abilities to realize the full potential of the bilateral commercial relationship.

Would it be appropriate now for U.S. and India to initiate their own version of a Strategic and Economic Dialogue, modeled after the U.S.-China initiative, as a way of giving further impetus to reforms on both sides?

Inderfurth: There is no doubt that a major foundation of a new relationship with India will be in the economic and defense areas. There wasn't much dynamism in those areas before U.S.-India relations underwent its transformation first under President Clinton, then accelerating under President Bush, and now continuing under President Obama.

We've come a long way in a short period of time. But the fact remains that we still have a great deal of unrealized potential in bilateral economic and defense relations, and the only way to unlock that is for both countries to get their own houses in order.

I am very pleased that the Obama administration under Secretary of Defense Gates launched a comprehensive review of U.S. export controls – a review that will do more than simply chip away at some of the barnacles that have developed over time. Importantly, this review has been examining closely the so-called Entities List. This is a list of foreign businesses, research institutions, government and private organizations, and individuals that are subject to a number of restrictions relating to export and transfer of dual-use, usually high technology items.

The fact that various Indian entities have been on this list has been a bone of contention with New Delhi. So the announcement during the President's visit that the United States was removing virtually all Indian "entities" from this list, including the Indian Space and Research Organization (ISRO), was very well received.

This was a step in the right direction aimed at realizing our full potential economically as well as militarily. I think that India also should be looking for additional ways that it can remove impediments to our economic and defense ties. In short, both countries need to step on the accelerator.

USAPC: You spoke earlier about the importance of India's presence in global organizations. How about in the World Trade Organization (WTO)? The sharp disagreements between the United States and India about liberalizing trade in agriculture, in part, were responsible for the collapse of the WTO's Doha Round two years ago.

Is New Delhi ready to assume a leadership role in an entity devoted to expanding a liberal global trading system?

Inderfurth: At this point, reviving the Doha Round probably is not realistic. I participated in the study group that contributed to the Center for New American Security's report, *Natural Allies: A Blueprint for the Future of U.S.-India Relations*. The study group supported the notion that the United States and India might present to WTO members a package of proposals for concluding the Doha Round.

Alternatively, the two countries might propose measures aimed at launching a post-Doha initiative that would move the WTO-based trading system forward. In addition, the United States and India could build support for the global trading order by concluding a long-delayed Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT).

But at the same time, we must recognize that just as the United States will put its economic self interests first in multilateral negotiations, so will other countries, including India. India has its own particular set of economic imperatives and, like the United States, is also a democratic society that must take into account its very strong and active parliament. Trade

liberalization must be worked through a broader democratic process, which will require tenacity. But I think the BIT would be a very forward-looking place to start.

USAPC: In what ways can the two countries develop a more global partnership and improve cooperation and coordination on issues beyond those that directly affect South Asia?

Inderfurth: There are many ways, but one to which I am particularly attracted involves cooperation in protecting the “global commons.” This is an idea whose time is rapidly approaching. It would involve the United States working with other countries, in this case India, to pursue, secure, and enhance our global commons – a term that refers to the sea, the air, space, and cyberspace domains.

Maritime security and the rule of law increasingly are vital to all of our countries’ interests. Just look at the piracy taking place off the coast of Somalia. More and more, we see challenges to transit and disputes in various maritime locations. We should be working closely with New Delhi on this precisely because as a democratic society, India naturally supports efforts to uphold transparency and the rule of law.

We also should be working closely with India on space cooperation. The US space program is in a period of reevaluation, while India’s space program is on the rise. Actually, we already are cooperating in this area in that India’s recent successful unmanned lunar mission included two NASA payloads.

But in addition to cooperating in space exploration, we could join forces with respect to launch vehicles and some technical areas, such as global mapping, which will play a major role with respect to climate change. I also would like to see the two countries cooperate on space governance issues.

The protection of cyberspace increasingly is one of the most important national security issues facing all countries. India and the United States would have a particular advantage working together on cyberspace security because we both are strongly oriented toward information technology. We both have our Silicon Valleys and we both have very bright and intelligent people working on cyberspace security. So we definitely should be considering how best to collaborate in that part of the global commons, both for the enhancement and spread of information technology, but also for the security of these methods of transmission.

So, as we look to the 21st century, I think it would be tremendously beneficial and appropriate for the United States and India to become partners in the pursuit of a secure and stable environment for all domains related to the global commons.

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