

Defence Remains an Area of Continuity in Indo-United States Relations

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Introduction

On 31 Oct 2025, India and the United States (US) formalised a landmark ten-year defence framework aimed at significantly deepening and expanding military cooperation, marking a new era in bilateral strategic ties.

The agreement was signed on the sidelines of the 12th Association of Southeast Asian Nations Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus in Kuala Lumpur, between US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

Hegseth said on X that the pact will enhance "Coordination, information sharing and tech cooperation" while advancing "Regional stability and deterrence". Shri Rajnath Singh called it "A signal of our growing strategic convergence" and said the deal would "Herald a new decade of partnership", cementing defence as a core pillar of India-US relations.¹

The Significance

The agreement signals stable ties between the two countries in the defence sector as it comes at a critical juncture as both countries navigate tense trade relations including the issue of India's purchase of Russian oil. Earlier this year, President Donald Trump had imposed 50 per cent tariffs on Indian goods, including a 25 per cent penalty linked to India's purchases of Russian oil and arms, creating strain in bilateral ties. The defence pact aims to enhance military cooperation, improve intelligence sharing, facilitate technology sharing, and strategic coordination, while strengthening both countries' presence and influence in the region.

It is expected to provide policy guidance across the full spectrum of India-US defence engagement, including interoperability, joint exercises, and defence research collaboration. Prमित Pal Chaudhuri of the Eurasia Group think tank said, "It provides for further potential in all three areas", allowing both militaries to

operate more seamlessly together and signalling a deeper alignment on regional security.²

In Feb this year, following a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Trump, the two sides had announced plans for the new ten-year defence framework. A joint statement after that meeting stated: “Highlighting the deepening convergence of US-India strategic interests, the leaders reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to a dynamic defence partnership spanning multiple domains. To advance defence ties further, the leaders announced plans to sign this year a new ten-year Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership in the 21st Century”.³

As per reports, the agreement was due to be signed in Jul/Aug but was delayed due to the friction in relations because of the trade sanctions and the claim of President Trump regarding the ceasefire between India and Pakistan during Operation Sindoor.

Historical Context

The Framework Agreement is an extension of an agreement that has been functional for over 20 years and owes its roots to the 1995 Agreed Minutes on Defence Relationship.

A major step next was the adoption of General Security of Military Information Agreement, signed in 2002, which facilitated sharing of military intelligence between two countries.

The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative is a partnership forum between India and the US and was launched in 2012 to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation, reduce bureaucratic obstacles, and promote co-development and co-production of defence equipment. The goal was to move beyond a ‘Buyer-seller’ dynamic towards a more collaborative model for developing new defence technologies.

The vision for bilateral defence cooperation was encapsulated in the Sep 2013 Joint US-India Declaration on Defence Cooperation and the 2015 Framework

for the US-India Defence Relationship, in which both countries committed themselves to increasing cooperation in the defence sector.

Between 2016 and 2020, both countries signed four more agreements, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in 2016, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement in 2018, and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement in 2020.

During his visit to India in Mar 2021, the US Secretary of Defence General Lloyd James Austin III (Retd) had said, “India in particular is an increasingly important partner among today’s rapidly shifting international dynamics. I reaffirm our commitment to a comprehensive and forward-looking defence partnership with India as a central pillar to our approach to the region”.⁴

In Aug 2024, both countries signed a Security of Supply Arrangement and Memorandum of Agreement regarding the Assignment of Liaison Officers, among other bilateral military agreements that have enhanced defence and security cooperation.

Defence has long been a key pillar of India-US relations. During Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the US in Feb, President Trump pledged billions in military equipment sales, including F-35 stealth aircraft. While India has traditionally relied on Russian weapons, its defence imports from Moscow have gradually declined as it seeks to diversify suppliers and expand domestic production under *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India).

In Apr, both countries participated in Exercise Tiger Triumph and in Sep this year, Indian and American troops participated in a two-week military exercise Yudh Abhyas at Fort Wainwright in Alaska.

Before that, the US submarine support ship USS Frank Cable visited Chennai on a scheduled port visit, which was the Military Sealift Command’s second to the region in two years.

Negotiations are also underway regarding the manufacture of GE F-414 jet engines in India for the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk2 fighters, and to

procure 31 MQ-9B high-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles. Deliveries of the GE-F404 engines for the LCA Tejas Mk1A are presently underway.

Importance of Defence Ties

The 2025 framework is intended to provide a unified vision and a comprehensive policy direction to deepen defence cooperation. It aims to usher in a new era in the already strong defence partnership between the two countries and marks a new chapter in further transforming it over the next ten years.

Defence ties intersect with broader trade negotiations, as both countries aim to finalise a long-delayed trade deal by Nov. India has hinted at increasing energy and defence purchases from the US, potentially easing tensions over tariffs and sanctions while reinforcing strategic alignment.

It is evident that despite the strain in relations over the issue of tariffs, there has been no visible dip in military ties between the two nations. India and the US continue to expand and deepen their defence relationship through military-to-military exercises and activities, information sharing, collaboration with like-minded regional and global partners, defence industrial, science and technology cooperation, and defence coordination mechanisms.⁵

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on X, “It is a signal of our growing strategic convergence and will herald a new decade of partnership. Defence will remain as a major pillar of our bilateral relations. Our partnership is critical for ensuring a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region”.⁶

US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said on X, “This advances our defence partnership, a cornerstone for regional stability and deterrence”.⁷

Conclusion

Signing of the agreement must, therefore, be seen as a consolidation of achievements over the last decades as well as the formalisation of the defence—industrial roadmap and technological cooperation.

The ten-year framework is expected to shape defence cooperation and provide policy direction to the entire spectrum of the India-US defence relationship well into the next decade, guiding joint exercises, technology partnerships, and

strategic planning. Both nations are likely to use the agreement as leverage to strengthen trade talks, diversify energy and defence purchases, and deepen their joint presence in the Indo-Pacific.

To quote Lieutenant General Ata Hasnain, “The signing was an act of strategic reassurance. It said, in essence, that both sides still value the partnership even if they differ on the pathway to equilibrium. From an Indian point of view, this is good, mature strategic thinking; it overcomes ego and appropriately pursues national interest”.⁸

The US sees India as a major defence partner and a bulwark against China and hence has worked to develop a deeper partnership with it. India has in recent years added American aircraft, helicopters, and artillery guns into its armed forces. There is no doubt that India remains a critical partner to the US and the agreement signals a mutual desire to reinforce military and technological ties and signals the strategic convergence in this relationship. Defence remains a key deliverable and an area of continuity in Indo-US relations across administrations.

Endnotes

¹ Shubhajit Roy, “US and China Take Great Leap of Faith, Decide to Open Military Channels”, *The Indian Express*, 03 Nov 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/us-and-china-take-great-leap-of-faith-decide-to-open-military-channels-10342531>

² Cherylann Mollan, “India-US Sign 10-Year Defence Pact amid Tariff Turmoil”, *BBC News*, 31 Oct 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y0qz701xeo>

³ Amrita Nayak Dutta, “India, US Seal 10-Yr Defence Partnership Framework, Signal Strategic Convergence”, *The Indian Express*, 01 Nov 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-us-sign-new-10-year-defence-partnership-framework-amid-tariff-tensions-10338454/>

⁴ “CUTS Global”, *Cuts-global.org*, 2021, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://cuts-global.org/defense-news-conclave.htm>

⁵ Dutta, “India, US Seal”.

⁶ X (formerly Twitter), 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://x.com/rainathsingh/status/1984135415876739237>

⁷ X (formerly Twitter), 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://x.com/SecWar/status/1984118246497243478>

⁸ Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, “India-US Defence Deal Signals Strategic Interests Trump Temporary Frictions”, *Firstpost*, 01 Nov 2025, accessed 01 Nov 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/india-us-defence-deal-signals-strategic-interests-trump-temporary-frictions-13946960.html>

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