

A USAF F-15E and an Indian Air Force Su-30MKI perform a familiarization flight over Idaho during Red Flag preparation in 2008. India participated in Red Flag that year for the first time—if all goes as planned, the IAF will be back for Red Flag 2014.



FRIENDS *or* ALLIES?

By Richard Halloran

FOR two years, the Obama Administration has sought to forge robust security relations with India as a vital element in the “rebalance” toward the Pacific-Asian region. Progress has been uneven, however, as India has been hampered by a zealous defense of sovereignty.

Slowed by the continued influence of its nonaligned policy during the Cold War,

India has also been hobbled by internal political and bureaucratic infighting.

A report produced in early 2013 by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service was pointed: “Frustrations among many ... in the United States have arisen from the sense that India’s enthusiasm for further deepening bilateral security cooperation is limited and that New Delhi’s reciprocity has been insufficient.” A CRS analysis in 2011 said: “Indian leaders

continue to demonstrate an aversion to assuming the kinds of new security-related postures and activities the United States seeks for India.”

Lt. Col. Douglas Woodard, the Pacific Air Forces officer charged with planning contacts with India’s air service, offered a diplomatic assessment: “It is a PACAF priority to develop a routine and reliable Air Force-to-Air Force relationship with India, but we recognize that we have to

The US and India have many common goals, but are slow to expand their military relationship.

exercise was canceled at the last minute because of the US budget sequester.

The first IAF visit to Red Flag was five years ago, in 2008, when some 250 IAF airmen flew to Nellis with eight Sukhoi Su-30 fighters, one Il-76 airlifter, and two Il-78 tankers. Anecdotally, USAF airmen were impressed by the flying skills displayed by the IAF.

Drilling Together

In India, PACAF pilots flew in four Cope India exercises between 2004 and 2009. During the 2009 iteration, PACAF and IAF crews flew day and night parachute drops, airdrops of light vehicles, assault landings, and medical evacuation missions. Joint planning sessions gave both sides an education. In other venues, PACAF and IAF have exchanged instructor pilots, safety specialists, and security personnel. The Indians and Americans have also occasionally met at multilateral drills elsewhere in Asia, such as Cobra Gold in Thailand.

Other joint exercises include:

- **Malabar:** The US Navy has joined with the Indian Navy for more than a dozen annual Malabar exercises, usually in Indian waters. The premier Malabar is a bilateral drill in tactics, techniques, and procedures during one year and a multilateral event the following year, with warships from Australia, Japan, and Singapore invited to join. For the US, the 10-day training often centers on an aircraft carrier strike force.

- **Habu Nag** is a drill highlighting amphibious operations.

- **Spitting Cobra** focuses on destruction of explosive ordnance.

- **Salvex** is a diving and salvage exercise.

- The Indian Navy has been invited to send ships to the 2014 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise organized by the US Pacific Fleet in Hawaiian waters.

The US Army has also been training alongside Indian Army formations since 2005:

- **Yudh Abhyas** features battalion field drills and brigade command post exercises. These have included armored Stryker combat vehicles from Schofield Barracks in Hawaii to show what they can do in India.

- In a May 2013 exercise, Indian Army units were flown into Fort Bragg, N.C., to train with paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division.

India does not have a Marine Corps equivalent, but US marines train in amphibious operations with the Indian Army in a drill called Shatrujeet. Special



Photo by Sagar Pathak

be patient and move at a pace with which India is comfortable.”

Woodard is secretary of the PACAF Executive Steering Group, co-chaired at the three-star level at both PACAF and in the Indian Air Staff. The Navy’s Pacific Fleet and US Army Pacific, other components of Pacific Command, have similar steering groups to plan training and exchanges with Indian counterparts. At the political level, a Defense Policy Group is co-chaired by

the undersecretary of defense for policy in Washington and by the Indian Defense Secretary in New Delhi.

Despite the obstacles, if all goes as planned, aircraft and pilots from the Indian Air Force (IAF) will make their second visit to Nellis AFB, Nev., next summer, to join USAF air and ground crews in a demanding Red Flag combat exercise.

The IAF crews and aircraft were set to fly in a Red Flag this past July, but the



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh speaks to reporters at JB Andrews, Md., during a two-day visit to the United States in September. Indian and US officials were closed-mouthed about the discussions held.

operations forces are often included in those Army, Navy, and Air Force exercises.

US arms sales to India have totaled some \$8 billion since 2001, a relatively small amount when measured against India's \$100 billion military modernization plan. A Pentagon report to Congress noted that arms sales "enable new training and exchange opportunities between our militaries." But the CRS said those sales were "complicated by myriad legal, political, strategic, historical, and bureaucratic obstacles."

One obstacle is a chasm between civilian officials in India's Ministry of Defense who hold decisive power on what is procured and military officers who evidently have little to say on such decisions. Recent sales reported by the CRS have included 12 C-130J Hercules airlifters worth nearly

\$2 billion and 10 C-17 airlifters for \$4.1 billion. The US has sold the former Navy cruiser USS *Trenton* to the Indian Navy for \$48 million. However, the US lost out in 2011 to European aircraft makers in a competition to sell fighters to India. The US candidates were the F-16 and F/A-18; India chose France's Rafale.

The Administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush looked for improved relations with India before the announced rebalance to Asia in November 2011. Hillary R. Clinton, President Obama's first Secretary of State, said then that the Asia-Pacific region "has become a key driver of global politics," and she noted "emerging powers like China,

India, and Indonesia" as part of the calculus.

Then-Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, during a visit to New Delhi in June 2012, said: "I believe our relationship is, can, and should become more strategic, more practical, and more collaborative." He told an Indian audience he had asked his deputy, Ashton B. Carter, "to lead an effort at the Pentagon to engage with Indian leaders on a new initiative."

In July 2012, Carter made a major trip to New Delhi for a meeting with the Defense Council of the Confederation of Indian Industry. The director general, Chandrajit

Banerjee, estimated that India would procure \$80 billion to \$100 billion worth of defense equipment within the next five years. But, Banerjee said, "India will no longer be satisfied with a buyer/seller or patron/client type of arrangement."

Future acquisitions would emphasize technology transfer and joint research and development, he said. The chairman of the council, V. Sumantran, added: "If we can have co-development and co-manufacturing with other nations, including Russia, why not have a similar and an even more promising relationship with the US?"

In response, Carter turned to practical steps: "We want to develop a joint vision of US-India defense cooperation," he said. "We need to define where we want to go and then make it possible to get there."

Carter asserted a necessity for a common strategic view, for knocking down bureaucratic barriers, and for aligning economic and business interests.

"You have to have all three of them to have a successful project," he said.

This past June, Secretary of State John F. Kerry, accompanied by US Pacific Command chief Adm. Samuel J. Locklear, traveled to New Delhi to take part in a strategic dialogue that focused mostly on economics and climate change control. But long-range anti-submarine warfare, intelligence, and maritime security came into the conversation.

Vice President Joe Biden became the most senior American to visit India recently, flying there in July to contend that India and the US have made progress in defense cooperation now that they have put the Cold War behind them.

Biden addressed the issue of sovereignty, often referred to by Indians as a "strategic autonomy."

An F-15C taxis by an Indian Air Force Il-78MKI tanker at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, during Red Flag training in 2008. USAF pilots were impressed with the flying skills of the Indian pilots.



“Let me state it plainly,” Biden said. “There is no contradiction between strategic autonomy and a strategic partnership.” He argued that “global powers are capable of both.”

Reasons for Partnership

Carter was back in India in September, saying the US and India “are destined to be security partners on the world stage.” He told reporters that, in meetings with Indian leaders, he had tried “to clarify a lot of old misperceptions about US willingness to share high-level technology.” The US, he insisted, would give priority funding to American researchers who find Indian partners for collaboration in technology.

“That’s something we’ve only ever done before with the United Kingdom and Australia,” Carter said. He cited the procurement and use of the C-130J cargo airplane as a “great example” of what India can accomplish.

Carter visited Hindon Air Force Station, where he met an IAF pilot who had flown a C-130J into and out of a landing field in the Himalayas above 16,000 feet, calling it “quite an accomplishment.”

In contrast to the parade of senior Americans through New Delhi, the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Washington in late September was distinctly subdued. After he and President Obama met in the White House, the two leaders offered platitudes to members of the press, taking no questions and offering no background briefing on what was discussed.

Both Indians and Americans affirm that there are clear reasons for partnership between the two countries.

- India is the world’s most populous democracy, and promotion of democracy worldwide has been a stated goal of every US administration.

- India’s economy is expanding swiftly—perhaps the ninth largest in the world.

- Geographically, India dominates South Asia on land and the Indian Ocean’s vital sea transit lanes.

- India’s military forces are being modernized; India in August launched its first indigenous aircraft carrier; put its first defense satellite into space; and is close to completing the purchase of the new Boeing C-17 airlifters. (India’s chief air marshal, Norman A. K. Browne, piloted one from San Diego to Washington in July.)

Both Indians and Americans acknowledge privately that the emergence of China gives New Delhi and Washington



Above: A Su-30MKI (bottom) flies a mission with an Air Force F-15C during training for Red Flag. Below: Indian Air Force maintainers install flare countermeasure devices on a Flanker-H at Mountain Home.





Indian civilian technicians and IAF personnel troubleshoot a Su-30MKI forward facing advanced radar at Mountain Home.

an impetus to stand together. But they are diffident about making common cause in public to avoid arousing the wrath of Beijing.

J. Mohan Malik, a scholar at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, a government-funded research and training center in Honolulu, has written extensively about India and China. In his book, *China and India: Great Power Rivals*, he wrote: “Relations between the two Asian giants have been marked by conflict, containment, mutual suspicion, distrust, and rivalry.”

Malik points to “a fundamental clash of interests between China and India that is rooted in their strategic cultures, history, geo-economics, and geopolitics.” The consequence, Malik concludes, is that “both countries aspire to the same things at the same time on the same continental landmass and its adjoining waters.”

Even so, not all Indian leaders distrust China. Minister of Defense A. K. Antony, considered by Indian political analysts to be an ideological left-winger, flew to Beijing to meet with the Chinese Minister of Defense, General Chang Wanquan, and Premier Li Keqiang, two weeks before Biden visited in India.

The Chinese official news agency, Xinhua, reported that the Indian and Chinese leaders agreed that service commanders, military region commanders, and field commanders would meet regularly (not mentioning their frequent border clashes). Dialogue would be promoted, ship visits would be increased, and air force exchanges on flight safety, aviation medicine, and training would be expanded.

India has also maintained working relations with Russia, built on New Delhi’s

collaboration with Moscow during the days of the Soviet Union. An Indian briefing paper published a year ago by its Foreign Ministry read, “Bilateral ties with Russia are a key pillar of India’s foreign policy. India sees Russia as a longstanding and time-tested friend that has played a significant role in its economic development and security.”

Nonalignment 2.0

The paper’s authors wrote that “cooperation in the military technical ... sphere has evolved from a simple buyer-seller framework to one involving joint research and development, joint production, and marketing of advanced defense technologies and systems.” The brief noted the two countries are working on joint development of a fifth generation fighter and a multirole transport. The licensed production in India of Su-30 aircraft and T-90 tanks are other examples of this cooperation.

US relations with Pakistan, India’s archrival, have frayed in recent years due to differences over Afghanistan, and consequently US decisions concerning India seem less influenced by what Islamabad might think. Until recently, Pakistan’s reaction was a key consideration in any cooperation with New Delhi.

As in most Asian nations, the legacy of colonialism and the struggle for independence still generates a wary attitude in India toward the West, including the US. India shook off British colonial rule

in 1947. Thus, a fierce compulsion to protect national sovereignty drives many decisions in India.

When speculative press reports suggested PACAF might propose that US aircraft fly into Indian air bases on rotation, both the Indian Defense Ministry and PACAF stomped on the notion. While USAF rotates aircraft to Guam, Okinawa, and South Korea, and has plans to do so in Australia and possibly the Philippines, there are no such arrangements eyed for India. Neither the Army nor the Navy envision such a scenario in the foreseeable future, either.

In New Delhi, a new form of strategic autonomy called Nonalignment 2.0 has gained credence. It is based on the strategy of nonalignment that governed India’s international relations throughout the Cold War and that was seen by some as favoring the Soviet Union.

Eight prominent scholars published “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the 21st Century,” which generated widespread coverage in the Indian press—and some dissent from pundits who thought it reflected Cold War thinking. The scholars met frequently for two years to produce the proposal, which they contended would preserve India’s strategic autonomy. “The core objective of a strategic approach,” they wrote, “should be to give India maximum options in its relations with the outside world—that is, to enhance India’s strategic space and capacity for independent agency.” They claimed their concept was a “reworking for present times of the fundamental principle that has defined India’s international engagements since independence.”

Nonalignment, they said, was to ensure that India did not define its national interest by ideologies and goals that had been set elsewhere and that “India retained maximum strategic autonomy.”

India, they argued, must seek “to achieve a situation where no other state is in a position to exercise undue influence on us—or make us act against our better judgment and will.”

The authors of Nonalignment 2.0, skeptical of getting too close to the US, concluded, “Both India and the US may be better served by being friends rather than allies.” ■

Richard Halloran, formerly a New York Times foreign correspondent in Asia and military correspondent in Washington, D.C., is a freelance writer based in Honolulu. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Hawk’s World,” appeared in the July issue.