

## US-India defense ties: setting the table for Secretary Mattis' visit to New Delhi by Sourabh Gupta

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“We should discourage Indian hegemonic aspirations over the other states in South Asia and on the Indian Ocean,” a draft version of the Pentagon’s post-Cold War Defense Planning Guide intoned in 1992. Twenty-five year later, US-India strategic and defense ties stand transformed. New Delhi is embraced as a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the foundation of a lasting partnership in the Indian Ocean, and perhaps down-the-line in the Asia-Pacific region, has been established. With Defense Secretary Jim Mattis visiting New Delhi this week, it is worthwhile to take stock of the progress in bilateral defense ties – especially over the past decade-and-a-half under a Republican and a Democratic president alike.

### Two phases of upgrades

Phase I can be dated to September 2001 when President George W. Bush waived the bilateral and third-party sanctions imposed on India following its 1998 nuclear tests. Defense cooperation received a significant fillip with the signing of the *Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP)* in September 2004 which laid out an ambitious path of cooperation in four areas: civil nuclear energy, civilian space programs, high-technology commerce, and a dialogue on missile defense. The high-water mark of cooperation was the signing of the *US-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement*, which paved the way for India’s rehabilitation within the international nonproliferation regime. Phase I came to a dispiriting end when the top two US contenders for a highly-awaited tender for the Indian Air Force’s fourth generation advanced combat aircraft were eliminated from contention in April 2011.

Phase II dates from 2012 with the announcement of the *US-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI)* – a flexible mechanism intended to transition the defense sales relationship from its traditional ‘buyer-seller’ mode and explore new areas of collaboration from defense science and technology cooperation to weapons co-production. The high-water mark so far has been India’s designation as a ‘Major Defense Partner’ by President Barack Obama in December 2016, which outlines a strategic trade authorization-related roadmap to enable the transfer of sensitive and dual-use items to India at par with the US’ closest allies. In notable respects, *DTTI* ensures continuity with *NSSP*’s purposes which, in its successor phase, had envisaged intensified cooperation in the areas of licensed technology transfer, amendment of the US arms export control lists, and New Delhi’s accession to a host of multilateral export control regimes.

During Phase I, the accompanying US geostrategic objectives were two-fold: first, transform India into a key security partner in the Indian Ocean Region that would host a skeletal US troop presence on a rotational basis, and gradually be joined with the US military in use-of-force planning to address regional incidents and emergencies. Second, as such collaboration was gradually extended to ‘out-of-area’ operations ranging from the Mediterranean Sea to the Western Pacific, India would also align with the major maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific and participate in the soft maritime encirclement of China. To obtain India’s long-term strategic alignment, Washington was prepared to make expensive political down payments (such as endorsement of India’s candidature for a permanent UN Security Council seat and the civil nuclear deal) as well as high-end defense sales.

India’s objectives were plainer. It was to take advantage of the pre-eminent US standing as well as willingness to transfer defense equipment to increase its military capabilities and national power, and thereby chart its own strategic rise as a US-friendly but independent actor within the international system. New Delhi was prepared to offer strategic-defense cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region and tempt Washington with the promise of strategic-defense coordination beyond the Malacca Straits.

New Delhi was careful, however, to ensure that mil-mil cooperation with Washington did not drift toward an interoperable relationship that could compromise India’s strategic autonomy, in form or substance. India stayed away from stationing personnel at US combatant command headquarters, objected to elevating their strategic dialogue to a ‘two plus two’ format, turned down a series of foundational pacts that would have enhanced logistics and battle-group networking, and opted to strip out tactical interoperability aids after purchasing US-origin defense equipment. Foremost, in its Indian Ocean zone of core interest, it turned down Japanese and Australian requests to participate within the US-India *Malabar* series exercises to negate any impression of ganging-up on China.

By 2011, it became clear that whatever trade-offs in means were being offered, both parties were seeking incompatible ends (strategic alignment for the US; strategic autonomy and independent rise for India). In retrospect, New Delhi’s participation in joint patrols with US vessels in the Malacca Straits in 2002 and near-dispatch of a brigade-sized unit to enforce peace operations in Iraq in 2003 may have raised false hopes in Washington.

Starting in 2012, *both* sides reset their strategic and defense relationship by geographically narrowing but functionally deepening their basis for cooperation.

Stung by India's lack of reciprocity but nevertheless taking the long view, Washington downgraded its earlier emphasis on seeking New Delhi's conspicuous alignment with US strategic goals in the wider Indo-Pacific. Instead, in exchange for New Delhi's embrace of a limited but potentially interoperable defense relationship in the eastern Indian Ocean, Washington resolved to elevate defense trade and licensed technology sharing (not just high-end defense sales) to a level at par with the US' closest allies. Former Defense Secretary Ash Carter labelled the bargain a "strategic and technological handshake." Many of the 'pathfinder' defense co-development projects that were identified have since fallen by the wayside due to capacity shortcomings at the Indian defense-industrial end. Two marquee technology-sharing initiatives, however – military jet engine-related and aircraft carrier catapult launch-related – have gone from strength-to-strength and provide the requisite technological ballast to the broader defense partnership.

Washington's defense technology sharing should be placed in perspective though. India's lone nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine is based on Russian designs and Russian technicians played a vital role in miniaturizing the boat's reactor to fit its hull.

For its part, New Delhi has moved off its rigid adherence to nonalignment and, as trust in US earnestness has grown, has voluntarily contemplated a far more engaged defense partnership with the US Navy in the Indian Ocean region. An agreement to share logistics during port visits, joint exercises, joint training and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts, as well as on a case-by-case basis for other cooperative efforts, was signed in August 2016. Yokosuka-based US warships can be repaired and serviced at Indian shipyards too. In December 2015, Japan was invited to become a permanent participant in the now-trilateral *Malabar* exercises, and fielded a helicopter carrier and a missile destroyer earlier this summer during drills in the Bay of Bengal that featured an anti-submarine warfare element. A ministerial-level 'two plus two' dialogue has also been newly-established. Posting a liaison officer to US Pacific Command could be the likely next step.

Each of these steps correspond with deliverables sought during the *NSSP* phase of the 2000s but which New Delhi was psychologically unprepared to deliver upon at the time. Equally, most of the steps so far have been improvements more in *form than substance*.

Going forward, from an operational perspective, New Delhi should fully integrate its data exchange and communications systems to enable battle-group networking during maritime exercises in the Eastern Indian Ocean. Voice communications during the *Malabar* exercises are still conducted over unsecure channels that are vulnerable to interception. Next, with the Indian and US navies operating a complementary set of carrier deck-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms (P-8 patrol aircraft; E-2D early warning aircraft), New Delhi should initial the so-called Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). This will enable the two sides to exchange and form a common IOR information picture during regular peacetime conditions. As Chinese submarines

increasingly foray into these waters, the framework, standards, and system configuration to exchange telecommunications support could be customized to support this ISR-related competency.

Down the line, New Delhi should also review re-signing a lapsed intelligence exchange agreement that could enable the two navies to operate separately but synergistically across these waters. To sweeten the deal, New Delhi could insist that all US-sourced digital intelligence equipment and technologies be subject to domestic or third-party security assurance clearances. Relaxation of US' foreign disclosure policy limits to ensure transfer of actionable intelligence on other South Asian countries (*read: Pakistan*) could also be sought. Separately, New Delhi should train to participate in joint and combined HA/DR operations across the Indo-Pacific, as well as begin to gradually put flesh on the bones of the Obama-Modi *Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region* of January 2015. The commitment to scale cooperation outward, east of Malacca, remains a dead letter.

The extent to which the US and India will join in a modestly interoperable ISR relationship during this second phase of their strategic and defense partnership will depend on the frequency of passage of Chinese surface and sub-surface vessels in these waters. It is by no means clear that the PLAN sees the IOR as being more than a throughway or envisages a role much beyond that of protecting its basic navigational interest as a 'user state' of these commons. On the other hand, it is clear that the PLAN neither enjoys the ability to project power and sea control currently in these distant waters nor is it in any hurry to acquire this capability. As China gradually deploys this capability in the IOR, the US and India would be better off in the meantime holding an intimate conversation on trying to align their foreign policies. Their gap in worldviews and policy positions remains nearly as wide on numerous fronts in 2017 as it was in 2000 – even as their bilateral defense relationship has been fundamentally transformed. Hopefully, their newly-established 'two plus two' dialogue will grapple with this disconnection.

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