

India-US Partnership: Shedding Old Skins for a Brave New World

Monish Tourangbam

Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the United States (US) in June 2023 was high on both style and substance. The Joe Biden administration as well as the Indian American community rolled out the red carpet for the Indian prime minister. The joint statement released after the visit is rich in detail regarding the ongoing engagements and the promise of future cooperation. In the last two decades, India-US dynamics has moved from merely maintaining a relationship to building a partnership deemed as a defining one for the 21st century. The growth, particularly in defence trade and building military-to-military interoperability, has been exponential and highly tangible. The move towards a greater synergy of co-development and co-production in the defence sector is extremely crucial for India's deterrent capability, and its rise is in America's interest of maintaining a stable order in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, it is imperative to assess the transformation in this relationship and the ways in which both countries are shedding old skin to navigate a brave new world.

Introduction

Progress in any bilateral relationship is not linear. There are developments and there are backlashes. The India-United States (US) relationship is no different. This relationship has seen all kinds of highs and lows in its journey and is now being called a defining partnership for the 21st century. During the Cold War, geopolitical circumstances did provide moments of convergence, but those opportunities were sporadic and did not translate into any long-term commitments. Two decades ago, it would have been hard to imagine the level at which the two countries currently engage across all sectors and domains. Geopolitical changes, more than anything else, have driven the strategic convergence between India and the US. The changing balance of power is evident – China's assertive rise in the Indo-Pacific region has led India and the US to recognise the growing mutuality of interest in not only building robust bilateral cooperation but also bonding with other like-minded countries through multilateral settings.

As China's belligerence across the continental and maritime realms of the Indo-Pacific hijacked the promise of an Asian century, Washington began to see India's pivotal role in its rebalancing strategy towards Asia-Pacific and, subsequently, in the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi as well began to reorient its strategy based on a more pragmatic engagement of Washington to develop a more advanced deterrent capability vis-à-vis China. Political support on both sides and webs of institutional linkages have managed to stitch together a partnership that is aspirational yet grounded in realpolitik. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the US in June 2023 has cemented the growing trust in a bilateral relationship that will be consequential for the pursuit of global good in the times to come.

India-US Dynamic: From Dissonance to Dialogue

The world is undeniably in a period of profound transition, where the great power rivalry between the US and China plays out alongside independent powers like India reorienting its strategy to build a strong defence and security cooperation with the US without decoupling from China.¹ From the rise of new technologies to the growing use of the maritime domain, outer space and cyberspace, for military and non-military means, the need for new rules of the road will require like-minded countries to build consensus and negotiate with different value systems and political cultures.

India and the US, being two of the most important functioning democracies, should have ideally converged from the beginning. However, the geopolitics of the Cold War and their respective worldviews of a preeminent power in the West vis-à-vis that of a newly independent post-colonial country in the Global South, finding its feet in the post-World War II international system, created inherent divergences. Amidst the Cold War, when Washington was frantically looking for allies to win the global race for supremacy against the Soviet Union, New Delhi found more prudence in etching a way of its own, to practice strategic autonomy through the non-aligned policy. However, there were many instances where the dynamics of Asian geopolitics, more particularly the rise of China as India's adversary post the 1962 India-China war, created opportunities for an India-US strategic embrace, which unfortunately, never really materialised to any long-term understanding.²

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union necessitated a new churning in New Delhi's outlook towards the US. India's economic liberalisation also provided a further impetus for change in Washington's outlook.³ India's nuclear ambitions clashed directly with the non-proliferation aspirations of the Bill Clinton administration and India's nuclear tests in 1998 rattled the relationship, and as expected, sanctions from the US and its allies followed suit, including on Indian defence establishments. However, in what would amount to be one of the most extensive and exhaustive series of negotiations between the two countries, the Indian and the American teams, led by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott respectively, met 14 times in seven countries on three continents between June 1998 and September 2000. These negotiations primarily centred on reducing tensions on the nuclear issue, sowed the seeds for broader mutual understanding of each other's concerns and helped set the stage for the strategic partnership that was to follow.⁴ Clinton's visit to India in March 2000 set the ground for a new era in the relationship, wherein the two democracies were ready to talk to each other and not talk past each other. The turn of the century brought the spectre of China's rise right into the bowels of the Oval Office and the national security team of the incoming George Bush administration was extremely favourable to engaging New Delhi as a partner in managing the growing China

¹ S Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2020), 39.

² Rudhra Chaudhari, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2014).

³ Chintamani Mahapatra, *Indo-US Relations into the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2000).

⁴ Strobe Talbott, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); and C Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India, The United States and the Global Order* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006).

challenge. Moreover, India's own threat perceptions vis-a-vis China provided the perfect geopolitical storm for a new India-US strategic understanding.⁵

This period also saw intense negotiations that would build the crucial habits of cooperation between the two countries, leading to the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, the India-US civil nuclear agreement and the India-specific Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver.⁶ The India-US defence partnership, which now forms the central plank of the relationship, got a major push with the signing of the 'New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship' in 2005, which was renewed in 2015. With the Barack Obama administration shifting strategic attention towards the Asia-Pacific, India's relevance found an added significance, with commonalities being established with India's 'Act East' policy. Despite a change of political guards in Washington and New Delhi, the political support for this relationship on both sides and the institutional linkages, cutting across military and non-military matters, has only strengthened the resolve to harness the convergences despite recurring differences.⁷ The release of the India-US joint strategic vision on the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean in 2015 was a curtain raiser for the looming rise of the Indo-Pacific as a primary theatre of geopolitics and that of the India-US partnership.

Overcoming Hesitations and Building Habits of Cooperation

Speaking at a joint session of the US Congress during his visit to the US in 2016, Modi contended that the India-US relationship had "overcome the hesitations of history". "Comfort, candour and convergence define our conversations. Through the cycle of elections and transition of administrations, the intensity of engagements has only grown", he said.⁸ Speaking at the US Congress during his recent visit, Modi said, "A lot has changed since I came here seven summers ago. But a lot has remained the same – like our commitment to deepen the friendship between India and the United States. In the past few years, there have been many advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI). At the same time, there have been even more momentous developments in another AI – America and India."⁹

Even the disruptive years of the Donald Trump presidency solidified this multi-dimensional relationship. Washington perhaps maintains and envisions an alignment with New Delhi like no country beyond its closer set of traditional allies. There will always exist varying perceptions on what New Delhi expects from Washington and vice-versa. While these voices might sound like that of dissonance, they could more positively be seen as debates and deliberations on details that are witnessed in any relationship with a high level of

⁵ Condoleezza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs* 79, no.1 (2000).

⁶ Shyam Saran, *How India Sees The World: From Kautilya to Modi: Kautilya to the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017).

⁷ Teresita C Schaffer, *India and the United States in the 21st Century: Reinventing Partnership* (Washington DC: Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2009).

⁸ "Full Text of PM Narendra Modi's Historic Speech in the US Congress", *India Today*, 17 September 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/full-text-of-pm-narendra-modis-historic-speech-in-the-us-congress-13124-2016-06-08>.

⁹ "Address by Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi to the Joint Session of the US Congress", Speech by HE Mr Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, Ministry of External Affairs (India), 23 June 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36714/Address+by+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+to+the+Joint+Session+of+the+US+Congress>.

multi-sectoral engagement.¹⁰ The Trump administration officially endorsed the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre of its geopolitical tussle with China and rechristened the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command. The signing of foundational agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement are clear signals of a burgeoning defence and security partnership.¹¹ Institutional engagements such as the annual '2+2' dialogue between the foreign and defence ministries and multilateral partnerships like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) are aimed at the common goal of a 'free, open, inclusive and rules based' Indo-Pacific.¹²

One of the most important takeaways of Modi's recent state visit to the US has been in the realm of cooperation over critical and emerging technologies. Advances in technology affecting both defence and civilian aspects are influencing the changing balance of power globally and in the Indo-Pacific. The new roadmap for the India-US Defense Industrial Production, the India-US initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology and the India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue intends to enhance collaboration and coordination cutting across the public and private sectors for ease of development and trade in technologies.¹³

Moreover, India's Ministry of Defence will be commencing "negotiations for concluding a Security of Supply arrangement and initiate discussions about Reciprocal Defense Procurement agreement."¹⁴ Over the years, the US designated India as a major defence partner and elevated it to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status, allowing "license-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce."¹⁵ Now, the aim and vision for both countries is to move from a buyer-seller relationship towards co-development and co-production, and the new Memorandum of Understanding between General Electric (GE) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to manufacture GE F-414 jet engines for HAL's Light Combat Aircraft Mk 2 is a major step in this

¹⁰ Ashley J Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India: New Delhi Won't Side With Washington Against Beijing", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>; and Arzan Tarapore, "America's Best Bet in the Indo-Pacific: How Washington and New Delhi Can Balance a Rising China", *Foreign Affairs*, 29 May 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-best-bet-indo-pacific>.

¹¹ "U.S. Security Cooperation With India", U.S. Department of State, 20 June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/>; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/after-the-foundational-agreements-an-agenda-for-us-india-defense-and-security-cooperation/>.

¹² "Fourth Annual U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue", U.S. Department of State, 11 April 2022, <https://www.state.gov/fourth-annual-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/>.

¹³ "Roadmap for U.S.-India Defense Industrial Cooperation", U.S. Department of Defense, 5 June 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jun/21/2003244834/-1/-1/0/ROADMAP-FOR-US-INDIA-DEFENSE-INDUSTRIAL-COOPERATION-FINAL.PDF>; "United States and India Elevate Strategic Partnership with the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)", The White House, 31 January 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/01/31/fact-sheet-united-states-and-india-elevate-strategic-partnership-with-the-initiative-on-critical-and-emerging-technology-icet/>; and "Launch of India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue", Embassy of India, Washington D.C., <https://www.indianembassyusa.gov.in/News?id=249871>.

¹⁴ "Joint Statement from the United States and India", The White House, 22 June 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/?fbclid=IwAR2WkYbEFOG5vbbsQkXS2gTGKShUHOct2xJUcnlnQ39i5nP0G i2YGip9sOY>.

¹⁵ "U.S. Security Cooperation with India", U.S. Department of State, 20 June 2020.

direction.¹⁶ Furthermore, the launch of the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem envisions expanding the synergy in the defence ecosystems by creating “a network of universities, startups, industry and think tanks” that “will facilitate joint defence technology innovation and co-production of advanced defence technology between the respective industries of the two countries.”¹⁷

The growing regularity and sophistication in military-to-military exercise is also witnessed among all the services. The Malabar exercise is multilateral involving the navies of the Quad countries (India, the US, Japan and Australia). Then, there is the Yudh Abhyas exercise between the armies and the Cope India exercise involving the air forces. India and the US also conduct the Tiger Triumph tri-service exercise and India participates in the US-led Rim of the Pacific exercise.¹⁸ Cooperation on increasing maritime domain awareness remains an area with immense potential given the focus on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific and China’s growing naval ambitions. Cooperation in outer space is another area of great promise, the latest addition being the understanding between the US Department of Defense’s Space Force and Indian start-ups. Moreover, the relationship has become more comprehensive and increasingly multi-dimensional, with both sides intending to improve bilateral trade and investment, employing emerging technologies across the spectrum, developing joint efforts to shift to greener, increase people-to-people ties and make multilateralism effective to deal with the challenges of the 21st century.¹⁹

Conclusion

This relationship has indeed undergone a major transformation in the last two decades.²⁰ More than any other factor, the rise of China and its strategic ramifications have provided the glue bringing together India and the US in a broad convergence. Over the years, the American beltway cutting across political parties has come to recognise the partnership with India as a strategic asset and New Delhi, regardless of the change in political guards, has come to value the engagement with Washington as crucial for its own rise. Growing mutual understanding on matters of defence and security has grown exponentially and witnessed a shift towards the greater potential for co-development and co-production of technology and equipment.

The defence trade is economics, but building a long-term partnership to increase India’s all-domain deterrent capability is also in America’s strategic interest of managing China’s assertive rise and ensuring a stable order in the Indo-Pacific. India has a rich repository of scientific temper among its young population and is rapidly becoming a centre for

¹⁶ “GE Aerospace signs MOU with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to produce fighter jet engines for Indian Air Force”, GE, 22 June 2023, <https://www.ge.com/news/press-releases/ge-aerospace-signs-mou-with-hindustan-aeronautics-limited-to-produce-fighter-jet-0>.

¹⁷ “India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X)”, U.S. Department of Defense, 21 June 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jun/21/2003244837/-1/-1/0/FACTSHEET-INDUS-X-FINAL.PDF>

¹⁸ “India-U.S.: Major Arms Transfers and Military Exercises”, Congressional Research Service, 29 June 2023, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2023-06-29_IF12438_2f571a4f9992f98dee33894a521982426cfd643b.pdf.

¹⁹ “Joint Statement from the United States and India”, The White House, 22 June 2023.

²⁰ Seema Sirohi, *Friends with Benefits: The India-US Story* (Gurugram: Harper Collins, 2023), p. 10.

innovation. The number of institutional partnerships undergoing and envisioned between India and the US aims to synergise the skill ecosystem in both countries for harnessing the opportunities of a new technological landscape.

.

Dr Monish Tourangbam is a strategic analyst based in India and is the Honorary Director of Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies, India. He can be contacted at monish53@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.