



Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S.-India Defense and Security Partnership

Dialogues on Deliverables to Deliveries

21
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1000 – 1545 hours (IST)
Hotel Lemon Tree Premier
Mumbai International Airport, Mumbai

WORKSHOP REPORT

Summary

With the inauguration of the Age of Reforms in India in 1990, Indian Foreign Policy has imbibed a distinct pro-liberalization stance that manifested itself in altered mutual perceptions on the part of both India and the United States. In subsequent years, India's designation as a Major Defense Partner of the U.S., signing of foundational defense-related agreements, and a large number of joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region have taken the U.S.-India Defense and Security Partnership to new heights.

The geopolitical attention to the Indo-Pacific region in recent years and related geo-strategic and geo-economic developments such as the coming together of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. into a Quadrilateral group, and the initiation of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, have further reinforced this partnership. This is corroborated by the Joint Statement of the United States and India following the official state visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the U.S. in June 2023 which highlighted inter alia the desire to secure a free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

Background & Context

Under the Defense News Conclave Project, supported by the U.S. Consulate General Kolkata and the U.S. Department of State, CUTS International is organizing five workshops covering consular districts of the U.S. Consulate Generals. They aim to create a group of informed stakeholders in India to strengthen the U.S.-India Defense and Security Partnership by generating the necessary awareness among diverse media professionals and relevant stakeholders. Each workshop is designed to consist of two sessions focusing on good practices of the U.S.-India Defense and Security Partnership in general and its relevance for the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific region in particular.

Through these exercises an attempt is made to look at the milestones set and achieved, and policies and gaps to be addressed in order to secure a free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

Introduction

The workshop was flagged off by Greg Pardo, Spokesperson for US Consulate General, Mumbai, who in his welcome address highlighted the exponential growth in the US-India relationship over the last couple of decades. In this context, he referred to the advancements and cooperative efforts in counter-terrorism, human rights, science, technology, trade, and defense.

He appreciated the progress in this domain as a result of deepening cooperation between the two nations, including joint exercises, information sharing, logistics networks, and interoperability. Referring to initiatives like the US-India Industrial Cooperation Initiative, Indus X, IDEX, ICET, and their focus on defense acceleration ecosystems, Pardo called for the inclusion of universities and institutions in order to foster innovation and develop technology that would be beneficial for both national security and society at large.

Delivering the keynote address, **Rear Admiral Michael Baker**, Senior Defense Official and Defense Attaché at the U.S. Embassy, New Delhi outlined the evolution of the US-India defense partnership across three pivotal lanes: defense industrial cooperation, contemporary operational partnership, and other emerging domains all of which have contributed to the robust proportions of the partnership at present.

Highlighting the strategic significance of this relationship, backed by high-level engagements between Prime Minister Modi and President Biden, Rear Admiral Baker pointed out that the defense industrial cooperation roadmap, endorsed by both nations, aims to integrate and accelerate collaboration of the defense sectors of the two nations.

Groundbreaking collaborations, such as co-producing high-end jet engines in India, emphasize the trust and cooperation between the countries. Among the partnership's achievements are joint efforts in ground mobility systems and opportunities in munitions, intelligence, surveillance, and underwater domain awareness systems, he added. This partnership he concluded, is poised to be a durable one as it seeks to expand into new areas such as space, cyber, and logistics support, showcasing joint efforts in space technology, AI, and cyber defense.

Delivering the second keynote address of the session, **Vice Admiral Girish Luthra (Retd.)**, former Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Naval Command laid a comprehensive roadmap for the two countries and spoke about the substantial progress in the realm of defense cooperation, especially in terms of exercises, joint initiatives, and strategic alignments in the Indo-Pacific region. However, he stated the India-US partnership lags in the realm of defense technology and industrial trade.

Pointing out the absence of concrete projects in respect of co-development and co-production despite efforts since 2013 under the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), Luthra urged a shift from delivering mere agreements (deliverables) to actual projects and products (deliveries) in the defense industry.

Highlighting the challenges ahead, he emphasized the need for joint design and development, intellectual property rights, quality standards, and addressing export-related complexities. He underlined the importance of private sector involvement, trust-building for sharing sensitive technologies, and the ongoing importance of interoperability between the armed forces.

Session I: U.S.-India Cooperation in Next Level Warfare

Chair & Moderator

- **Rahesha Sehgal**, Anchor, WION News

Panelists

- **Lt. Gen. Subrata Saha** (Retd.), Former Deputy Chief of Army Staff
- **Lt. Gen. Sanjay Verma** (Retd.), Former Director General Weapons and Equipment, Ministry of Defence and Consultant, DRDO
- **Alaric Diniz**, Partner, Aerospace & Defence, Deloitte, India
- **Sandhya Sharma**, Editor, Technology Policy and Foreign Policy, ET Prime

This session focussed on growing hybrid warfare, with no universally accepted definition, which involves varied methods for optimal conflict gains in the contemporary changing geopolitical landscape.

It underscored the need for a comprehensive, urgent, and robust partnership between the US and India to effectively navigate the complexities and challenges of 21st-century warfare.

The session addressed the evolving geopolitical threats such as China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the Israel-Hamas war, emphasizing the importance of preparedness amidst this complex global landscape.

‘Grey zone’ warfare

India's "grey zone" warfare with China has led to the emergence of non-contact warfare, emphasizing the threats to space assets, cyber vulnerabilities, and the development of autonomous systems as key concerns for future conflicts.

No country in the world is capable of combating these emerging threats single-handedly and therefore the urgency of collaborative partnerships among like-minded nations, particularly between the US and India, to counteract these evolving challenges is deemed crucial.

Also, it is of utmost importance to leverage partnerships and innovative technologies to address threats that transcend conventional military domains, including financial weapons as a form of mass destruction.

Importance of Comprehensive Frameworks

India and the US need to align strategically and technologically, and there is an urgency to leverage collaborations across sectors, including cybersecurity, telecommunications, and space, to address evolving challenges and capitalize on joint technological advancements.

Pointing out the limitations of the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the speakers emphasized the broader and more inclusive approach of the Critical and Emerging Technologies Initiative (iCET) as a framework for encouraging collaboration across various sectors, including academia, industry, and defence.

Challenges in Technology Collaboration

The US-India defense partnership faces challenges in co-production, technology development, and absorption of failures in the development cycle. There are existing collaborations in cybersecurity between India and the US, focusing on joint efforts in Quantum research, AI, and securing telecommunications infrastructure through the Open Radio Access Network (ORAN).

There is a need for India to align its industry standards and infrastructure with the US while highlighting the potential for joint research in areas like Quantum, AI, and Advanced VIES (Virtual, Immersive, Augmented, and Enhanced Systems) Technologies.

Like technology, the space sector has been an arena for historical collaborations between India and the US and the signing of the Artemis Accords earlier this year clearly points to the potential for increased collaboration between the two countries. There are also provisions for greater involvement of the private sector in civil space programs for more impactful outcomes.

Evolving Industrial Landscape

Indian defense policy shifts, evolving industrial landscape, and the promising future of collaboration with the US in the Aerospace and Defense sectors underscores the need for deliveries and tangible outcomes in keeping with the rising collaboration.

Indian Industry, particularly the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Aerospace and Defense has witnessed a phenomenal transition from catering to Public Sector Units (PSU's) to becoming an integral part of the global supply chain, emphasizing their shift towards a global positioning.

The country needs to build resilient and reliable supply chains, especially concerning geopolitical risks and adversarial supply chains at lower tiers, and this also suggests the need for alternative solutions and domestic industrial support.

There are positive prospects and collaborative opportunities with the US, especially with recent developments like 100% FDI in defense and the participation in manufacturing GE-414 engines and Predator drones, which indicate an optimistic take-off and future for India-US collaboration.

Countering Mis/Disinformation

The role of technology in warfare and information dissemination is crucial. It is important to discuss the growing significance of strategic technology collaborations between India and the US in countering emerging geopolitical challenges.

Complexities of contemporary warfare, such as hybrid warfare are compounded by challenges posed by disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, deep fakes, and the anonymity that technology engenders. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure careful verification of information in the fast-paced world of journalism.

Besides, technology is of great significance in geopolitics, especially in tracking real-time events using geo-imaging tools. The existence of around 300 start-ups in India working in the domain of strategic technology and the potential for collaborative efforts between the two nations was held to be of vital importance.

The Chinese military is focused on AI and autonomous technologies, and this clearly points to the need for India-US collaboration in dual-use technologies for addressing such developments.

Session II: Significance of U.S.-India Naval Collaboration

Chair & Moderator

- **KP Vijayalakshmi**, Professor & Head, Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal University

Panelists

- **Cmde. Srikant B Kesnur** (Retd.), Former Director of the Maritime Warfare Center in Mumbai
- **Cmde. Mukesh Bhargava** (Retd.), Deputy Chairman, Defence & Aerospace Committee, FICCI Gujarat and Senior Advisor, Defence & Aerospace Committee, CM Madhya Pradesh
- **Capt. Nikunj Parashar** (Retd.), founder, Sagar Defence Engineering Pvt. Ltd.

- **Shrikant Paranjpe**, Honorary Adjunct Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Savitribai Phule Pune University

The second session highlighted the comprehensive roadmap for Indo-US relations, emphasizing the sustained and enduring partnership between the two nations. The discussion centers on naval collaboration, acknowledging the strategic importance of the seas in geopolitics. The relationship has metamorphosed over several decades from being considered "strange democracies" to a 'comprehensive global partnership', notably marked most notably by the 2008 nuclear deal.

Historical Interconnectedness and Interdependence

Indo-US naval collaboration is deemed crucial for strengthening core capabilities in the contested Indo-Pacific region. The strategic bet placed by the US on India is acknowledged, emphasizing India's role as a rising power in a multi-polar world.

Delving into the historical context of Indo-US naval relations, one encounters intriguing trivia about the connection between Mazagon Dock and the US's HMS Minden. Transitioning to the immediate past, the discussion turns to a pivotal moment in 1964 when India sought submarines from the US post the China war, and this evoked a strategic shift towards Russian procurement. The Enterprise incident in 1971 is mentioned, marking a turning point. Exercise Malabar is highlighted as a key factor fostering Indo-US naval collaboration, which helped to overcome the stresses and strains of the Cold War. The Tsunami response in 2005 becomes a watershed moment, one that showcased the potential and capability of the Indian Navy in influencing bilateral relations.

Role of MSMEs in fostering Joint Partnerships

The three key events that contributed to fostering joint partnerships between the two countries are: 1) the renewal of the Indian-US strategic partnership in 2015, 2) the elevation to tier one defense supplier in 2018, and 3) the significant role played by startups during the PM's visit to the US in 2023. Furthermore, emphasizing the shift from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region, aligning with the rise of the Pacific Rim and the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean have all provided an impetus to the Naval led defense industries.

MSMEs Challenges in Cooperation

The challenges faced in defense industry cooperation pertain mostly to issues of funding and ESG policies. However, the potential success stories emerging from the DIO (Defense India Startup Challenge) program, underscoring the need for policy changes to support the growth of startups and the defense industry in India and INDUS-X are encouraging beacons of hope under which solutions to the challenges faced by the defense industry can well be discerned.

US-India Defense Collaboration: Challenges

The speaker outlined three major problems in the context of Indo-US defense collaboration:

1. **Geopolitical Compulsions:**

- **Indian Ocean Region (IOR):** The speaker suggested that the US has limited relevance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) except for protecting trade routes. India's interests in the IOR are primarily related to securing its trade routes, and the Quad's focus on the Pacific may not align entirely with India's strategic priorities in the IOR.
- **South China Sea:** While the Quad initiative addresses concerns in the South China Sea, India's interests in the region are limited to trade routes. The extent of US support for Taiwan and India's focus on bilateral relations in managing border issues with China will be vital in this regard.

2. **Technology Transfer Challenges:**

- The concept of a "technology trap" highlights three challenges: denial of critical technology, high costs or sanctions on available technology, and the provision of obsolete or unnecessary technology. These challenges hinder India's ability to acquire advanced defense technologies.

3. **Perception Management and Soft Power:**

- The negative perceptions of the United States regarding the Indian mindset, influenced by historical factors and criticisms from American leaders, need to be checked via larger and widespread media literacy. Criticisms on issues such as India's nuclear policies, foreign relations, and diplomatic actions contribute to an unfavorable image which requires a bottom-up approach.

There is need for effective political communication and narrative building to manage these perceptions. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for building a positive and mutually beneficial Indo-US defense relationship.

The workshop concluded with an acknowledgment of the positive aspects of Indo-US relations through history. It reiterated the need for discussing a roadmap for industrial cooperation and highlighting the importance of addressing the manifold challenges pointed out in the course of the day, for even better defense collaborations in future.