

Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S. - India Defense Partnership

The Past, Present, and Future of India-U.S. Defense Relations

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India-U.S. cooperation has the potential to be a force for good in the post-pandemic global world order. The engagement between the world's largest and the oldest democracy has overcome the hesitations of history. In the twenty-first century, the evolution of India-U.S. defense relations has been particularly noteworthy.

Over the years, the nuclear deal, India's designation as a Major Defense Partner of the U.S., and strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific region have taken the strategic relationship to new heights. Given the current trajectory, India-U.S. defense relations hold the promise of being one of the firmest pillars of a robust bilateral relationship.

Introduction

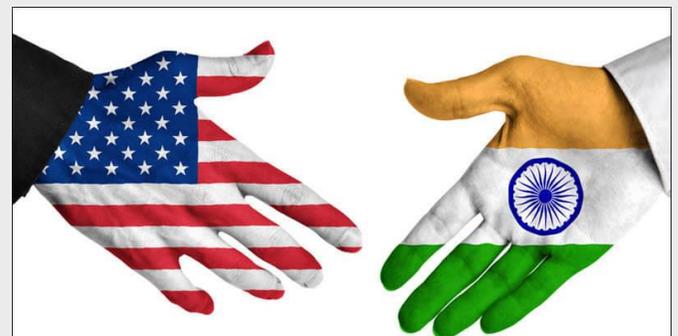
During his confirmation hearing, U.S. Ambassador-Designate to India Eric Michael Garcetti remarked that *"Today, the fundamental [strategic partnership](#) is firmly ingrained in both Washington and New Delhi. Twenty years ago, President Biden...called for a new and ambitious vision of U.S.-Indian ties...that strong new chapter is upon us"*.

India and the U.S. are [natural partners](#) with shared values of democracy, freedom, the rule of law and a broad convergence on geopolitical interests. Cooperation between the world's largest democracy and oldest democracy is the need of the twenty-first century to ensure a peaceful global order and protection of the global commons.

Historically, India-U.S. relations have had rough patches, often described as the "hesitations of

history". However, a close relationship has been developed in the last 20 years due to the end of the Cold War and the emergence of China as a major power.

The signing of the India-U.S. nuclear agreement in 2005, designation of India as a Major Defense Partner of the U.S. in 2016, a culmination of the signing of all four foundational agreements in 2020, and an overall convergence of interests in the Indo-Pacific have set the stage for broad-based India-U.S.



defense relations. The past two decades have seen the bilateral defense partnership come of age.

Hence, this Briefing Paper looks into 'The Past, Present, and Future of India-U.S. Defense Relations. The paper is structured as follows. Section – I briefly surveys the first five decades of the bilateral defense relationship from India's independence in 1947 till the mid-2000s. Section – II encapsulates the evolution of the strategic relationship in the past two decades.

Section – III takes a long view ahead, assessing what the winding road through the next three decades in India-U.S. defense ties may look like.

Post-Independence till the Mid-2000s

The initial phase of bilateral engagement between India and the U.S. as independent nation-states was shaped by the world order of bipolarity. While the U.S. was leading the Western Bloc, Indian foreign policy emphasised "non-alignment", according to which India would join neither the Western bloc nor the Eastern bloc.

Despite India's stated policy of non-alignment, as a responsible democratic power, it cooperated with the U.S. at crucial junctures, contributing to efforts to prevent the Cold War from escalating into a hot war.

One such instance was the Korean War (1950-53), which saw an early example of India-U.S. defense cooperation. During the war, the Indian government [cautioned](#) the U.S. of forthcoming Chinese entry into the conflict and warned about the probable threat to the U.S. troops.

At the United Nations, India and the U.S. worked together to denounce the aggression against South Korea. India sent the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance Platoon to the Korean Peninsula [to support](#) the United Nations forces, which included U.S. troops. The 1950s also witnessed defense trade between the two countries, and one of the major



highlights was the procurement of [Fairchild C- 119](#) transport aircraft by India from the US.

The 1960s saw the Congo crisis escalating steadily, with many prominent leaders being assassinated amidst the peace process. India sent a large contingent of soldiers as part of the UN Peacekeeping Force, also consisting of U.S. troops. A full [army brigade of 5,000 soldiers](#) – the first contingent flown from the Indian subcontinent to Africa by the U.S. Air Force – was committed to the mission in Congo.

With the outbreak of the India-China war in 1962, the U.S. intervened militarily to [provide air support](#) against the Chinese. However, before major warships were to [take off](#) from the U.S. coasts, China declared a ceasefire.

U.S. [military aid](#) of US\$500mn was sanctioned for India in the context of the Indo-China war. This was to facilitate a five-year programme that would help equip six Indian mountain divisions with better communications, transportation, air defense capabilities and assist Indian defense industries.

The nuclear power plant at Tarapur outside Bombay was built as a [showpiece of the aid project](#) and was a major element in India-U.S. nuclear cooperation.

The Indian nuclear test in Pokhran in 1974 created a rift in India-U.S. relations, and it took significant effort to get the relationship back on track. It was not until the signing of [the Delhi Declaration](#) in 1978 that relations were reinstated,

with both sides affirming their shared belief in democracy, economic development and peaceful settlement of disputes.

By 1982, there were renewed talks on India-U.S. [arms trade](#) focusing on 155 ram howitzers and TOW (Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided) anti-tank missiles. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on sensitive technology exports was signed to overcome obstacles in transferring technology from the U.S. to India.

In 1984, India and the U.S. agreed on a speedier review of the export of controlled items, aiming to create mutually beneficial indigenous defense production capabilities. By 1998 [stronger relations](#) were emerging between both countries.

FACT BOX

Lt. Gen. Claude M. Kicklighter is a former commander of the U.S. Army in the Pacific. As early as 1991, he made many proposals to intensify defense and military cooperation between India and the U.S.

They called for reciprocal visits of Chiefs of Army Staff, conducting strategic symposiums annually that will see participation by India and U.S. armies, establish an executive steering committee to review, refine and redefine the agreed-upon goals and objectives, exchange of staff, staff information exchanges for the reciprocal flow of information, training for commandoes and mutual participation in regional conferences to improve the ability to work together.

Source: <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/3791941>

India-U.S. defense relations witnessed significant progress with the [1991 Kicklighter Proposals](#). Another setback and a fresh [rift in relations](#) occurred with India's nuclear test in 1998 (Pokhran II). However, the beginning of the new century saw bilateral ties flourish, especially in

defense cooperation. A greater engagement between New Delhi and Washington had begun by the early 2000s.

Terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001, and against the Indian Parliament in December of the same year, precipitated a rapid thaw in the overall relationship. Responding to India's offers of assistance following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government [waived the sanctions](#) imposed on India due to its nuclear tests. Both countries recognised the challenge posed to national and global security by the threat of terrorism.

These developments gave new impetus to bilateral defense relations, leading to the [signing](#) of foundational military agreements in the years ahead. The first agreement to be signed was the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in January 2002, which provided [specific measures](#) to ensure security standards and sharing of critical information. Subsequently, the [High Technology Cooperation Group](#) (HTCG) and [Next Steps in Strategic Partnership](#) (NSSP) were established in 2002 and 2004.

Overall, the period between 1950s to 2000s had been tumultuous, but it set the stage for India-U.S. defense cooperation in the upcoming years. In a world that was confronting increasing global security threats, the initiation of the signing of foundational agreements further paved the way for greater bilateral engagement.

The Mid-2000s till 2020

July 18, 2005, marked a turning point in India-U.S. ties. On this day, the joint vision statement setting out the future of the bilateral relationship was issued. It was long and detailed, pinpointing areas of focus that ranged from economic development to cooperation in high technology and space.

There was also a paragraph where the U.S. agreed to enable full civil nuclear energy

cooperation and trade with India. The India-U.S. nuclear agreement of 2005 represents a significant milestone in bilateral relations.

The agreement was a direct consequence of the U.S. recognising India as a [major power pole](#) in the coming century. For its part, India demonstrated its steadfast commitment towards non-proliferation.



Step by step, India aligned its [export control](#) framework with the required mandates of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), despite not being granted membership of these groupings. The U.S. successfully [took up](#) India's case at the NSG to facilitate a waiver for New Delhi to engage in global civil nuclear trade.

From its beginnings in 2005 to its culmination in 2008, India's integration into the civil nuclear trade architecture was aided by the [growing strategic convergence](#) between India and the U.S. The steady high-level engagement sparked the development of new programmes, dialogues, and agreements that have further bolstered bilateral defense cooperation since 2005.

Prominent among these are the New Framework for Defense Cooperation (NFDC) in 2005 and the 2012 [Defense Technology and Trade Initiative](#) (DTTI). DTTI was conceptualised as an initiative for defense co-production, thereby marking a shift from the traditional 'buyer-seller' dynamic. These agreements were further [renewed](#) in 2015.

India-U.S. defense relations underwent a paradigm shift in 2016. That year witnessed the signing of the second foundational agreement, the [Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement](#)

(LEMOA), and the designation of India as a [Major Defense Partner](#) (MDP) of the U.S. [MDP status](#) resulted from two decades of sustained focus and growing ambition between the two sides. It provided a template for engagement between two geopolitical partners whose cooperation remains critical to the security and management of the global commons.

The MDP designation is [unique to India](#). It provides a strategic framework for India-U.S. engagement in the defense sector and elevates New Delhi to a position similar to Washington's closest allies and partners. MDP offers a [flexible strategic framework](#) that can anticipate, evolve and enable strategic cooperation.

The MDP status amended the U.S. export control laws, facilitating smooth transfer of technologies and arms to India. Indian and American companies in India can seek Validated End-User (VEU) status for civil and military manufacturing. Companies acquiring such status will no longer require individual licensing, which will enable a quick response to changing market conditions.

The MDP designation expedited the signing of the remaining foundational agreements and elevated India to [Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier-1](#) (STA-1) status. STA-1 enabled India to receive licence-free access to dual-use and military technologies.

Over the years, the designation has enhanced the defense partnership between countries across the full spectrum - sharing logistics, military information, cooperation in advanced military technologies, and multilateral frameworks.

The two countries signed the third foundational agreement, the Communication and Information on Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) in the form of an India specific version called the [Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement](#) (COMCASA) in 2018. COMCASA ensures technological interoperability between the two militaries and provides high-end technology

from the U.S. to India. The last foundational defense agreement was signed in 2020.

The [Basic Exchange and Communications Agreement](#) (BECA) enables the sharing of high-end military technology, access to classified geospatial data and classified satellite data.

Foundational Agreements	Objectives	Year
General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)	Allows the sharing of classified information by the U.S. government and firms with the Indian government and state-owned enterprises.	2002
Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)	Gives the two countries' militaries access to each other's facilities for refuelling and replenishing.	2016
Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)	Allows the sale and exchange of encrypted communications data and equipment.	2018
Basic Exchange and Communications Agreement (BECA)	Enables the two countries to share advanced satellite data for long-range navigation and missile targeting.	2020

Within broad-ranging and diverse areas of bilateral engagement, the defense relationship has emerged as a key pillar of India-U.S. relations. In the defense field, there are extensive dialogue mechanisms such as the Military Cooperation Group (MCG), Defense Joint Working Group (DJWG), Service-to-Service Executive Steering Groups (ESGs), Joint Technical Group (JTG), Defense Policy Group (DPG), Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) and the 2+2 dialogue.

Overall, there is an increase in U.S. defense sales to India, which grew to [US\\$3.4bn in 2020 from US\\$6.2mn in 2019](#). The DTTI has significantly contributed towards easing defense trade and creating opportunities for co-production and co-development of defense equipment.

As noted by the [11th DTTI Group meeting](#), an agreement for Air-Launched Unmanned Aerial Vehicle was signed within just one year. In the multi-sectoral cooperation between India and the U.S., the defense sector is the most [successful](#) sector of partnership, and the key to this is the bilateral defense trade.

Political views in the two countries have generally favored a deeper bilateral partnership - one of the few issues on which there is a broad bipartisan consensus today in both countries. Frequent high-level exchanges, delegations and meetings are testimony to this, and there are currently [50 plus bilateral dialogue mechanisms](#) between the governments. India and the U.S. each undertake more joint bilateral military exercises than with any other partner country.

The period between the mid-2000s-2020 witnessed a transformation in India-U.S. relations. The MDP status and signing of all foundational agreements have made India an important defense partner of the U.S. The shift in geopolitical attention to the Indo-Pacific has made India-U.S. strategic and defense relations even more relevant in the present context.

India-U.S. Military Exercises	Description	Year
Malabar Exercise	The exercise began in 1992 and has been held annually since 2002	1992
Vajra Prahar	Bilateral exercise between Indian and U.S. Special Forces	2002
Tarkash	Bilateral counterterrorism training exercise	2015
Cope India	Bilateral air combat exercise	2002
Yudh Abhyas	Bilateral annual army exercise	2003
Shatrujeet	Bilateral semi-regular ground field training exercise	2005
Habu Nag	Cooperation between the navies of India and the U.S. for facilitating humanitarian aid and disaster relief	2007
Tiger Triumph	Joint engagement between the Indian tri-service and the U.S. Navy	2018
Carrier Strike Group Passage Exercise	Indian Navy and Air force with the U.S. Navy to integrate maritime operations	2021

Source: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/operations/11>

Looking Ahead: 2020-2050

The recent progress on defense and security ties between the U.S. and India, building on many years of history, has contributed to the safety of their citizens and the Indo-Pacific region. The coming three decades between 2020 and 2050 are crucial for the growing India-U.S. defense relationship. The status of this relationship will be a deciding factor in the shaping of security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.

The security architecture developing around the Indo-Pacific necessitates and thus, facilitates stronger India-U.S. defense relations. Unilateral Chinese politics and policies challenge the [security umbrella](#) established post-second world war in the Indo-Pacific. This has led to the development of a new security architecture in the region.

The need for an open, free and rules-based Indo-Pacific region is being internationally recognised. The region holds importance as it encompasses half of the world's population, [60 percent of the global maritime trade and global GDP](#), thereby necessitating the merging of security and strategic interests to ensure a peaceful Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, recent years have seen various joint exercises like [Vajra Prahar](#), [Cope India](#) and [Yudh Abhyas](#) being undertaken.

Advocacy for the Indo-Pacific as an '[arc of prosperity](#)' by Shinzo Abe in 2007, Hillary Clinton in 2011, Tony Abbott and Manmohan Singh in 2013 finally manifested in the [formation of the Quadrilateral Dialogue \(Quad\)](#).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic revived the Quad, as the region grappled with multi-dimensional challenges, including supply chain crises and aggressive assertions by China leading to a refocusing of security initiatives. The effects of such a multi-level crisis were very evident in the Indo-Pacific. A summit-level meeting of the Quad was held, which has pro-actively pushed for many

significant deliverables. These cover [three main areas of focus](#).

First, improving the well-being of people through steps like the Quad vaccine initiative. Second, cooperating on issues such as cyber security and emerging technologies like 5G. Third, other collaborative initiatives, such as a fellowship programme.



The U.S. recognises [security threats](#) faced by India from China in its continental and maritime domains. While the formulation of initiatives like the Quad aid in safeguarding maritime security, there still lies significant potential in India-U.S. cooperation concerning India's land border security.

Similarly, larger economic and security concerns challenge the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Further, the region remains [economically dependent](#) on China to a large extent, which China often takes advantage of, posing an innate challenge. A bilateral, trilateral or multilateral initiative which offers economic alternatives through infrastructural and development projects needs to be actively pursued.

Drawing on the shared principles and the strong commitment to each other's mutual progress, India and the U.S. should expand their security and defense partnership further. Facing common threats and challenges, such as China's efforts to alter borders unilaterally and disrupt the rules-based international order, regional and global terror networks, drug traffickers and malicious cyber

actors, both the countries have to further enhance interoperability and cooperation among their defense and security forces.

Prosperity and development require security. As nations that have a significant stake in the development of the Indo-Pacific, India and the U.S. should expand their collaborative mechanisms to enhance security, both bilaterally and through other initiatives such as the Quad. There also exist other larger, cross-cutting areas for the two countries to expand their partnership to be well-equipped to deal with tomorrow's threats.

a). Collaboration in developing defense technology and third-party trade

New tools such as advanced drones are being employed regularly by adversaries of both countries. The countries in the Indo-Pacific face an increased security threat from China. Therefore, one major exploration area is developing and manufacturing advanced defense technology systems, aiming for enhanced third-party defense trade with other countries in the Indo-Pacific.

Joint start-ups in defense technology can be a good step in this direction. They will provide an opportunity for the fledgling Indian defense sector start-ups to better commercialise their emerging technologies, and earn both profits and expertise.

b). Conduct joint and combined exercises and exchanges

To build synergy, inter-operability and habits of cooperation, more joint, bilateral and combined exercises and exchanges can be organised between the two countries. More exercises should be organised annually, such as the recently held maiden tri-service exercise 'Tiger Triumph' which focused on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and amphibious operations.

c). Assessment of future threats

Both countries should jointly research the possible future threats and take an all-around analysis of the emerging threats. Once the threats are identified and mutually agreed upon, both countries can plan countermeasures. They can also jointly train and equip like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region in countering these emerging threats.

d). More joint training and training programmes

India and the U.S. should provide more opportunities to their military cadets and defense service staff for joint training at their premier military institutions. This will help build mechanisms of cooperation and cultivate mutual trust among the defense services of both countries.

e). Cyberwarfare capabilities

Both countries' nature and level of threats are evolving, and there are heightened challenges and threat perceptions in the cyber-security domain. In the context of a rapidly changing cyber-security architecture which requires advanced safety mechanisms, India and the U.S. should increase collaborations in developing security measures in the cyber defense and security domain.

Regular exchange of information about existing and potential threats, and sharing tools developed by each other to counter these threats will be mutually beneficial.

Conclusion

The broad-based India-U.S. bilateral partnership is a defining one that influences the global geopolitics and the Indo-Pacific in particular. The U.S. President well sums it up in a [remark](#) before a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister of India- "*I think that the relationship between India and the U.S., the largest democracies in the world, is destined to be stronger, closer, and tighter. And I think it can benefit the whole world*".

India-U.S. bilateral relations have developed into a global strategic partnership with increasing convergence on common interests. The consistent exchanges over the last decades have provided momentum to bilateral cooperation by shaping up dialogue architecture and frameworks between both countries.

This has shaped an expansive bilateral engagement agenda encompassing trade, education, environment, infrastructure, science and technology, civil nuclear energy, space technology, defense and security. Vibrant people to people ties across both countries, including an active diaspora, support such expanding ties.

The defense relationship is one of the defining aspects of this bilateral relationship which is moving upwards. This relationship will certainly face bumps and frictions as it expands and evolves. Still, all these should be overcome through active diplomatic engagements and both countries should continue expanding their security partnership.

As leading democracies in the Indo-Pacific, and indeed the world, both countries should be prepared to ensure that nations in the Indo-Pacific have the opportunity to thrive in a rules-based international order.