

India-US Defence Partnership: Challenges and Prospects

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Since 2005, when the United States of America (USA) and India signed the new framework for the India-US Defence relationship, the bilateral defence ties have grown to become strong, and potential driven. With initiatives such as the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the India-US Declaration on Defence Cooperation, the signing of agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the two countries have made bipartisan efforts to move beyond the “hesitations of history”.¹ They have been cooperating on defence production, maritime security, disaster response, and counter terrorism. In November 2019, India and the USA concluded the first land and sea exercise in the history of their military exchanges. With security challenges growing in the Indo-Pacific region, and growing Chinese influence, it becomes imperative for India and the USA to strengthen ties, and defence is one of the main drivers of the deepening relationship. This essay is an attempt to look at defence ties between the two countries.

It looks at the following:

- *How the defence ties between the two countries have grown in the last few years?*
- *What is the importance of Major Defence Partnership (MDP) for India and the US in the Indo-Pacific theatre?*
- *What are the existing challenges to a greater defence partnership?*
- *Recommendation for the future.*

From enjoying a “special role” in Barrack Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’ to remaining a central pillar in Donald Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy, India has been a strategic bet for the USA on a bipartisan level. In fact, in the last two decades,

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consecutive US administrations have been prepping India's rise as a great Asian power to counter the influence of China in the region. While enthusiasts are of the opinion that growth in Indian power will uphold a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region,² intermittently, signs of strain in Indo-US relations have cropped up, even if these are not palpable. India's ties with revisionist powers like Russia and Iran, trade issues between India and the USA, a general cynicism regarding India's capability and intent to play a more robust role in global and regional security, and becoming the net security provider have been the key factors in this regard. In the last few years, India's defence capabilities have increased. However, India has still to catch up to the burgeoning Chinese military presence and assertiveness. This essay sets out to analyse the importance of defence and strategic ties between India and the USA to face the Chinese challenge in the region. It will look at how defence relations between the two countries have evolved in the last few years. It will look at the importance of the unique Major Defence Partnership (MDP) designation for India. The essay will also focus on the challenges impeding the exploitation of the full potential of the relationship. It will assess how the two countries should work together in the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on developing a denial strategy in the Indian Ocean region. The essay will conclude with recommendations for the future of a more robust India-US defence partnership.

India-US Defence Ties

In the last two decades, India-US defence and security ties have flourished greatly. America's post-Cold War Presidents - Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barak Obama, and now Donald Trump have made considerable efforts to connect with Indian leaders, and have recognised India as a core part of the American Grand strategy in Asia. There has been an increased focus on defence technology cooperation, co-production, and co-development. There have been more frequent Government to Government (G2G) exchanges that are also to be seen in the commercial sector, with Indian and American defence companies working at partnering in the global supply chain. The value of the bilateral defence trade between the two countries is estimated to reach USD 18 billion by the end of 2019.³ In fact, the USA has become the second largest arms supplier by providing 15 percent of India's weapons import. US arms exports to India increased by over 550 percent. Since 2008, Indo-US defence trade has steadily increased from under US\$ 1 billion to now over US\$ 18 billion, with the USA becoming India's second largest arms supplier.⁴

India has inducted a large number of American defence hardware, including Apache attack choppers, Chinook heavy-lift Helicopters, C-17 Globemasters, C-130J Super Hercules Transport aircraft, P-81 Maritime Patrol Aircraft, M-777 ultra-light howitzers, and AN-TPQ weapon locating radars. News reports in the month of November 2019 have indicated that India and the USA are close to inking a defence deal worth US\$ 7 billion for the procurement of Sea Guardian armed drones as well as P-8I anti-submarine warfare and surveillance aircraft. Talks are ongoing on for the acquisition of 10 P-8I anti-submarine warfare and long-range surveillance aircraft⁵. Many of these - the C-17s, Chinooks, etc. - are being used in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations in the neighbourhood as well as in other countries, especially those with a sizeable Indian Diaspora.

Bilateral Pacts

In the last few years, India and the USA have signed several agreements in defence cooperation. In 2012, the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) was launched for the co-production and the co-development of military equipment to move away from the traditional “buyer-seller” dynamic. It was aimed at easing the bureaucratic hindrances that were slowing down the process. Under the initiative, nine meetings have taken place till the time of writing this report. Senior leaders from both countries are engaging consistently to strengthen the opportunities in the line of defence. The agreement has led to exploring collaborative projects and programmes, including aircraft carriers; jet engines; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; chemical-biological protection; naval systems; and air systems. In addition, it encompasses two Science and Technology government-to-government project agreements - the Next Generation Protective Ensembles, and Mobile Hybrid Power Sources. Under DTTI, apart from the transfer of radars, gas turbine engines, and night-vision technology, cooperation on aircraft carrier design is also on the cards.⁶ A major breakthrough came in 2016 when India was declared a Major Defence Partner (MDP) by the USA. The bespoke status was unique to India, and it was taken to help US Executive Branch officials who needed a political justification to treat India on par with America’s partners and allies in the context of defence technology trade and cooperation. It was also aimed at winning the confidence of India as a reliable partner.⁷ Under the aegis of this strategic partnership, the two countries have recently signed a number of bilateral agreements that facilitate greater synchronisation across their logistics support networks and communications platforms. In August 2018, the USA granted to India the designation of Strategic Trade Authority Tier 1

or STA-1, “providing India with greater supply-chain efficiency by allowing US companies to export a greater range of dual-use and high-technology items to India under streamlined processes.” This authorisation is the equivalent of NATO allying with Japan, South Korea, and Australia.⁸ The 2+2 ministerial dialogue was established in 2018 for promoting the shared principles of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific. The two countries also signed a 10-year-framework pact, envisaging the joint development and manufacture of defence equipment and technology, including jet engines, aircraft carrier design and construction, protective suits for chemical and biological warfare, as well as mobile electric hybrid power sources. The two countries are also facilitating the transfer of critical military technology and classified information by American defence firms to the Indian private sector for joint ventures. This is expected to enable ‘Make in India’ and technology sharing. There have been proposals in place for including drone warfare, light weighted arms, and virtual augmented reality.⁹

In the last few years, the two countries have also signed foundational pacts such as the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Exchange (LEMOA), and are likely to ink Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) which is considered crucial for obtaining cutting edge weapons and communications system. These will allow India access to the big database of American intelligence, including real time imagery. While enabling interoperability, these pacts will also provide access to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refuelling and replenishment in port calls, joint exercises, training, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Once signed, the BECA will allow India to use US geospatial maps to get pinpoint military accuracy of automated hardware systems and weapons such as cruise and ballistic missiles. Both sides have implemented the Helicopter Operations from Ships other Than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC) program. They are also negotiating the Industrial Security Annex that will enable greater cooperation between the defence industries. Other than that, the US Department of Defence and the Indian Ministry of Defence are increasing the scope, complexity, and frequency of military exercises.

India-US Joint Defence Exercises

Both countries have been increasingly conducting bilateral sophisticated military exercises. The first tri service bilateral exercise ‘Tiger Triumph’ took place in

November 2019. The exercise was aimed at developing interoperability between the two militaries in case of HADR operations. Apart from this, both the armies conducted the 15th iteration of 'Yudh Abhyas' in Washington, USA in September. These exercises provide the opportunity for armies to jointly train, plan and execute a series of well-developed operations for the neutralisation of threats of varied nature. Other major exercises being conducted by the two countries include the RIMPAC, Vajraparahar, and Malabar exercises. Their diplomatic engagements also involve other countries. Malabar has become tri-lateralised since 2015 to include Japan. There has been an upswing in Quadrilateral consultations involving the ministers and high officials of India, the USA, Japan, and Australia. The armies have also been jointly training African peacekeeping forces. For the first time, the Indian navy joined the USAFRICOM's Cutlass Express exercise, and American observers (along with some from New Zealand) were included in the Australia-India naval exercise. The American and Indian navies also undertook a group sail, with Japan and the Philippines, in the South China Sea recently.¹⁰ Such exercises provide the opportunity to understand each other's organisational structure and battle procedures, enabling jointness and interoperability. The Indian Navy and the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) are also set to deepen their maritime cooperation in the Western Indian Ocean, where Chinese presence, in island nations and strategic ports such as Gwadar and Djibouti, are of concern to India.¹¹ Thus, India-US defence ties focus on a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from intelligence sharing to joint humanitarian and relief efforts, mutual port visits by naval ships, joint exercises, trade in military hardware, and the co-production and co-development of military systems. These engagements with the USA as well as other foreign powers are intended to enable Indian forces to work closely with foreign counterparts, making it difficult for the Chinese military to dominate the region, especially during peacetime.

Indo-Pacific Alliance: Main Driver of the Defence Partnership

The current US administration has elevated the Indo-Pacific to a top level regional priority. It was the former US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, who had leveraged the potential of the concept in a speech on US-India relations. The 2017 National Security highlights American interests in the region, and puts India at the helm of its Indo-Pacific strategy. The strategy describes the Indo-Pacific as a region in which "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of [the] world order is taking place",

and where “China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda”¹². The 2018 US National Defence Strategy also describes China as a strategic competitor, declaring it explicitly a “revisionist power”.¹³ The strategy calls upon US allies in the region to work in tandem. It further sought to boost the quadrilateral cooperation (Quad) with Japan, Australia, and India. The strategy also emphasises the strengthening of defence ties with India.

In the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report published in June 2019, the US administration reiterated the importance of regional multilateralism by calling for “a more robust constellation of allies and partners”.¹⁴ Notably, the report is the first document of depth on the strategic mega region referred to as the Indo-Pacific which, in the US conception, ranges from the western coast of India to the west coast of the USA. Previously, the 2018 US National Defence Strategy called upon the allies for the equitable burden sharing to protect against common threats, stating that, “When we pool resources and share responsibility for our common defence, our security burden becomes lighter and more cost-effective.”¹⁵ The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report carved the role of India as a “regional guardian”, with the aim of building capability and acclimatising India to the USA’s Indo-Pacific goals.¹⁶ Even as the Indian Ocean region in the Indo-Pacific has not been exploited to its full potential, there is a strong Pacific bias. In this regard, Southeast Asia is a primary theatre of interest. The Indo-Pacific report describes Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia as crucial nations for ensuring stability and economic growth in the broader region. In this regard, the USA is looking at India’s Look East policy as meeting the US rebalance strategy in the Southeast Asia and a greater India-US convergence in South Asia.¹⁷ The USA recently renamed its Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) - an acknowledgement of the seamless connectivity that binds the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as India’s growing importance. The USA is trying to expand interoperability with allies and partners to “ensure that our respective defence enterprises can work together effectively during day-to-day competition, crisis, and conflict.”¹⁸ The USA is taking steps with regard to India so that it grows more comfortable with such bilateral military cooperation. On its part, New Delhi has been feverish about its strategic autonomy; this continues to drive policy debates. Therefore, while India is increasingly getting warm when it comes to consulting and coordinating with the USA on matters of shared concern, it is more comfortable to operate in parallel rather than in a joint set-up to achieve coordination and the benefits of mutual cooperation.

Challenges to India-US Defence Cooperation

Willingness to be a regional guardian?

As mentioned earlier, the US-India defence cooperation is the consequence in large part of growing Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. India shares US worry in this regard, and has been closely monitoring Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese submarines have been operating in the region, and Beijing is striking deals with seaports in what experts describe as the Chinese “string of pearls” against India. These “commercial” seaports can, in the future, be potentially used for military purposes.¹⁹ India has refused to be a part of the Chinese ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Yet, it does not prefer an open confrontation with China. In fact, India has been trying semi-formal or informal channels - such as the ‘Wuhan Spirit’ or ‘Chennai Connect’ - along with more formal approaches to solve long standing issues. The idea is to mitigate Sino-India challenges. This stands somewhat in contrast to Washington’s increasingly confrontational attitude towards Beijing. India has made clear that, even with shared values, it is autonomous enough to pursue a different approach to China as well as other regional issues.²⁰

Capability to be a net security provider?

Since the last two decades, there has been an assumption that India is/can emerge as a great Asian power. While India’s development has been unprecedented, it has not yet closed the gap with China’s military and economic might. During the Obama’s administration, India was the ‘linchpin’ in the US pivot to Asia. It was expected that India will take the role of a net security provider. However, currently, India has been involved in its domestic economic and national security issues. India’s military modernisation has been pending even as there are plans to infuse US\$ 130 billion to bolster the combat capabilities of the armed forces.²¹ These, if implemented with full vigour, will still take at least five to seven years to reach fruition. China’s recent military modernisation has further widened the gap.²²

Relations with Other Countries

The shadow on India-US defence collaboration has been India’s relations with countries like Iran, Venezuela, and Russia as well as US relations with Pakistan. India has accepted some costs (such as US sanctions against Iranian oil imports) in exchange for US accommodation of India’s priority

(such as the completion of the Chahabar port project). However, India's continued reliance on Russia regarding key defence exports such as the decision to purchase S-400 long range surface to air missile systems has been a red flag for the US administration. The Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) (passed by Congress in 2017 and intended to target Iran and Russia) could potentially be used against India as well. Sanctions under the CAATSA range from the denial of visas to persons who are party to the S-400 contract to severe action such as the denial of munitions licences to India. This could have negative implications for future interoperability between the two nations as well as high end defence cooperation and sales. India's strategic autonomy can have a bearing on the extent both the countries would converge over geostrategic developments in the Indo-Pacific. Notably, India has signed deals with Moscow for leasing a nuclear submarine, a manufacturing facility for Kalashnikov rifles, and the production or purchase of frigates. These four deals, worth over US\$ 12 billion (with additional deals being contemplated), would count as "significant transactions" under the CAATSA.²³ Interestingly, these deals come in the wake of Moscow's strengthening relations with Beijing and Islamabad.²⁴

Trade Issues

US President Donald Trump cares about trade deeply, making it one of the most vexing issues in the relationship. In the last few years, trade, investment and immigration have become front running issues. India's stance on matters regarding data localisation, e-commerce regulations, and price caps on pharmaceutical imports has also added concerns in US businesses. The USA also ended India's trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences. Even though that affects meagre US\$ 5.5 billion of Indian exports, it has not gone down well on the Indian side. On its part, the Modi government has also imposed retaliatory tariffs. The attempt on the part of the Trump administration to raise trade issues even with allies and partners shows that the USA is not willing to let go of small time economic concessions in the hope of garnering long term strategic alliances.

Differing Conceptions of the Indo-Pacific

For the USA, the Indo-Pacific spans from the west coast of India in the Indian Ocean to the west coast of the United States in the Pacific Ocean. In contrast, India, regards "Indo" to denote the whole of the Indian Ocean, stretching from South Africa to Australia. The western Indian Ocean - including

the Persian Gulf - is arguably the most strategically important sub region of India's Indo-Pacific but does not feature in the US conception of the same.²⁵ This difference in conception also signals the different priorities of both the countries. While the USA wants India to play a more strategic role in the Pacific Ocean, India wants to give more priority to the Indian Ocean.

Bureaucratic Measures on Both the Sides

Many leaders on the US side - such as Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Ashton Carter, James Mattis, etc. - have advocated greater ties with India. However, with the exits of many of these, India has lost some important advocates at the Cabinet level. On India's part, the Minister of External Affairs, Subramanyam Jaishankar, has been Indian Ambassador to the USA and China, and has been tasked with managing relations with both the countries. However, both the sides need leaders at the senior level, with an appreciation of the strategic dimensions of the bilateral relationship. Apart from this, both the nations, especially India, needs to clear up bureaucratic bottlenecks that do not allow fast decision making.

Recommendations

Operationalising Agreements and Sharing Expertise

While the LEMOA and the COMCASA have been concluded and MDP status accorded to India, these have not fully been channelised. These agreements need to be operationalised, and BECA and ISA need to be concluded fast. Apart from this, attention needs to be paid to more defence exchanges, military exercises, training, planning, and military education. There is need for technology cooperation and information transfers on areas relating to maritime domain awareness, undersea domain awareness, anti-submarine warfare, and integrated air and missile defence.

HADR operations strengthened

For both India and the USA, working together in disaster relief and humanitarian intervention is a way to jointly garner influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The region is prone to disasters, and both the countries are skilful in responding to humanitarian emergencies at home and abroad. Australia, Japan, India, and the USA played an anchor role in the 2004 Tsunami response after which the idea of Quad germinated. HADR will help them in coordinating disaster response planning and training. It will enhance information and data sharing

and build interoperability, and help operationalise foundational agreements like the LEMOA. Above all, it will demonstrate to sceptics and adversaries alike, the Good Samaritan values of the USA and Indian militaries.

Enhancing Co-production

Defence relations between the two countries can reach new heights once the buyer-seller relationship can be replaced with co-production. These will help India become a regional defence export hub. It will also provide an alternative to Chinese and Russian arms. For this, DTTI and MDP need to be reinvented so that joint research, development, and production can be conducted.

Conclusion

As India and the USA grapple with the emerging security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, both are looking at each other for a stronger defence partnership. In the last 20 years, the USA has been incrementally increasing its strategic bets on India. This has been due to the recognition of the importance of the Indo-Pacific for global trade, commerce, and security. Both the countries acknowledge that developments in this region will shape the larger trajectory of the rules-based international order. The USA and India maintain a broad-based strategic partnership, underpinned by shared interests, democratic values, and strong people-to-people ties. This has resulted in the strengthening of India-US ties. Between 2013 and 2017, American arms sales to India have increased by more than 500 percent, and India has become one of the most important non-NATO allies for the USA. The establishment of the US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in September 2018 also serves as a tangible demonstration of the ties. However, despite the hope that India will act as a “regional guardian” or a “US ally” in the Pacific biased Indo-Pacific, India has shown a preference for multipolarity and a more flexible style in dealing with China. For critics this could mean an “Indian fatigue”²⁶ in the USA. It is, therefore, important for both the countries to relax expectations, and keep the groundwork going for keeping the strategic partnership in momentum, even if it moves slowly.

Notes :

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