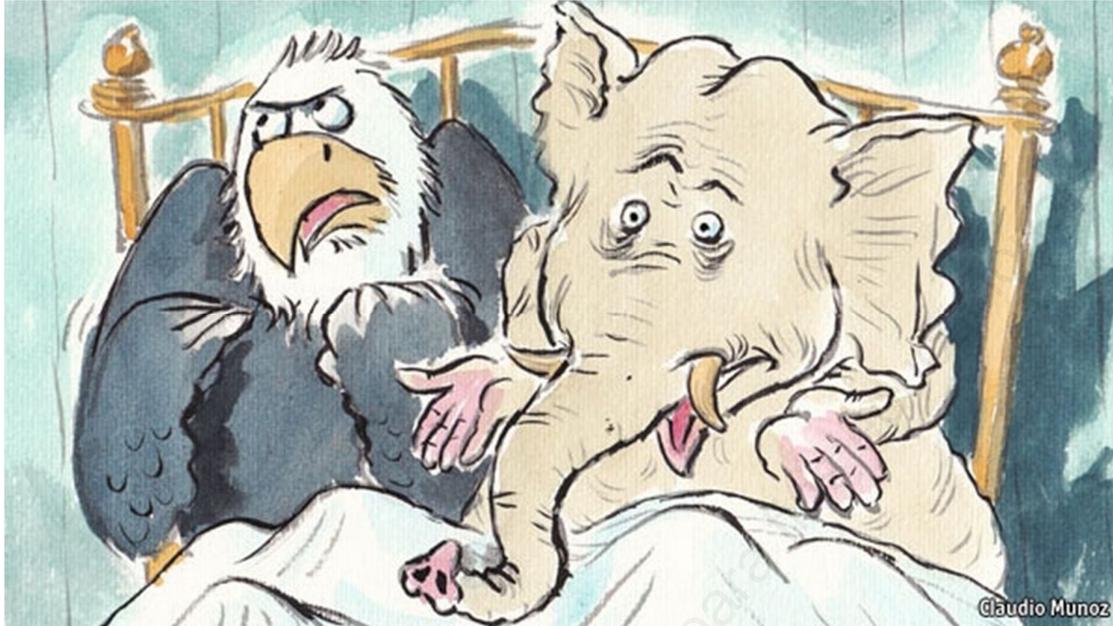


## Less than allies, more than friends

*America and India try to define a new sort of relationship*



“Two cities where people rarely agree on much of anything” was how Robert Blake, an assistant secretary at the American State Department, described Washington and Delhi this month. It was a joke but, in context, was rather close to the bone. Touting a blossoming friendship, America and India still find plenty to bicker about.

His speech was looking forward to the third annual US-India “Strategic Dialogue”, which brought together senior figures from both countries in Washington, DC, on June 13th. This is a celebration of a partnership by which both countries set great store. Yet the list of issues on which they are at odds is dispiritingly long: Afghanistan, Iran, nuclear trade, climate change, market access, arms sales and more. If this is partnership, some in both capitals ask, what would rivalry look like?

The impetus seems to have gone out of a relationship in which America invested so much under George W Bush. His decision, in 2005, to press for international acceptance of India’s civil nuclear programme, ending a ban on foreign assistance imposed because of India’s refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, was meant to usher in a new era of co-operation and trust. Some of that evaporated early in the presidency of Barack Obama. India resented and successfully resisted his appointment of an envoy with a brief to meddle in India’s dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir. And it was alarmed by his effort to recast relations with China, and talk of a “G2”.

In America, meanwhile, the prizes won by Mr Bush’s huge concession to India can seem at best disappointing. Indian legislation about the liability for nuclear accidents in effect closes to American companies the very market Mr Bush sacrificed so much to prise open. Disgruntlement grew last year when American firms lost their bid to supply India with 126 jetfighters—India’s biggest-ever defence contract—to European competitors. Both sides have moved on, but still, says Daniel Twining, of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a think-tank in Washington, “even the most ebullient supporters” of the partnership in America are “a bit depressed”.

Mr Twining, who worked on the partnership in the Bush administration, says that both sides remain confident in its long-term benefits—perhaps so confident that they neglect the mundane business of actually building it. Two factors, however, are pushing America to reinvigorate ties with India. The near-collapse in its relations with Pakistan gives India an even

greater significance in America's hopes for stability in Afghanistan when most NATO troops leave in 2014. And America's aspirations for co-operative relations with China have degenerated into a more blatant if undeclared form of strategic competition, as America rebalances its entire military posture towards Asia.

So American leaders are again talking up the India relationship. In Delhi this month Leon Panetta, the defence secretary, called India a "linchpin" of the "rebalancing" strategy. After this week's dialogue, Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, noted that "the strategic fundamentals of our relationship are pushing our two countries' interests into closer convergence."

But India fears being left in the lurch as NATO skedaddles out of Afghanistan. Its security priority is to receive credible reassurances on plans for stabilising Afghanistan and ensuring it never again becomes a Talibanised client of Pakistan.

America, for its part, wants to see India further reduce imports of oil from Iran, with which Indian leaders like to boast of their "civilisational" ties. But on the eve of the dialogue, Mrs Clinton announced that India, unlike China or even Singapore, had already done enough to earn a waiver from American sanctions.

Hopes that something concrete might emerge from the dialogue were largely invested in economics. The two sides agreed to work on a bilateral investment treaty to unlock the huge potential for co-operation. In fact the one area where ties are flourishing—the jetfighter disappointment aside—is defence. India has become the world's largest arms importer, and American exporters are benefiting, with more than \$8 billion in sales in recent years.

Overall, however, America's economic ties with India do not come close to the huge, symbiotic relations it has with China. India itself now does more trade with China (\$74 billion in 2011) than it does with America (\$58 billion). American officials would like to see the balance tip more in their country's favour.

The unstated logic in both America and India behind the drive for closer relations is as a warning to China not to overreach itself and drive them into a fully fledged military alliance. It is still far short of that—more like a mutual feeling that India and America are closer in strategic and political outlook to each other than they are to China. For that reason, America has no qualms about India's "Look East" policy of engagement with the rest of Asia, or even with its contemplating membership of the China-led regional security grouping focused on Central Asia, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation.

Experience elsewhere in Asia suggests that America's confidence in the long-term strength of its partnership with India need not be shaken even if China's economic links with India continue to outpace its own. The great paradox of Asian strategy today is that the closer countries find themselves bound up with China economically, the more they seek the reassurance of American security.

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