



U.S.-India Defense Partnership 2.0: making good (incrementally) on strategic congruence by Sourabh Gupta

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Against many odds, Prime Minister Narendra Modi – with capable assists from President Obama – has repaired the US-India strategic equation that had begun to fray during the latter years of his predecessor's second term in office. As an expression of goodwill for his energetic espousal of the bilateral cause, Modi will be formally welcomed on the South Lawn of the White House in early June. His fourth visit to the Oval Office, less than halfway into his (first) term, is a reflection of Washington's *primus inter pares* standing among the major powers within the constellation of New Delhi's global and Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific interests.

Against a lesser set of odds, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has restored momentum to the US-India defense partnership that appeared to be stalling during the past half-decade following India's disinclination to sign three 'foundational agreements' which, at the time was imagined, would append the Indian armed forces to US geostrategic purposes in the Indo-Asia-Pacific and beyond. During the second week of April, Carter paid his third visit in 30 months to New Delhi, and the seventh by a US defense secretary to India since 2008 (during this time only one visit was reciprocated) – a reflection of the prominence accorded to New Delhi within the Pentagon's emerging constellation of interests within the Indo-Asia-Pacific strategic arc.

The contrasting outreaches capture a truth that permeates the US-India strategic engagement: New Delhi seeks a broad-based and loosely-defined strategic partnership with Washington as envisioned in its 'Act East' policy; the US, by contrast, has emphasized a narrower and focused maritime defense alignment in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, as epitomized in its 'Rebalance' policy.

In New Delhi, Carter and counterpart Manohar Parrikar laid the penultimate touches to a series of defense cooperation, technology sharing, and research and co-production project-related agreements that have been on the anvil for the past 18 months or so. When the final details are filled in, the US and India will have exchanged a memorandum of agreement to share naval logistics, an understanding to share US aircraft carrier technologies (particularly a catapult launch system), and the commencement of upgraded maritime dialogues, including on anti-submarine operations, at the official 2+2 as well as officer-to-officer level. In 2015, the two defense heads re-authorized their defense framework agreement for an additional 10 years, identifying the security of free movement of lawful commerce and navigation across sea lines of communication as a newly-shared national interest.

More consequentially, Carter and Parrikar, during their unusually-engaged period of interaction (they've met four times in the past year), have laid the foundation of a new and elevated phase of strategic defense cooperation – US-India Defense Partnership 2.0 – that will fundamentally, albeit incrementally, transform the means by which the Indian Navy and the US Pacific Fleet engage each other within the confined reaches of the Eastern Indian Ocean and the southern Bay of Bengal.

The agreement to share logistics during peacetime will enable the two navies to mitigate capability gaps in broader Indian Ocean waters that have seen a growth in operational commitments. It will also breathe life into the India-US Maritime Cooperation Framework agreement that had envisaged "an appropriate agreement on logistics support" – 10 years after its signing. The understanding to share aircraft carrier catapult-launch technology and design capabilities will enable the two navies to operate a complementary set of deck-based platforms (P-8i patrol aircraft; E-2D *Hawkeye* early warning aircraft; F/A-18E/F *Super Hornet* fighters – if agreement on co-production in India is reached) that will enable the two navies to operate separately but synergistically across the Indian Ocean domain.

With Beijing's progressive sub-surface penetration of the Indian Ocean now a fact, a navy-to-navy dialogue and at-sea exercises tailored to this undersea dimension will enable New Delhi to both remedy its under-preparedness in the area of anti-submarine sonars as well as deter the entry of PLAN nuclear attack submarines into the Bay of Bengal. In time, as US-sourced advanced communications gear facilitates seamless and secure ship-shore and platform-to-platform intelligence-sharing, it will also open the door – and the eyes of the Indian Navy's civilian masters – to the virtues of a more interoperable equation with the US Navy along strategic approaches to the eastern Indian Ocean.

A couple of years from now, it is likely that the Indian Navy and the US Pacific Fleet, individually, will operate a set of network-centric intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets that allow a common information picture about the eastern Indian Ocean to be formed and exchanged as well as provide a basis for cooperative responses to possible threats.

Credit for the renewal of defense-maritime ties goes to both parties. The proximate catalyst for the stepped-up engagement was the Modi government's willingness to cast aside its inherited blinkers and re-evaluate three Bush administration-era foundational defense agreements (on logistics, encrypted communications, and geo-spatial mapping) with a fresh set of eyes. A 'non-paper' to this end was solicited from the Pentagon in late-2014. Of even greater consequence has been laudable openness to jettisoning India's

long-standing disinclination to be associated in any way, shape or form with extra-regional strategy and purpose in its hitherto jealously-guarded Indian Ocean zone of core interest.

For his part, Carter deserves credit for his perseverance in working through the fundamental alignment-autonomy contradiction that afflicts US-India strategic ties to tease out a middle ground that combines New Delhi's longing for defense technology-sharing (to boost autonomous capabilities) with Washington's yearning for navy-to-navy interoperability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. In doing so, he has overruled his own earlier, and extravagant, conception of the role of India – as host of US 'over-the-horizon' bases and participant in US-led 'coalition-of-the-willing' conventional missions – within US and allied military strategy.

The US-India Defense Partnership 2.0 nevertheless needs to be kept in perspective.

Its geographic writ is unlikely to extend beyond the sea lines of communication and strategic (eastern) approaches of the Indian Ocean and southern Bay of Bengal – aside for emergency disaster relief missions. From a functional standpoint, military-grade intelligence sharing or any hint of federated defense planning or capabilities, including joint threat assessment and expeditionary or amphibious operational cooperation, remains off-the-table. Most of the smaller-scale 'pathfinder' defense technology cooperation projects on the roster too, particularly those marginally attached to the maritime sphere or which entail private-to-private technology transfer, are likely to wither on the vine.

A sense of proportion must also inform an understanding of the China factor. The eastern Indian Ocean will remain for some time a decidedly distant 'far seas' theater of operation for the PLAN – even as it goes about coupling a recent emphasis on 'blue-water defense' to its historical interest in 'offshore defense.' Not until 2014 did the PLAN's South Sea Fleet Surface Task Group conduct its first – and solitary – training deployment there. The interests involved, too, are limited (albeit vital – free access, unimpeded navigation) and correspond with India's own such interests east of Malacca – meaning, they are amenable to diplomatic give-and-take. Earlier this February, India and China inaugurated, and institutionalized, a mid-level official Maritime Affairs Dialogue that will allow both sides to broach these and related issues of common interest. Later in the year, China and India along with Russia are to hold a first-ever, stand-alone ministerial-level consultation on security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.

New Delhi neither sees itself as locked in a triangular strategic relationship with Washington and Beijing (rather both sets of ties are guided by bilateral actions on separate tracks) nor is Beijing the 'threat' that some in both capitals perceive it to be (the latest Defense Ministry Annual Report dispenses with the characterization of China as a 'threat'). China too has never complained about US defense technology transfers to India, especially in a bilateral context.

US-India defense cooperation (other than big-ticket military sales) has for too long failed to attain take-off speed, owing in part to a lack of trust arising from a tendency on *both*

sides to view defense cooperation initiatives through a lens of entrapment. The tempered expectations but dependable delivery in US-India Defense Partnership 2.0 may be marked as the moment when the two parties dismounted the high horse of unattainable ambition and settled for a more productive, albeit modest, equilibrium that translated their mutual visions of order into practical cooperation on air, land, and sea in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region. For their foresight and wisdom to compromise, Carter and Parrikar deserve a token of praise.

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