

There are Challenges that Need to be Overcome in the Indo- US Defence Partnership

US Secretary of Defence General Lloyd Austin visited India on 04 and 05 June in what was his second visit with the aim of reinforcing the major defence partnership, and advancing cooperation in critical domains. Significantly, this visit was scheduled ahead of Prime Minister Modi's official state visit to the US on 22 June. His previous visit to India was in March 2021.

Shortly after landing he tweeted; "I'm returning to India to meet with key leaders for discussions about strengthening our Major Defence Partnership. Together, we're advancing a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The Interactions

The Secretary of Defence met the Defence Minister shri Rajnath Singh and the National Security Advisor shri Ajit Doval. During the meetings, they exchanged perspectives on a range of regional security issues. The US committed to collaborating closely with India in support of the shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

India and the United States also concluded a roadmap for defence industry cooperation for the next few years, the two countries said on Monday, a landmark move expected to bolster New Delhi's defence manufacturing ambitions. [\[i\]](#)

The US is working to deepen ties with India and sees stronger military-to-military and technology ties as a key counterweight to China's dominance in the region. It is also seeking to wean India away from its traditional dependence on Russia for defence supplies.

The roadmap was finalised at a meeting between visiting US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. The roadmap is considered significant as Washington maintains strict controls over what domestic military technology can be shared or sold to other countries.

The agreement comes weeks before Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits Washington on 22 June for an official state visit to hold talks with President Joe Biden.

Technology Cooperation

US-India Defence Industrial Cooperation, aims at fast-tracking technology cooperation and co-production in areas such as air combat and land mobility systems; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; munitions; and the undersea domain.

This initiative aims to 'change the paradigm for cooperation' between US and Indian defence sectors, including a set of specific proposals that could provide India access to cutting-edge technologies and support India's defence modernization plans. [\[ii\]](#)

The Indian Defence Minister and US Secretary of Defence also pledged to review regulatory hurdles impeding closer industry-to-industry cooperation and to initiate negotiations on a Security of Supply Arrangement and a Reciprocal Defence Procurement Agreement, which will promote long-term supply chain stability.

India, depends on Russia for nearly half its military supplies but has also increasingly diversified its sources to buy from the US, France and Israel, among others.

India also wants global defence manufacturers to partner with Indian Companies and produce arms and military equipment in India for local consumption as well as exports.

The Biden administration is likely to sign a deal that will allow General Electric Co to produce jet engines in India powering Indian military aircraft. Engaging in this level of conversation regarding sharing critical technology is no doubt a pointer regarding both the importance and intensity of the relationship.[\[iii\]](#)

New Initiatives

The two sides also discussed the growing importance of defence innovation and cooperation in emerging domains such as Space, Cyberspace, and Artificial Intelligence. They praised the recent launch of a new Advanced Domains Defence Dialogue and committed to expanding the scope of Bilateral Defence Cooperation to encompass all domains.

The Indo-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X), a new initiative to advance cutting-edge technology cooperation has also been proposed. The initiative, will be launched by the US -India Business Council on 21 June is designed to complement existing government-to-government collaboration by promoting innovative partnerships between US and Indian companies, investors, start-up accelerators, and academic research institutions. [\[iv\]](#)

The US aims to bring India's military capabilities to the level where it integrates with the US's next level of integrated deterrence called Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2) strategy.

General Austin and Rajnath Singh also discussed ways to increase information sharing and new initiatives to improve maritime cooperation, including in the undersea domain.

Contours of The Relationship

Since the signing of the Framework for the US -India Defence Relationship in 2005 (which was renewed in 2015), bilateral defence engagement between the two countries has come a long way. The US has also designated India as a "Major Defence Partner (MDP) in 2016," a status unique to India. It is supposed to have made India more or less at par with the closest allies of the US.

Amongst the foundational Agreements signed are the Defence Technologies and Trade Initiative (DTTI) in 2012, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), 2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) 2020 and Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in 2022. India had been added to the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) list of the US, in 2018 which is critical to easing export controls for high-technology product sales.[\[v\]](#)

Both nations conduct a number of joint exercises at bilateral and multilateral levels. India has bought US military systems and platforms worth more than 21 billion dollars in the last few years to include C-130J planes, C-17 Transporters, P-81 Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft, CH-47 Chinook Helicopters, Harpoon Anti-Ship missiles, M777 Howitzers, and MH-60 Seahawk Maritime helicopters.[\[vi\]](#)

In May 2018, the then Secretary of Defence General Jim Mattis also renamed the Pacific Command as the Indo-US Pacific Command.

US View

General Austin stated that; “The US-India Defence partnership matters, because “we face a rapidly changing world.” He further said, “We see bullying and coercion from the People’s Republic of China, Russian aggression against Ukraine that seeks to redraw borders by force and threatens national sovereignty, as well as transnational challenges such as terrorism, and climate change. So, democracies must now rally together around not just our common interests but also our shared values.” [\[vii\]](#)

Keeping this and India’s leading role as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific Secretary Austin welcomed India’s leadership role in the Quad Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative (IPMDA), which aims at providing cutting-edge domain awareness capability to countries across the Indo-Pacific region.

Integrated Deterrence

In April 2021 General Austin had stated; “the cornerstone of America’s defence is still deterrence, ensuring that our adversaries understand the folly of outright conflict”. [\[viii\]](#)

In 2022 he said “integrated deterrence will be a key factor of the new National Defence Strategy, which seeks to address major threats to national security and the international rules-based order.” “Integrated deterrence means using all of the capabilities in all warfighting domains: Air, land, sea, space and cyber.”

While speaking at The Shangri La Dialogue General Austin said; “The Indo-Pacific is at the heart of American grand strategy. He then went on to state; “Our security alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are a profound source of stability. So, our integrated deterrence in the region will continue to centre on our ties with our proud treaty allies: Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. And we remain unwavering in our mutual-defence commitments.’ [\[ix\]](#)

At the same time, we’re also weaving closer ties with other partners. I’m especially thinking of India, the world’s largest democracy. We believe that its growing military capability and technological prowess can be a stabilizing force in the region.

General Mark Miller, the US Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated that the ‘JADC2 strategy requires all Services to be networked to bring information into a single operating centre. ‘Acting seamlessly as one Joint Force across all the domains at machine speed’. The underlying idea of JADC2 would be to make data/information from all war domains available to every participant including allies and partners in their command-and-control centres. [\[x\]](#)

Challenges

There is no doubt that the relationship between the two countries is strong and has been on an upward arc over the past few decades irrespective of the party in power both in India and in the US. However, there are issues that affect the relationship amongst these are, US still feels that India is aligned towards Russia and has not supported it in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Their interpretation of the Indo-Pacific does not match, while India defines it to include both the Pacific and Indian Oceans ie From the West coast of US to the East coast of Africa, the US views the Indo-Pacific from the West Coast of US to the shores of India. That could be one of the reasons why General Austin met with the Japanese Defence Minister Yasukasu Hamada, the Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles and their Philippine’s counterpart Carlito Galvez in

Singapore on the side-lines of the Shangri La Dialogue on 03 June where they talked about the importance of building a networked security architecture in the Indo- Pacific.

India on its part is not ready to join any alliance and retains its strategic sovereignty while the US would like it to be part of an alliance. Pakistan is another issue and there is no doubt that Pakistan has used US funding and military equipment against India in the past and even now the US has approved funding for spares for the Pakistan F-16 fleet.

The other fact what endures is that countries always place their interests above all else and this is true in case of the US also, during 1971 they were willing to overlook the genocide in East Pakistan as Nixon and Kissinger were focussed on building ties with China using Pakistan as the conduit. More recently, 9/11 changed the priorities, policies and direction of the US and now in spite of 'the stated pivot towards Asia' in order to counter the assertiveness of China, the Ukrainian conflict has once again resulted in efforts being directed towards Europe and against Russia. This is a serious inconsistency which affects relationships.

Presently, China is the threat which both countries have to confront and in turn is binding both nations as regards their security interests. But India sees China in terms of a continental threat in the Himalayas as well as a maritime threat in the Indian Ocean whereas most US analysts look at the threat from China in terms of the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Conclusion

Defence Cooperation has emerged "as the most significant dimension" of the India-US Strategic Partnership and "a key driver" of the bilateral relationship in recent years. While both Countries are committed to strengthen operational collaboration across all defence domains, the US realises that it needs to support India due to its strategic significance and leading role in the security framework of the Indo-Pacific in view of the expansionism and belligerence of China.

India has been the primary security provider and strategic partner to most of its smaller neighbours like Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka and due to its strategic position, the Indian Navy has always been amongst the first to reach nations requiring humanitarian assistance or medical aid in times of crisis and disasters.

While there is no doubting the centrality of the US-India partnership to maintaining peace and security. The challenge for the US in deepening defence ties also lies in being able to share sensitive defence technology, most of which is developed by private Companies while retaining the essence of these technologies, is a ' delicate dance'.

Endnotes:

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[iii] 'US set to allow GE to make engines in India for military jets', The Times of India, 01 June 2023 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/us-set-to-allow-ge-to-make-engines-in-india-for-military-jets/articleshow/100663819.cms?from=mdr>

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[v] Factsheet, U.S. Security Cooperation With India, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, US dept of State, January 20, 2021 <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/>

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[x] CJCS Gen. Milley Reviews JADC2 Strategy While Industry Jostles For Position, Breaking Defense, 24 February, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/02/cjcs-gen-milley-reviews-jadc2-strategy-while-industry-jostles-for-position/>

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