

SWAYING THE STRATEGIC BELT: US-INDIA MILITARY PARTNERSHIP IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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Abstract

Washington's rebalancing approach towards the Asia-Pacific came in the form of a strategic reliance on New Delhi to counter Beijing's rise. The underlying strategic logic behind the Pivot to Asia-Pacific policy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report is shared economic and security interests between the US and India in addition to an indispensable Indian role as a major power in the region. Both India and the US carried out a major overhaul in their respective foreign policies while considering China as a common threat. Indian military modernisation and its recent military doctrines have been influenced by the US and are in line with Washington's policy trajectory. Recent Indo-US military agreements and defence deals have altered the traditional alliance structures in the region. India has gained access to conventional and disruptive technologies by using the American military hardware in the form of autonomous weapons, cyber technologies, innovative intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, etc. Moreover, by joining the US-led alliance, India has managed to increase its sphere of operations and outreach in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Washington's strategic altruism, putting all eggs into one basket, might prove beneficial in tackling the Chinese economic and strategic rise. However, it remains highly probable that once India positions

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itself into a specific threshold in the world order, it might become more proactive and aggressive, which would be more detrimental for the American national interest than for China. This is evident from its policies in South Asia, which are now evidently manifest in the Indian Ocean too.

Keywords: *Asia-Pacific, strategic partnership, autonomous weapons, Quad, military, nuclear weapons.*

Introduction

The signing of the first Indo-US Strategic Dialogue on 1 June 2010 not only changed the security outlook of South Asia but also transformed the global security landscape. The arrangement strengthened Indian role across the Asia-Pacific following the award of a title of 'an indispensable partner' by the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Former US President's avowal to the importance of the dialogue as "a defining partnership in the twenty-first century"¹ further reiterated the significance of India for the overall regional power (re)balancing. Asia-Pacific was termed as the engine for the growth of the United States in which India was selected as one of the emerging powers and partners for America in Hillary Clinton's article *America's Pacific Century*. Moreover, it was outlined that the two countries shared common values and interests, which served as the converging point for them. Indian *Look East Policy* was taken as a catalyst for safeguarding the interests of the two countries.² China's rise was taken as a mutual threat on which the two countries enhanced and further built their strategic partnership, encompassing collaboration in almost every arena, especially maritime, nuclear, and cyberspace domains. These developments were based on a multi-layered approach where the stand-alone significance of India covered one dimension, whereas its inclusion in bilateral and multilateral security arrangements concealed the national interests of the US, India, and other participating stakeholders. This research analyses how the US-India strategic relationship has transformed since 2010 while considering

various dimensions such as maritime military partnerships, cyberspace collaboration, technology transfer, etc.

Reconstructing the Asia-Pacific Strategic Belt

Initiation of the US-India strategic dialogue in June 2010 created a new bloc in international security architecture, which led to several tectonic shifts in the foreign and security policy of both the US and India. Shortly after the signing of the strategic dialogue, the Obama administration supported India in its bid for securing a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It also paved the way for several other Indo-US deals encompassing defence and trade. Similarly, the genesis of India-US nuclear cooperation can also be traced to this strategic partnership.³ A glaring aspect of this US-India strategic partnership includes the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) intended to strengthen global cybersecurity cooperation and countering terrorism. The MoU facilitated exchanges of cybersecurity information and expertise that were developed among the Department of Information Technology, Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, and the Department of Homeland Security's United States Computer Emergency Readiness Team (US-CERT).⁴

The US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2015 made public under the Obama administration announced the country's new *Pivot to Asia-Pacific* policy enabling the US and India to further build upon their relationship. The strategy called for unlocking the relationship and strengthening strategic and economic partnerships with India, supporting its role as a regional security provider.⁵ The 2015 NSS proved as a catalyst for both the countries to consolidate their cooperation in many areas.⁶ As discussed earlier, maritime cooperation remained one of the primary components of shared interests between India and the US, following which the two countries established core shared security principles in the domain under the 2015 *Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region*. The scope of the

strategic vision widened the nature of Indo-US cooperation and its associated operations. In addition, various agreements, including the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and the renewed Defence Framework Agreement further expanded the joint naval exercises by India and the US with increased emphasis on technology transfer and interoperability.⁷ In the Indian Ocean, the joint naval exercises focused on areas surrounding the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Chinese emergence in the Asia-Pacific remains of critical concern for the US and India as it has the potential to define the security architecture of the entire region. With its current trajectory of military outreach and technological advancement, China is seen to strategically transform Asia-Pacific into a Sino-centric region. The two countries further outlined that the growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea (SCS) and the IOR in terms of its increased naval presence is a challenge for both. To address any contingencies, the countries resolved to develop joint structures and mechanisms, which would include integration at the strategic level in addition to policy and working-level engagement.⁸

Indian Military Modernisation: The US as an Enabling Partner

The year 2016 marked another landmark strategic shift and victory in the US and Indian policies, as India was designated as a 'Major Defence Partner' by the US. This gave India additional access to American military and dual-use technologies. The country also received Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status (STA-I), allowing it to purchase the aforementioned technologies without the need for any license. America also engaged its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) processes to facilitate defence sales to India in which the role of COMCASA was crucial and was accorded great significance. Technologies such as aircraft, helicopters,

howitzers, gas turbine engines, and electronics have been sold to India through both FMS and DCS processes. Moreover, the agreements also included the service and maintenance of this defence equipment.⁹

COMCASA's scope of application has increased and continues to expand with time. It remains critical for the interoperability of Indian and American forces in the Asia Pacific,¹⁰ as a huge disparity of technological implementation remains between both the militaries. In 2018, it was announced that the US Central Command (CENTCOM) would provide greater access to India in its operations for which a new tri-service exercise was launched to increase operational coherence between the two militaries.¹¹

Trends in increased military cooperation between the two countries have witnessed gradual escalation because of India's role as a key security partner. Some of the key developments that took place in the year 2020 are shown in Table 1.

By including India in several multilateral security engagements, the US enabled the Indian military to not just develop new ties but also to further strengthen existing ties with several countries. This allowed India to get hold of advanced technologies and weapons. For example, India deployed robotic sentinels like SGR-A1 and the Super aEgis II jointly developed by Korea University and Samsung Techwin. These robots are capable of detecting border intrusions automatically. Super aEgis, additionally, is capable of auto-firing via a turret mounted on it.¹² Therefore, India has managed to exploit the linkages developed through the US for its national interests in addition to the common interests of India and the US.

Most recently, the US Department of State approved a possible foreign military sale of an Integrated Air Defence Weapon System (IADWS), which was requested by India. The Integrated Air Defence Weapon System (IADWS) approximately costs \$1.867 billion and includes 134 Stinger FIM-92L missiles, 118 AMRAAM AIM-120C-7/C-8 missiles, 5 AN/MPQ-64FI Sentinel radar systems, 4 AMRAAM Control

Sections and 3 AMRAAM Guidance sections. India takes this deal as an opportunity to modernise its air defences against any potential aerial threats. According to the US, this deal “would not alter the basic military balance in the region.”¹³

Table 1

Trends of Military Cooperation between India and the US in 2020

Intensified Collaboration in the IOR	
US joining of Milan Naval Exercise 2020	A multilateral naval exercise conducted by India stretching from the Straits of Malacca to Andaman and Nicobar Island.
Increased Indian Cooperation with the US Central and African Command	This increased the horizon of Indian operations as its navy was attached with US Indo-Pacific Command.
Enhanced Information Fusion	For maritime situational awareness, information exchanges were intensified for practical implementation.
Exercise Tiger Triumph	Both the countries announced annual tri-service military exercises.
Substantiating Security Partnerships	
Industrial Security Annex (ISA)	The signing of the ISA enabled the exchange of sensitive American defence technologies with the Indian private sector. It also involves the co-development of these technologies in future.
Installation of Communication Facilities	Secure communication links and facilities were established and installed for protecting the confidentiality of information of the two armies and air forces.

Source: Centre for Strategic and International Studies

Other weapons and technologies included in the deal are Electrical Optical/Infrared (EO/IR) Sensor Systems, Multi-spectral Targeting System-Model A (MTS-A), High Mobility Launchers (HML), Vehicle Mounted Stinger Rapid Ranger Air Defense Systems, Fire

Distribution Centers (FDC), Dual Mount Stinger (DMS) Air Defense Systems, thirty-two (32) M4A1 rifles, forty thousand three hundred twenty (40,320) M855 5.56mm cartridges, Handheld Remote Terminals, AMRAAM Non-Developmental Item-Airborne Instrumentation Units (NDI-AIU), Canister Launchers (CN); communications equipment; tool kits; test equipment; range and test programs; support equipment; prime movers; generators; technical documentation; computer-based training equipment; training equipment; training towers; ammunition storage; training and maintenance facilities; infrastructure improvements; US Government and contractor technical support, engineering and logistics support services; warranty services; Systems and Integration Checkout (SICO); field office support; and other related elements of logistics and program support.¹⁴

BECA and the Regional Security Mosaic: The Question of Compulsive Engagement

In the backdrop of the recent transformation of South Asian strategic dynamics, the US and India entered a new phase of their alliance with the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) on 27 October 2020. BECA re-routed the strategic course of action vis-à-vis military cooperation between Washington and New Delhi. Complemented by previous Indo-US defence agreements such as COMCASA, LEMOA, and GSOMIA,¹⁵ the scope and applicability of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) expanded and simultaneously reshaped the regional security mosaic. Formerly, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geospatial-Intelligence¹⁶ approved “the exchange of unclassified and controlled unclassified geospatial products, topographical, nautical and aeronautical data, products and services between India and the United States (US) National Geospatial Agency.”¹⁷

The two countries, under the US-India Defense Framework Agreement, further strengthened the Major Defense Partnership (MDP) in which Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) was recognised as a significant step to build the partnership. Moreover, the recent signing, in the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue held in 2020, redefined its scope and the spill-over effects of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in the maritime domain by including “maritime information sharing and maritime domain awareness” not only between the two navies but also provision of advanced real-time intelligence to the joint-services.¹⁸ Facilitated through agreement, with an enhanced Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) network, Indian armed forces would possess situational awareness spanning from strategic to battlefield level across the warfighting domains. In addition, advanced navigational aids, avionics, and associated logistics support would be entitled to the US aircraft supplied to New Delhi.¹⁹ Acting as a jumping pad for Indian armed forces, BECA also has the potential to improve Indian Geographical Information and Management Information Systems’ capability. An improvement of the aforesaid systems entails a boost in the accuracy of Indian autonomous weapon systems, automated hardware systems, and weapons including cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and, in the prospective scenario, armed drones as well.²⁰ Additionally, an upsurge of Indian investment in the strategic application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) assisted via BECA, in land, naval, aviation systems and nuclear, cyber and biological warfare,²¹ can broaden the usage of autonomous weapons and also result in their added lethality. Ultimately, the incorporation of autonomous weapons in military operations would embolden aggressive designs of the Indian armed forces.

The expected launch of the fifth geosynchronous Space-Based Infrared System satellite (SBIRS GEO-5) would enhance the ballistic missile launch detection capability of the US Space Force with

worldwide coverage. The activation of SBIRS GEO-5 would create a global security dilemma and intensify the international missile race. Moreover, it also possesses the potential to transform the security architecture to New Delhi's strategic advantage. This advantage entails giving New Delhi detection capability of ballistic missiles deployed (and if launched) from both Beijing and Islamabad.²² Indian possession of such technologies not only disturbs the power balance in the region but also widens the asymmetry of conventional weapons between Pakistan and India, consequently, lowering the nuclear threshold in South Asia.

The Partnership, Asian Rebalance, and China

Part of the grand American Pivot to Asia-Pacific policy remains to transform the Indian military policies in coherence with the US national interests. This entails multiple aspects, which are relative to time and space. For example, the tri-services doctrines of India are undergoing a major transformation for shifting reliance from Russia to the US. However, due to ongoing India-Russia defence deals, execution remains rather constrained. The following paragraphs discuss some of the key facets of the policy.

Firstly, although India and the US have put in resources and developed and engaged new mechanisms for facilitating their defence cooperation, the growth of their cooperation in terms of application has remained rather sluggish. It has been widely argued that since the initiation of the Indo-US Strategic Partnership, the gap between India and China on the economic and military front has remained static, if not widened. The economic capacity of India and its policies do not align with its operational plans. Both of these components are significant prerequisites to settle in with the American posture. On the other hand, Chinese military modernisation has widened the capability gap vis-à-vis that of India and the country remains unable to reverse it even with American support.²³

Secondly, the traditional relationship between India and Russia casts a dark shadow over the defence deals between India and the US. The presence of Russian political leverage and its roots in the Indian defence sector hinders the full-fledged transfer of sensitive defence technologies from the US. This creates a hindrance in the execution of policies and also in connecting the newly transformed doctrines with operational capabilities. Similarly, some of the defence agreements between India and the US are built on covering projects that have minimal or nearly no “operational utility or strategic value.” In this regard, the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) is the best to be quoted as it primarily looked for jointly developing projects and technologies such as aircraft launch systems for aircraft carriers.²⁴ Aircraft carrier as a technological addition in Indian naval fleet does not seem visible in coming decades. Hence, such initiatives prove to be self-absorbing and jeopardise the potential fruitful projects.

Thirdly, the Indian military modernisation drive lacks in connecting with its cutting-edge, US-towed military doctrines. With an overwhelming amount of resources, technologies, equipment, ammunition, and policy advice being pooled in by the US, India authorised a new mountain strike corps with modernised battlefield gears, new lift-fighter aircraft and light infantry in addition to placement of cruise missiles at its northern borders to engage in a severer competition with China according to Washington’s expectations.²⁵ However, due to a lack of synergy in the tri-services and the failure to convert a manpower-intensive force into a technology-led firepower-centric force, India has not been able to meet Washington’s expectations so far. Pulwama crisis, in February 2019, depicted how the Indian air fleet is ineffective in contemporary military contingencies and is exposed to multiples vulnerabilities.

Similarly, on the southern front, the US seeks expanded India deployment and operations in which Indian sea-based nuclear deterrent remains the linchpin of the strategic vision. In the maritime

domain, the US has been engaging India through various bilateral and multilateral security engagements, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) being the most significant of those engagements. India has also pressed the US for maritime military cooperation as around 60 per cent of its ships are becoming obsolete with a critical need to be replaced.²⁶ New Delhi's concerns over the two front or the two-and-a-half front threat have snowballed with heightened China-Pakistan military cooperation and its self-assumed threat spectrum. This has led the Indian strategic thinkers to a path of continuously reconstructing their military doctrines and developing associated capabilities.²⁷ In that, Washington's role as a potent supplier of dedicated weapons and equipment enhances as the US military has remained engaged in conflict situations in varied terrains and operational environments. This resulted in the development of terrain-specific and user-dedicated weapons and technologies, which is intensely needed in the Indian military.

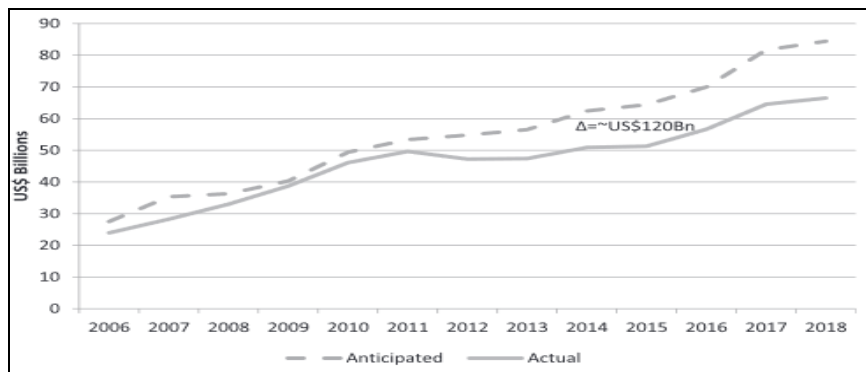
During the process, however, India has continued to follow an appeasement policy. Since the 2018 Wuhan Summit, India embarked on the route to avoid an overtly confrontational policy against China while adopting a more hedging one between the US and China. It skidded away to a large extent from the Malabar naval exercise and decreased its participation in the Quad.

Finally, the Indian voting pattern in the United Nations has changed in the last fifteen years following the US attempts to rebuild ties with India. However, a sense of realisation prevails in the Indian ruling elite that the country is on its way to becoming one of the leading global powers. To show its political and military clout, India voted in a United Nations process in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which proved detrimental for the US interests in the Indian Ocean Region. It also affected the American base in Diego Garcia and induced friction between the two countries.²⁸

Indian defence budget spending has not been able to match what was predicted by American reports even with resources dedicated by the US to minimise the said gap. The figure below shows how the actual defence spending differs from what was predicted:

Figure 1

Indian Defence Spending (2006 - 2018)



Source: Stimson Center

Based on the aforementioned statistics regarding Indian defence spending, it can be safely asserted that Indian security forces’ capitalisation doubled during the stated period of engagement with the US, whereas that of China quadrupled. However, Indian investments in technology integration and synergy in forces have not proved beneficial for the country based on the huge disparity in its present doctrine and available technologies. This lack of appropriate utilisation of resources could be termed as a major determinant of the inadequate performance of the Indian military.²⁹

Conclusion

The strategic partnership between India and the US has undergone multi-vectored growth. From its primary focus on the rise of China in Asia-Pacific, the partnership has evolved into serving India’s national interests. For instance, the recent Indo-US deal of Integrated Air Defence Weapon System (IADWS) came as a reaction to the

Pulwama crisis whence New Delhi witnessed its weaknesses and realised that the possessed offensive aerial capabilities could not cope with the contemporary threats. In this regard, American-made air defence systems can prove as a viable option for defending against aerial strikes. This would directly impact deterrence stability in South Asia as the Indian military would pursue a more aggressive approach at the borders given the latest American technologies.

Another noteworthy aspect here is 'India's pick and choose policy' when it comes to weapons procurement. The country is procuring major offensive weapons and advanced technologies from the US as it is the leading country to develop and possess them. However, for defensive weapons, India seems more inclined towards Russia. Its tilt towards Russia for assistance is rooted in sophisticated Russian defensive technologies, which have tremendously grown over the years, in particular, the S-400 Triumph missile system.

Even though with India's multipolar approach in terms of defence ties, its significance for the US has strengthened, which is evident from the renaming of the US Pacific Command to 'Indo-Pacific Command' by the US Department of Defence. This has not only enhanced India's role in the region but also increased its relevance in the US foreign policy and its commitment to maintaining the status quo.

It can also be contended that the increased US insecurity vis-à-vis the rise of China has led to an intensification of the strategic partnership with India. Additionally, Washington's increased reliance on India and its desire to fill the capability gap in the Indian military to engage with China has not proven as beneficial as desired. As discussed earlier, the major focus of security agreements like the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) has not only been irrelevant for the contemporary strategic settings because of its expanded scope but has also proved deleterious for other ongoing initiatives like the Quad. However, under BECA, the potential provision

of superior conventional technologies by Washington to New Delhi will lead to two outcomes. First, it will destabilise the strategic equilibrium between India and Pakistan. Two, it will account for an emboldened Indian military, aiming to confront its neighbour head-on given their ongoing territorial disputes.

Thus, the Indo-US defence partnership has adverse implications for the strategic stability of the Asia-Pacific, particularly South Asia. Indian acquisition of new weapons and technologies is accounting for the massive proliferation of weapons in the whole of the Asia-Pacific as the security dilemma continues to rise. These acquisitions also account for a more aggressive Indian military posture in the region, regardless of the nature of its ties with neighbours. The recent military escalation in Ladakh and surrounding areas is a practical manifestation of the situation getting out of Indian hands. Hence, India is pursuing an aggressive policy to dominate the regional states without even considering the repercussions or rebuttal in the form of a triggered nuclear escalation.

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