Original Article

NATO and India: The politics of strategic convergence

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Abstract In this article, I argue that after having experienced a distinctly cool relationship throughout most of the post-war period and for the 10 years following the end of the Cold War, India and North Atlantic Organization (NATO) are now gradually moving towards each other. Indeed, during the past decade, NATO's 'out-of-area' operations have taken it eastwards from the Mediterranean, while India's 'extended neighbourhood' framework has brought it westwards from the Indian subcontinent. This has created a geopolitical overlap between these two actors, most notably in Afghanistan but also elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. Common advocacy of liberal democracy and overt concerns over jihadist destabilization have brought these two actors together. In NATO's post-Cold War search for relevance and India's post-Soviet search for partners, they have found each other. Unstated potential concerns over China are also a feature in this strategic convergence. However, while NATO has adopted a flexible range of 'Partnership' frameworks, India's sensitivity on retaining 'strategic autonomy' will limit their cooperation to informal *ad hoc* arrangements.
International Politics (2012) **49,** 98–116. doi:10.1057/ip.2011.35;
published online 23 December 2011

Keywords: NATO; India; post-Cold War; geopolitics; China; jihadism

Introduction

This article aims to fill a gap. There is not much literature on NATO–India relations. This reflects the simple fact that there has not been very much to write about. However, this is now changing as both actors reach out and encounter each other in ways undreamt of in the previous century. Treatment of their relationship has now become something worth doing. Back in the 1950s, as the North Atlantic Organization (NATO) and India looked at each other, their strategic divergence and geographical distance apart was noticeable. However, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, convergence and

overlap of strategic areas has become noticeable. This convergence of strategic outlook, combined with the overlap of geographical areas of interests and operation, has been a politically sensitive development, which raises the question of cooperation and partnership boundaries. It also raises further questions of cooperation and partnership in terms of extent, depth and where applied. This article seeks to pinpoint, evaluate and extrapolate these features in the politics of strategic convergence. It says something new (comparative world views) about something new (NATO–India relations).

Convergence

Whereas the second half of the twentieth century saw divergent distant coolness between NATO and India, the twenty-first century has seen some convergence between NATO and India, to a degree that Nehru and the early NATO founders would have found surprising. Geographically, NATO's field of operations was in Europe and the Northern Atlantic, with its own sense being that 'during the Cold War NATO did not need other countries to fulfil its essential security mission of self defence. Allied solidarity was enough' (Rizzo, 2007a). During the 1950s, NATO's alignment cut across India's non-alignment, while the presence of Portugal as a NATO founder member further distanced India as it sought to regain the Portuguese enclaves in India. Goa might have been regained by India from Portugal in 1960, but India's strategic convergence with the Soviet Union provided another factor of ongoing divergence between India and NATO. As late as 1999, India was expressing strong criticisms of NATO operations in Kosovo without the explicit authorization by the UN; 'it is clear that NATO … believes itself to be above the [international] law. We find this deeply uncomfortable … . India cannot accept any country's taking on the garb of a world policeman' (Kamalesh Sharma cited in Krieger, 2001, p. 439). Since 2001, there has been a clear shift, both in terms of NATO's willingness to deploy outside Europe and in India's greater willingness to cooperate with NATO as India also expands its own reach. Their respective world views and geographic focus can now be analysed and compared for strategic convergence.

India's world view

In terms of India's 'world views', India's old focus on non-alignment and its explicit distancing from formal alignment with the US bloc and its NATO derivative faded with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the end of Cold War bipolarity, there are no longer those two camps, those two blocs and alliances, for India to keep its distance from. Indeed, if anything, India is now

tilting towards the United States. Such tilting of India towards the United States is with regard to China, with whom India has a problematic relationship. Some Indian commentators (Kumar, 2009) thus argue that 'there are common grounds for NATO-India convergence such as containing China'.

India was quick to offer full assistance to the US military and security forces in 2001, in the wake of 9/11, an event bringing their common concerns over Islamist *jihadist* operations into greater prominence. This common concern has been maintained between India and NATO over the Taliban and al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. In contrast to the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, India (Sibal, 2003) treated the NATO's assumption of control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in August 2003 as a 'UN-authorised multinational operations as in the case of Afghanistan … . The involvement of the UN implies a certain legitimacy, an international recognition and acceptability … a certain international legitimacy as distinct from *ad hoc* or unilateral decisions'. India has thus been ready to accept such UN-sanctioned NATO *out-of-area* deployment.

India's final 'world view' shift has been a re-engagement with the international system, not so much in terms of Nehruvian moralism, but in terms of India's own power rise. The emphasis under Indira Gandhi on South Asia and a regional pre-eminence there for India (*Indira Doctrine*) has given way to wider interests. This led India to formulate a policy of active involvement beyond its immediate neighbourhood of South Asia, in what India from 2000 onwards has termed its 'extended neighbourhood' (Scott, 2009). As the then BJP Minister for External Affairs, Yashwant Sinha (2004) explained 'this Government, over the last six years, has assiduously promoted the idea that India is a major power … . We have articulated the concept of an extended neighbourhood for India'. There is a progression here of interests $\sim >$ strategic interests $\sim >$ security interests $\sim >$ military interests. The Congress administration argued in similar terms that 'given the size of the country and its role in the comity of nations, our security concerns are not limited to our immediate neighbourhood … . India's area of security interest extends beyond the confines of the conventional geographical definition of South Asia' (Dutt, 2007; also MOD, 2007). This concept of *extended neighbourhood* reflects a sense of India's rise generating wider strategic interests in such regions; strategic interests to be gained and maintained and defended, wider regions where it encounters NATO's similar extension of strategic interests.

NATO in a New World

Since 1991, NATO is no longer faced with the Soviet Union or with the Warsaw Pact. Faced with the disappearance of its original purposes of

countering the Soviet Union, NATO has had to reinvent itself, or at least redirect itself to an extent. Stabilization and promotion of democracy has emerged as the primary public focus for NATO, already in the forefront of NATO's decision to intervene in Bosnia (*Operation Deliberate Force*) in 1995 and in Kosovo (*Operation Allied Force*) in 1999, where it was a question for NATO of 'averting a humanitarian catastrophe' (Solana, 1999; also Simma, 1999). Whereas the former (Bosnia) had UN authorization, the latter (Kosovo) did not – an activist stance in 1999 by NATO, which as already noted drew Indian criticism.

The identification of terrorism as an international threat, rather than domestic problem, has been taken up by NATO. As Michael Ruhle (2005), a NATO figure, explained, 'combating terrorism is a recent addition to NATO's agenda … . Following 9/11 … the participation of NATO in the "War on Terror" marked the end of a Euro-centric NATO'. The then NATO Deputy Secretary General Alessandro Rizzo (2007b) told an Indian audience that security and insecurity had become globalized: 'we had to leave behind the traditional geographical approach to security. And we had to be prepared to tackle problems at their source. In short, "9/11" marked the beginning of the third phase of NATO's evolution'. The technical way that NATO has done this was seen immediately after 9/11. On 12 September, for the first time ever NATO invoked Article-5 of the *North Atlantic Treaty* ('an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all'), whereby a terrorist attack by a non-state actor could trigger NATO's collective self-defence obligation. In effect, NATO mandated itself 'to make combating terrorism an enduring NATO mission', a stance that 'marked the de facto end of NATO's out-of-area debate, which, as the French NATO Ambassador put it cogently, had collapsed with the Twin Towers' (Ruhle, 2003, p. 93).

NATO has thus moved from seeing itself as a regional organization with regional field of operation to seeing itself as an organization with regional membership, out-of-region deployment and global aspirations. Its world view is of transnational challenges needing wider responses. This lies behind Ruhle's (2007) talk of 'expanding the transatlantic toolkit':

> The need to move from a geographical understanding of security to a more functional approach has been widely accepted. There is broad agreement on the direction of NATO's military transformation, namely towards expeditionary capabilities for operations far away from the Alliance's traditional European perimeter.

NATO's transformation from a regional actor into a global player was formally confirmed by the NATO Foreign Ministers at their meeting in

Reykjavik in May 2002, where they declared that the Alliance would confront threats to members' security, regardless of what (and where) their origin. The then NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson (2003) emphasized that the Reykjavik decision required 'that NATO should step above its traditional theological squabbles and be prepared to go out of area instead of out of business'. In effect, this was a declaration that the 'out-of-area' debate was dead. NATO figures have been explicit enough about this development; 'by taking action not only out-of-area, but out-of-continent, the Alliance clearly demonstrated that it was prepared to adopt a functional, rather than a geographical, approach to security' (Rizzo, 2007b). The Riga Summit further pushed a NATO role in Afghanistan and Darfur, its formal *Declaration* (NATO, 2006) talking of 'expeditionary operations far from home territory'.

NATO has not only moved from a North Atlantic and European framework to a global framework, but it has also moved from a reactive to pre-emptive setting. NATO's *Strategic Concept* asserted that 'crises and conflicts beyond NATO's borders can pose a direct threat to the security of Alliance territory and populations. NATO will therefore engage, where possible and when necessary, to prevent crises, manage crises, stabilize post-conflict situations and support reconstruction' (NATO, 2010a). The inclusion of 'pre-emptive action' has become part of NATO's interpretation of 'self-defence', an anticipatory stance (Yost, 2007).

Consequently, the scope for NATO operations has jumped beyond its geographical North Atlantic and European membership, with talk now of a 'Global Nato', first raised in 2006 by Ivo Daalder – the subsequent US Ambassador to NATO. His argument was radical:

> With little fanfare – and even less notice – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has gone global … it is extending both its geographic reach and range of its operations … NATO's next move must be to open its membership to any democratic states in the world … only a truly global alliance can address the global challenges of the day. (Daalder and Goldgeier, 2006, p. 105; also Mowle and Sacko, 2007; Bhatiya, 2009 and Hammans, 2009)

His calls for expanded formal membership beyond its trans-Atlantic foundations have not been pushed by NATO, although provision of military forces and logistical support for NATO operations outside Europe have been sought and achieved. Moreover, NATO has pushed formal Partnership programmes with other states outside its traditional Atlantic-European boundaries.

This means that NATO activities involve not just 'Members' inside NATO, but also 'Partners' outside NATO; Claudio Bisogniero (2010, p. 2), the NATO Deputy Secretary General, argued that 'NATO today is simply unthinkable

without its partnerships'. NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Alessandro Rizzo (2007a), similarly argued that 'as we send our forces *now* [my italics] globally on peace support operations we know how important partnerships with other [non-NATO] countries are to our success'. The *Riga Summit Declaration* highlighted partnership potentials:

> NATO's partnerships have an enduring value, contributing to stability and security across the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond … . With this in mind, we task the Council in Permanent Session to further develop this policy, in particular to … increase the operational relevance of relations with non-NATO countries, including interested Contact Countries; and in particular to strengthen NATO's ability to work with those current and potential contributors to NATO operations and mission, who share our interests and values. (NATO, 2006)

The question from that was how far India shared interests and values with NATO, to which the answer is both.

Rasmussen pushed the question of NATO's role further at the Munich Security Conference in February 2010, in his speech 'NATO in the 21st Century: Towards Global Connectivity'. His argument was that 'we must take NATO's transformation to a new level – by connecting the Alliance with the broader international system in entirely new ways' Rasmussen (2010a). This reflected a sense of *global connectivity* in terms of challenges and responses.

> The approaches of a bygone era simply no longer work. Static, heavy metal armies are not going to impress terrorists, pirates or computer hackers … . Security today is about active engagement, possibly very far from our own borders … in an age of globalized insecurity, our territorial defence must begin beyond our borders … our success in preserving our shared security – including through NATO – increasingly depends on how well we cooperate with others. (Rasmussen, 2010a)

From the military side of NATO has come similar stress on this global connectivity. Di Paola, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee stated that 'in this new context, because of the vulnerabilities created by globalization … it is all the more essential for us to maintain global connectivity if we are to successfully tackle 21st Century challenges and trends', for 'NATO is but one of the actors on the global security stage and needs to work in tandem with others' (ACO, 2010).

This drive for global connectivity was maintained at the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010. This included its general call to 'engage with our partners across the globe who contribute significantly to security, and reach

out to relevant partners to build trust, increase transparency and develop practical cooperation. Develop flexible formats to discuss security challenges with our partners' (NATO, 2010b). The Lisbon Summit also ratified and recommended a new *Strategic Concept* agreement, unofficially dubbed *NATO Version 3.0* by commentators like Flockhart (2011); also Hyde-Price (2011) complete with NATO (2010b) talk of establishing 'a wide network of partner relationships with countries and organisations around the globe'. NATO figures like James Shea (2011, p. 29), Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges, continue to argue that this is a significant new development, 'innovation lies in the area of connectivity … the recognition of an international reality … now it is even more urgent to leverage the commitment and contribution of others'.

Within this process, NATO's outreach to other significant powers is noticeable (Brzezinski, 2009). Among these new rising powers, India looms as an increasingly valuable potential named partner in the *Strategic Concept* on account of its compatible (strategic-geopolitical) interests and shared (democratic) values. Consequently, NATO figures like Ruhle (2011) have pursued NATO–India links, a 'reaching out to India'. Hence, the NATO Secretary-General Anders Rasmussen's talk of engaging more closely and actively with India (interviewed in Aiyar, 2008). NATO figures like James Appathurai have responded to the emerging economics-driven rise of India: 'security is the oxygen of prosperity and, India with its vast skilled human resources, is fast emerging as a global power that has the potential to provide stability … NATO would be most interested in enhancing economic relations with the country' (cited in Sharma, 2005). Alongside their shared democratic norms, India's significance for NATO is also structural. India's weight as a rising power in the international system led Rasmussen (2010a) to argue that 'I believe we should also reach out to the rising stars of this century, such as … India, where we have common security interests'. In short, NATO's changing views on its own global role is bringing a shift of greater involvement with potential non-NATO partners like India.

India's Extended Neighbourhood

As already noted, India's changing world view has brought a sense of *extended neighbourhood* for India to operate in. The geographical scope of this strategic framework is wide ranging – an 'extended neighbourhood for India which stretches from the Suez Canal to … West Asia, the Gulf, Central Asia … and the Indian Ocean Region' (Sinha, 2004). It has security implications. Defence Secretary Shekhar Dutt (2007) argued that 'India's security environment extends from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca across the Indian

Ocean, including the Central Asian region in the North West'. This security sense of India's extended neighbourhood has generated military considerations. This was why the Indian Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2007, p. 9) pointed out that 'India is making every effort to enhance its defence ties with its extended neighbourhood in … Central Asia, the Gulf and Middle East regions'. Such a framework generates India's *Look North* (Afghanistan and Central Asia), *Look South* (Indian Ocean) and *Look West* (Gulf and the Middle East) policies, which bring India alongside NATO outreaches into those same areas.

With regard to these overlapping areas, northwards, the fall of the Taliban brought active Indian involvement in Afghanistan, with civilian reconstruction projects and a generally heightened Indian diplomatic presence a noticeable feature. Ironically, though, NATO's decision at the 2010 Lisbon Summit to announce withdrawal of troops by 2014 prompted discussions between Afghanistan and India in June 2011 to strengthen India–Afghanistan security cooperation, including Indian training of Afghan forces. In Central Asia, India's presence in Afghanistan has led to further Indian defence links with Tajikistan (Ayni airbase) and Mongolia. Southwards, within its drive into the Indian Ocean, India's naval links with the Seychelles have been developed.

Even as NATO has stretched eastwards, India has stretched westwards. Here, Indian outreach into the Gulf was first seen in the dispatch of its aircraft carrier INS Viraat in 1999. Since then, India has regularly dispatched units into the region; during 2005–2007, around 40 Indian naval vessels were dispatched to Oman and the Gulf. The rationale was clear for the Indian government: 'beyond the immediate region, India has vital interests in the Gulf … the Gulf forms parts of our strategic [extended] neighbourhood' as an 'important source of energy, home to over 3.5 million Indians, and a major trading partner. Parts of it are also a source of ideology, funding and recruits to the cause of Islamic radicalism and terrorism' (Mukherjee, 2005). Bilateral defence and security agreements have been made with Qatar in 2008, with the *Thammar al Tayyib* annual military exercises taking place between Oman and India since 2003. Further westwards, the Gulf of Aden has seen Franco-Indian cooperation through their *Varuna* naval exercises in 2005 and 2007. The end of the decade, December 2008, witnessed the dispatch of the Indian navy to carry out ongoing anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, alongside the parallel deployment there of the NATO's *Task Force 508* in *Operation Ocean Shield*. Interestingly, this deployment was explained in wider geo-economic terms by the Indian Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2008); 'the Gulf of Aden provides access to the Suez Canal through which sizable portion of India's trade flows. Indian Navy's presence in the area will help to protect our sea-borne trade'.

Indeed, India's western naval outreach has brought it into the Mediterranean, and NATO's own immediate sphere of operations. In 2004, INS Mysore, INS Godavari, INS Ganga and INS Shakti, having been deployed to the Gulf of

Aden, were then sent up the Red Sea and into the Eastern Mediterranean, visiting ports in Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Turkey (a NATO member). Conceptually, there was the Indian Ministry of Defence (MOD, 2010, p. 8) sense that 'the Indian Ocean Region which extends up to the … Eastern Mediterranean … is crucial to India's maritime interests'. In July 2006, Indian naval vessels on regular deployment from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, Suez Canal and Eastern Mediterranean were deployed in *Operation Sukoon* to evacuate civilians from Beirut. Manmohan Singh (2006) explained to the Indian Parliament that this showed that 'West Asia is our extended neighbourhood and tensions in that region affect our security and our vital interests'. The Indian navy was similarly deployed in Libyan waters in 2011 to evacuate Indian nationals from Benghazi, even as NATO air and naval forces moved to enforce a no-fly zone against the Gaddafi government.

NATO Goes Out of Area

Since 2001, NATO's focus on *out-of-region* and global issues has been reflected in specific deployments out of its traditional Atlantic-Europe-Mediterranean focus. Such out-of-region deployments have brought NATO into India's own expanding strategic backyard, NATO's eastern deployments overlapping with India's westwards deployments. As Rizzo (2007b) put it, 'we have already successfully broadened our partnership policy beyond Europe, by reaching out to countries across the Mediterranean and into the Gulf region', and 'we are now opening a new chapter by deepening our ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific region'. The *Mediterranean Dialogue* links NATO to Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Still wider Gulf links have been established through the *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative* (ICI) links with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. NATO's (2010a) *Strategic Concept* reaffirmed its longer-term horizons to 'develop a deeper security partnership with our Gulf partners and remain ready to welcome new partners in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative format'. *Partnerships for Peace* (PfP) agreements (Fruhling and Schreer, 2011) have been drawn up between NATO and the ex-Soviet countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Finally, 'Contact Countries' involve NATO with Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand.

NATO's readiness to undertake out-of-region deployment was most clearly seen in August 2003, when it took over the leadership of the ISAF in Afghanistan. The UN Security Council unanimously renewed its mandate in October 2010 for another year. NATO (2003) described this deployment as 'a reflection of our transformation agenda and the Alliance's resolve to address

the new security challenges of the 21st century', and as a 'watershed moment'. Unlike the air strikes of 1999, this NATO-led deployment of force received approval (and a degree of legitimacy in Indian eyes) from the UN's Security Council *Resolution 1776*, which formally expressed 'its appreciation for the leadership provided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization'. The Partnership Agreement drawn up between NATO and Afghanistan in 2010 provided for longer-term NATO links. India commentators recognized that 'NATO is *suo moto* stepping out of the ISAF, deepening its presence and recasting its role and activities on a long-term basis. South Asian security will never be the same again' (Bhadrakumar, 2010b).

NATO's ISAF-led operation already includes a wide range of participants, formally from NATO 'Members' and NATO 'Partners':

> More than 50 000 soldiers are deployed today under NATO command and under UN mandate. These soldiers come not only from the 26 NATO member countries but also from 18 Partner countries … Countries from as far away as Australia, New Zealand and South Korea – even Japan – contribute to our mission in Afghanistan. So NATO is increasingly an organisation which is able to bring together the international community in the broadest sense to defend common values and common security interests. (Fouret, 2007)

NATO sources recognize that such Afghanistan involvement involves NATO with other regional powers:

> If we really want to get a grip on the new risks and threats to our security, NATO will increasingly have to work with other actors … with other nations. Nowhere is this clearer than in Afghanistan … [in] Afghanistan our No. 1 priority, it is obvious that we need to engage with major players in the region. (Rizzo, 2007b)

In part, this has drawn NATO closer to Pakistan, but it also draws NATO closer to India, as NATO recognizes 'there are no solutions to Afghanistan's problems solely within Afghanistan's borders … India has a stake in Afghan stability' (TOI, 2010).

NATO's own widening maritime role, to protect Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and the common seas, is also pulling it out of its traditional Atlantic-Mediterranean waters (Ruiz, 2008; Smith-Windsor, 2009; Alderwick and Giegerich, 2010). Consequently, 2008 witnessed naval ships from the United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, Greece and Turkey setting up collaborative links with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. These Gulf countries are NATO 'Partners' within already mentioned ICI framework set up in 2004.

In September 2007, a NATO Standing Naval Maritime Group visited the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean and conducted exercises in the Indian Ocean, India's backyard, before then re-entering the Mediterranean via the Red Sea. Their stay in the Indian Ocean was accompanied by calls that it would 'demonstrate the alliance's continuing ability to respond to emerging crisis situations on a global scale and foster close links with regional navies', of which India is an obvious partner in the Indian Ocean (Bhadrakumar, 2007). This was followed by fuller deployment in 2008, *Operation Allied Provider*, involving more NATO vessels deployed to protect UN food shipments into Somalia, and again noticed by Indian commentators like Bhadrakumar (2008). General operations against Somali pirates by NATO's *Task Force 508* (in *Operation Allied Protector* from March to August 2009, and *Operation Ocean Shield* since August 2009) widened NATO's scope still further. Such deployments have been noticed in India. India can no longer ignore NATO, even if it wished to; 'whether India likes it or not, NATO is on its doorsteps … . New Delhi cannot prevent NATO from expanding its footprint into areas which are of strategic interest to India' (Gupta, 2008; also Bhadrakumar, 2010a). Equally well, NATO cannot ignore India, for 'without India, NATO's partnerships in the Indian Ocean region would remain inherently weak' (Bhadrakumar, 2007).

NATO–India: Cooperation and Partnership for the Future

In 2011, the ICPS-NATO Dialogue, an annual event since 2004, had 2 days of discussion. Day One was officially entitled 'From Convergence to Cooperation', and Day Two was entitled 'From Cooperation to Partnership', a progression in terms of practicality and in terms of closeness. How far is this happening, or is likely? Whereas NATO has been quite vocal in considering and reaching out to India, the Indian government has been hesitant:

> Understandably, given the domestic political compulsions and a long history of non-alignment, India's response to the visits of these annual NATO delegations to India has been minimalist. Apart from occasional references to the Atlantic Alliance in diplomatic parleys and speeches regarding the security situation in Afghanistan, NATO is virtually non-existent in Indian [official/public] security discourse. (Mukhopadhyay, 2009)

However, the potential is there and is starting to become more noticeable (Basrur, 2006, p. 186; Gupta, 2008). Discussions between the Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee and NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoof Scheffer, in New York, in September 2007, explored areas of convergence, although circumspectly, and without much publicity.

In terms of NATO–India cooperation, this can be looked at in three ways, with regard to issues, place and level. This is more than clutching at straws, although it is less than concluded arrangements. NATO 'flexible formats' flagged up in its *Security Concept* 2010 are apparent here. It was apparent in what NATO called its 'broad menu' on offer with its ICI:

> The ICI Menu of Practical Activities … now contains some 600 activities and events for our ICI partners to choose from – ranging from counter-terrorism, through military education and training, to energy security, non-proliferation, civil emergency planning and maritime cooperation. That broad menu represents a wealth of opportunities for each of our ICI partners … individual cooperation programmes … a practical tool … rather than as a political undertaking, or something that would necessarily have a high public profile. (Bisogniero, 2010)

Such a low profile, flexibility enabling India to quietly choose *a la carte*, might be particularly appropriate for a politically sensitive Delhi, keen to publicly maintain *strategic autonomy* and national sovereignty.

Issues

'Counter terrorism' is one issue that brings NATO and India together. This may be in terms of combating piracy on the high seas as in the case of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, where they both have an interest in keeping the SLOCs open. This may be in terms of combating more overt Islamist *jihadist* groups operating around the world. However, there are limits. Indian commentators like Varun Sanhi argue that cooperation on terrorism operates at three levels (cited in Sultanat, 2005). At the *conceptual level*, cooperation possibilities are 'high' as both actors are democracies faced with common threats. At the *operational level*, there are moderate, concrete possibilities, but 'tactical and episodic', such as intelligence sharing, joint exercises and experience sharing. However, in terms of formalized *institutionalized cooperation*, NATO's links with Pakistan make this 'remote', with India keen to retain its self-perceived strategic autonomy.

Another area that brings NATO and India together is 'democracy', an issue that distances China from both of them. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, India's confusing (to others) close links with a manifestly undemocratic Soviet Union has gone. India's presence as a democracy was flagged by it joining the US-sponsored World Movement for Democracies, hosting its first Conference in New Delhi in 1999. This gives an ideational link to NATO, which continues to affirm its support to the establishment and maintenance of

democracies. After all, NATO's founding Charter, the *North Atlantic Treaty* (1949), did start by identifying the alliance as 'founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law'. Of course it remains a moot question as to how far India's presence as the world's largest democracy has actually been translated in a correspondingly large promotion by India of the democracy cause outside India (Mohan, 2007). In the cases of countries like Myanmar, India has for other reasons – like sovereignty sensibilities, desire for energy resources and rivalry with China – been reluctant to push democracy in its foreign policy relations.

Areas

The immediate area where NATO and India geopolitically overlap is Afghanistan. From the NATO side was the sense in 2007 that 'at this moment, Afghanistan is the place where India and NATO both seek to provide stability' (Rizzo, 2007b). Three years later, it was still a question of 'NATO engaging more systematically with countries like India' in which 'Afghanistan is proof, to my mind, of the vital importance of broader partnerships for successful international missions' (Rasmussen, 2010b). From the Indian side, discussions with NATO in 2007 were such that 'during the meeting with the Secretary-General of NATO, there was a discussion on the international security situation, with particular reference to the situation in Afghanistan. The two leaders emphasized the importance of continued international cooperation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan' (India, 2007). Their roles have differed. NATO's *hard power* presence in Afghanistan, through its military ISAF operation, has been complemented by India's *softer power* presence in areas of economic and social reconstruction. Central Asia is a further area when NATO and Indian interests are starting to overlap. Central Asian states have provided some access assistance for NATO operations in Afghanistan. In turn, India's involvement in Afghanistan forms a bridge for India's further appearance in Central Asia. Energy security has been an important issue for India in Central Asia, as well as quietly seeking to avert religious fundamentalism and subsequent regional destabilization. NATO has similar interests.

India's own westwards expansion of interests and presence has taken it from the Strait of Ormuz into the Gulf and also to the Gulf of Aden and its choke point of the Bab-el Mandeb. This is paralleled by NATO's own eastwards expansion of interests and presence in those parts of the world. Common interests in anti-terrorism activities, and common concern over Islamist destabilization of the area, are again a shared interest there. The eruption of piracy in Somali coast brought parallel counter-deployments by the Indian navy and by NATO's *Task Force 508*. From India's point of view, 'our

navy has discharged its responsibilities with distinction and is viewed as an indispensable partner … by the … NATO naval forces … to devise measures for keeping open access points to avoid choking international trade' (Rao, 2010). At NATO's Planning Division, Ruhle (2010) argued that 'NATO's recent cooperation with the Indian navy in counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia will likely be followed by closer cooperation in other areas as well'. The regular deployment in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden at various times by the Indian navy with US (*Malabar* joint exercises), UK (*Konkan* joint exercises) and French (*Varuna* joint exercises) naval units gives a further linkage between India and NATO members. A final geographical overlap for NATO and India is the African coastline, the Indian Ocean Rim. A common concern, already explicitly recognized, would again be potential instability through piracy and Islamist groups. Another potential concern is the growing presence of China in these maritime stretches, an unstated but common strategic challenge for both NATO (Fruhling and Schreer, 2009) and India.

Level

There are various gradations or levels of interaction between NATO and India. As Rizzo (2007b) told his Indian audience, there is a 'wide variety of NATO partnership programmes', in which 'some partners help us with military bases, air fields and transit rights. Some provide forces to our missions, and some provide us with intelligence and expertise … and increasing their interoperability with those of the Alliance'. If one stands back, there seem to be five levels for NATO–India links that can be meaningfully discussed: intelligence, planning-strategy, interoperability, exercising, formal linkage.

With regard to *intelligence sharing*, there is no inherent reason why some intelligence sharing between NATO and India should not take place; it already does between the United States and India, especially since 9/11. However, India might have reservations over the intelligence tightness within a multinational organization, made up of different members with varying intelligence-gathering capabilities? With regard to *planning and strategy*, there may be grounds for NATO–India discussion on overlapping geographical regions of Central Asia/Middle East and the Indian Ocean, less so with regard to NATO planning and strategy in the Atlantic and Europe, or of Indian planning and strategy in Southeast Asia, the Far East and Western Pacific. *Interoperability* is an area for convergence, given the growing acquisition of Western materials from the United States and France in particular. The 2005 US–India defence-security agreement set the seal on this shift, with subsequent sales of military equipment (*internal balancing*) and substantive military exercises (*external balancing*) bringing the two military machines closer together. Interoperability

may also be strengthened through joint military exercises. India already holds joint bilateral operations with the United States (*Malabar*, *Cope Thunder*, *Red Flag*, *Yudh Abhyas* exercises), Britain (*Koncan* exercises) and France (*Varuna* exercises). If India can carry out such varied exercises with NATO members, then it could do that with the NATO organization. A further sign of interoperability was the NATO offer in September 2011 for India to become a partner in its ballistic missile defence programme (Sethi, 2011; Subramanian, 2011).

However, formal institutionalized linkage between NATO and India is unlikely. India tends to feel that it is too big to be simply just another formal partner country to the Atlantic Alliance. NATO does have Partnership Agreements with other countries, like Pakistan for example, but India may see itself as too big to merit such relatively junior status. This underpinned Raja Mohan's sense that 'while it is clear that the alliance between the two have to be on equal terms, the terms of engagement between the two need further clarity and elaboration. Given the rising status of India, it is not willing to be a junior partner in any alliance' (cited in GSC, 2007, p. 5). India's own sovereignty sensitivities, its desires to safeguard its strategic autonomy and domestic considerations would probably leave India adverse to any too explicit Partnership Agreement framework. This also makes Indian military participation under NATO control (on the model of the NATO-led ISAF operations in Afghanistan) unlikely, although parallel deployment would be another matter. Flexible *ad hoc* cooperation between NATO and India is more feasible than rigid institutionalized frameworks.

Conclusion

Ideological and geographical concerns about NATO have not totally disappeared in India. With regard to Libya, India's reservations over a NATO no-fly zone led it to abstain alongside Russia and China in the UN Security Council authorizing vote in March 2011, whereas NATO members like the United States, France and Britain voted for it. Indeed, India went on to voice some concerns on the subsequent impact of NATO air strikes, with the Ministry of External Affairs announcing that 'India views with grave concern the continuing violence, strife and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Libya. It regrets the air strikes that are taking place' (TOI, 2011). However, Indian concerns remained muted, with the eventual collapse of Gaddafi regime by October 2011 stilling those criticisms.

Meanwhile, NATO's formal partnership links with Pakistan continue to cut across NATO–India links, and detract from some of the other dynamics pulling NATO and India closer together. The accidental NATO air strikes killing 20 Pakistani soldiers in late November 2011 immediately strained NATO–Pakistan relations. Ironically, plans announced at the Lisbon Summit in

November 2010 for NATO to shift from a combat role to a supportive role in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 caused some unofficial discomfort for India. Hitherto, India had given its effective support to NATO's ISAF role, whereby NATO had focussed on a hard power military presence and India had focussed on a complementary soft power reconstruction presence. NATO withdrawal from its combat role leaves India faced with Afghanistan sliding into Taliban Islamist destabilization, or of India being pulled into a more overt uncomfortable hard power military presence. The announcing of a strategic partnership between Afghanistan and India in 2011, including security cooperation and assistance, seemed to presage such an Indian shift to step into NATO's shoes.

General NATO coordination of its future operations with the UN, achieved in Afghanistan but an issue for India in the 1999 NATO airstrikes, would facilitate greater NATO–India operational coordination. This seems behind Indian comments (Sanhi, 2010, p. 3) that UN-sanctioned 'peacekeeping cooperation is an area in which a NATO–India partnership could emerge'. However, from NATO's point of view, effective planning and deployment is not necessarily always fostered through UN involvement, as it considered the case to be in Kosovo 1999, given the ambiguous presence of China and Russia able to block the moves by the other (NATO) permanent members, the United States and United Kingdom. If, and when, India achieves its long-held goal of UN Security Permanent Membership status, a NATO–UN linkage is likely to become even more important for India. Meanwhile, India's term as a Security Council member for 2010–2012 brought her announcement that 'during its forthcoming term on the Security Council, India's immediate priorities will include peace and stability in its near and extended neighbourhood including Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa, counter-terrorism' (MEA, 2011, p. 106). These are precise areas of overlap with NATO concerns and UN-mandated NATO operations.

To conclude, strategic and ideational convergence is likely to bring a degree of greater cooperation between NATO and India, as it is already doing between India and the United States. However, the politics of strategic convergence make such NATO–India cooperation likely to be *ad hoc* rather than institutionalized, and implicit rather than explicit. NATO strategy needs to reflect the political fact that Indian sensitivities generate continuing political determination not to give up any of India's strategic autonomy. NATO cannot expect to get many formal institutional agreements from India. It will have to use its own rhetoric on flexible arrangements to the full. Nevertheless, within that sensitivity, with regard to NATO–India relations, strategic logic *is* overcoming geographic distance; convergence *is* already leading to a degree of cooperation in the Indian Ocean/Gulf/Afghanistan zones. A *de facto* partnership has emerged, somewhat unnoticed but of growing substance. It will probably develop further.

About the Author

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