India, tied as it to the US apron strings, has suffered a major strategic set-back in Iran where not only has it potentially lost exclusive development rights and control of the strategically important port of Chabahar, but has also been kicked out of Farzad-B gas field project. This has potentially meant a physical death of the ambitious 2013 ‘Tehran Declaration’, which had supposedly tied India and Iran in a strong strategic relationship. While India’s deliberate move away from Iran has taken place against the backdrop of US sanctions on Iran, imposed in the wake of Trump’s decision to force-scrap the JCPOA, these moves are fundamentally rooted in a strategic consensus with the US over Iran. It is for this reason that India has not pumped enough money even into the Chabahar port, which otherwise is exempted from US sanctions.

For India, getting close to the US was/is more important in the wake of its on-going military tensions with China than pursuing relatively low-level strategic interests in Iran. The path that the Indian policy makers chose to confront China at a broader level required sacrificing their interests in Iran. As it stands, Indian companies previously involved in Farzad-B are now engaged in a similar gas exploration project in Israel, indicating how India has largely moved to the anti-Iran camp.

India’s move away from Iran has allowed it to deepen its strategic relations with the US. Indeed, the immediate result has been the signing of “Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement” (BECA), the third so-called “foundational pact” after the “Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement” (LEMOA) and “Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement” (COMCASA) which collectively improve these countries’ military interoperability.

As an Indian news report explained, the BECA will help India get real-time access to American geospatial intelligence that will enhance the accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones. Through the sharing of information on maps and satellite images, it will help India access topographical and aeronautical data, and advanced products that will aid in navigation and targeting.

While one may think that the India’s close ties with the US have roots in Trump’s own aggressive China policy, the US policy towards India and India’s relevance for the US against China are unlikely to change even if Trump loses and Biden wins. Let’s not forget that Biden, when he was Obama’s vice president, was one of the main architects of the so-called “Asia Pivot” policy. India was as relevant to the “Asia Pivot” as it is to Trump’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy. “Indo-pacific” strategy is very much a continuation of “Asia Pivot” in as much as it aims at confronting and containing China and Russia in Asia and beyond.

According to Indian defense experts, the agreement signed will directly help India fight China in Ladakh, and Pakistan in Kashmir. Indian experts have been reported to have said that if the deal had signed earlier, the situation at the Northern border of India could have been different.

Indeed, Mark Esper said that defense agreements between the US and India call for military cooperation and is a check on ‘Chinese aggression’, adding that "Based on our shared values and common interests, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific for all, particularly in light of increased aggression and destabilizing activities by China."

“Our leaders and our citizens see with increasing clarity that the [Chinese Communist Party] is no friend to democracy, the rule of law, transparency, nor to freedom of navigation, the foundation of a free and open and
prosperous Indo-Pacific,” said Pompeo.

Pompeo further categorically said that America would “stand by India” in the fight against China, and paid tribute to the soldiers killed in Ladakh.

With China, rather than Modi-Trump bromance, being the central pillar of US-India strategic relations, it is, therefore, unlikely that the prevalent spirit of deep direct defense ties will die out even if Trump is voted out of the White House.

As India’s former army chief General Nirmal Chander Vij explained, “Over this period we have realized that Indian interests and American interests are [going] in the same direction and for the same purpose – and for that very reason, India has gone ahead and signed the foundational military agreements.”

What is more important for India in the wake of its on-going military tensions with the US is the realization about its lack of military preparedness vis-à-vis China. With no significant arms industry at home, the Indian policy makers see in the US a natural anti-Chin ally, one they would not find in Russia or anywhere else, and a key source of advance military hardware.

To maintain and even deepen this alliance and to further the scope of the so-called 2+2 dialogue, Indian policy makers were not reluctant to tell Iran that their country wouldn’t be able to maintain the spirit of ‘Tehran Declaration.’ It is for this reason that two consecutive visits of India’s foreign and defense ministers to Iran were quickly followed by Iran’s decision to kick India out of Farzad-B gas project, realizing that India’s strategic realities are clearly at odds with its previously widely propagated and ambitious ‘look East’ policy, an idea that imagined a greater Indian reach to Central Asia and Afghanistan via Iran.

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