**From warp speed to reset, the state of India-U.S. ties**

This month marks a year since Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s state visit to the United States, where U.S. President Joseph Biden rolled out the red carpet and the U.S. offered to restart the decade-old plan to transfer technology for jet engines to India. The visit was marked by many such announcements of strategic and high-tech cooperation, with the U.S.-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) considered a major success for bilateral relations that would set the stage for a whole new phase in ties.

However, one year later, the pace of the relationship has not matched those ambitions for a number of external and internal reasons. As the newly sworn-in Indian Prime Minister will engage once again with the U.S. President this week at the G-7 outreach summit in Italy, and senior U.S. officials are set to arrive in Delhi, the “good, the not-so-good, and what could-become ugly” (to paraphrase the Hollywood western) in the relationship must be studied closely.

The crests

It is clear where the ‘good’ and even ‘great’ in the India-U.S. relationship lies. Last September marked 25 years of the turnaround in ties post-Pokhran, that was heralded by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s famous Asia Society speech in New York, on September 28, 1998, where he called India and the U.S. “natural allies in the quest for a better future” for the world in the 21st century. Since then, Delhi and Washington have built up strategic ties year on year, with dialogues in a growing number of spheres — from climate change and green energy to critical and emerging technologies and outer space.

Over the past decade, the growth is seen in strategic trust in particular, with the conclusion of all foundational agreements, a plethora of military exercises, growing inter-operability and coordination on maritime operations, not to mention the considerable purchases in the pipeline of military hardware. A broader mutual understanding has been sparked by many of the old irritants going away from relations: the de-hyphenation of U.S.-India ties with Pakistan, silence over old concerns on Jammu-Kashmir that once roiled ties, India’s increased engagement with the Quad (India, Australia, Japan and the U.S.) and the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific strategy, and shared concerns over China’s aggression have brought Delhi and DC increasingly on the “same page”, internationally.

While the bilateral engagement has been thriving, much of it due to dozens of official-level conversations that continue, some of the “not-so-good” or work-in-progress areas lie in the areas of multilateral cooperation on global conflicts. Russia’s war in Ukraine has been one major area of difference, especially as the U.S. has framed the war purely in terms of the international rule of law and humanitarian principles. India has chosen a more historical frame that also considers the disruption to other players like the Global South on issues such as food, fertilizer and energy security. There have been some compromises: the U.S. has withdrawn its objections to India’s continued purchase of oil and other Russian exports and held off any talk of sanctions, while India has put over the annual India-Russia summit for two years now. It remains to be seen how the newly-elected Prime Minister manages engagements with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the next few months, with a possible meeting at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Kazakhstan in July and the BRICS Summit in Russia’s Kazan in October. Some of the edge of the U.S.’s moralistic posture has also been taken off by its support of Israel’s bombardment of Gaza and the continued killing of civilians despite calls from the United Nations, the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice to stop.

The China factor

On the other multilateral front and growing concerns over China’s threats against Taiwan, with the latest conflagration over the Philippines in the South China Sea too, India-U.S. cooperation at the Quad has flagged somewhat. This has mainly been a factor of logistics. Mr. Biden’s decision to decline the invitation for India’s Republic Day in 2024 meant that the Quad Summit was foregone, and the U.S. has indicated that it will not be rescheduled until after the U.S. elections in November. Planned visits by U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan were cancelled twice this year, at the last moment, due to the Gaza crisis), in turn affecting the iCET review. As a result, so has the visit by the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell (nicknamed ‘Quadfather’ or ‘Asia Czar’ for his role as Biden’s Indo-Pacific Coordinator), who has instead focused on “Quad-Plus” meetings with the Republic of Korea and the Philippines over the past few months. All eyes are also on the Quad Foreign Minister’s meeting to be scheduled in Japan this year, but much will depend on U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken being available for it.

There has been no Indian Ambassador in Washington for months, and South Block’s ties with the U.S. Ambassador in India Eric Garcetti have been somewhat strained after his comments on Manipur and human rights. The State Department’s comments on the state of democracy in India before the general election 2024 as well as consistent bad reviews for India in the State Department’s Religious Freedom report enraged India’s Ministry of External Affairs leading to the summoning of a senior US diplomat, and in turn widening the gap. Washington has been sounding excessively offensive and interfering and New Delhi prickly and reactive. The decision by the U.S. to wait for the “final results” of the general election before congratulating Mr. Modi, and then issue a statement commending civil society and journalists for their “their commitment and vital contributions to India’s democratic processes and institutions”, will no doubt chafe the South Block-State Department equation.

Tensions over ‘plots’

Amid this discourse, the elephant in the room remains the attempted assassination of Khalistani separatist and U.S. citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York, allegedly ordered by Indian security officials. June 2024 also marks a year since the plot in the U.S. was unearthed, along with transcripts linking the plot to the killing of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside Toronto, the same month (June 2023). Although details of the allegations became public only in November last year, it is clear that the discomfort over the perception that India is behind the killing of foreign citizens in friendly countries had begun to seep into the relationship even as Prime Minister Modi touched down in the U.S. last year. During a visit to Washington this summer, this writer saw signs that those concerns have broadened, particularly with U.S. intelligence agencies, the Department of Justice, and at the U.S. Congress, where lawmakers now routinely raise concerns from that section of the diaspora that feels most targeted by India, including those accused of terrorism by India. While the U.S.’s demand that India bring senior officials “to account” publicly for the alleged plot is a non-starter, the Government of India must realise that its theory of “rogue actors” being responsible for such a high profile plot will not wash either. It should proceed more quickly with its high-level investigation. Either way, one can expect the issue to come to a slow boil over the next few months as the trial in New York brings forth more details of what the U.S. believes, and passes on to the Canadian authorities too for the trial set to begin there.

Given the government’s need to adjust to new coalition realities after the shock of the results of the general election as well as the fast-closing window of engagement with the U.S. government as Washington heads into “lame-duck” season, officials and leaders have their task cut out for them. While a possible Trump presidency in November might resolve many of the problems between them, it will most certainly introduce much more uncertainty to their ties as well. The opportunity for a Biden-Modi meeting this week then, followed by the visit by Mr. Sullivan to Delhi soon to complete the iCET review, as decided by the leaders during their phone call, is both desired and necessary for the restart they require, a year after it seemed that the relationship had reached “warp speed”.