

The India-US Reaper Drone Deal: A New Beginning?

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Summary

India is set to procure 31 MQ-9B Reaper drones from the United States (US) in a US\$3 billion (S\$4 billion) deal poised to usher in a new era of Indo-US relations. However significant the military impact of the drones, their symbolic value will likely be their most noteworthy effect, as Reapers are beacons of strength and status. They will enhance India's global image while simultaneously serving as a boost to indigenous industries, representing a Narendra Modi dual victory. Regional reactions range from unwelcome to hostile, but existing regional dynamics are likely to continue. The deal by no means formally aligns India with the US but rather indicates that cooperation is to be more forthcoming and frequent.

Introduction

India's June 2023 drone deal with the United States (US) represents far more than routine security cooperation between the world's two largest democracies; it arguably represents the consummation of what has been termed the "Biden-Modi honeymoon".¹ Although the agreement's specifics remain unclear, India is set to acquire 31 MQ-9B Reaper drones – otherwise known as Predator Bs – from General Atomics in a deal worth just over US\$3 billion (S\$4 billion).² This deal fulfils a perceived national security need – increased defence and surveillance around both India's northern frontiers and southern maritime zones. India is familiar with the drones – its navy had leased two MQ-9B SeaGuardians – variants of the Reaper from November 2020 to November 2022, primarily using them for maritime surveillance.³ Surveillance comes naturally to these high altitude long endurance drones, but India may arm the drones with strike capabilities as well. The deal holds both military and political significance – not only will it enhance the Indian defence forces' battlefield capabilities, but it will also further cement the burgeoning India-US strategic partnership.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, the Indo-US cooperation has steadily grown, with a White House official recently branding the relationship with India as "[the US'] most important bilateral relationship".⁴ However, security cooperation has not always been as forthcoming, especially in niche technologies. Even after becoming a member of the Missile

¹ Satya Narayan Misra, "A Paradigm Shift in Indo-US Defence Cooperation", Centre for Air Power Studies, 7 July 2023, <https://capsindia.org/a-paradigm-shift-in-indo-us-defence-cooperation/>.

² Vedant Saigal, "India's Prolonged Wait for MQ-9B Drones Ends", *South Asian Voices*, 6 July 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-prolonged-wait-for-mq-9b-drones-ends/>.

³ Manish Kumar Jha, "Predator drones will set the ground for manufacturing HALE drones in India: Navy Chief", *Financial Express*, 28 June 2023, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-predator-drones-will-set-the-ground-for-manufacturing-hale-drones-in-india-navy-chief-3146606/>.

⁴ Alyssa Ayres, "India Is Not a US Ally- and Has Never Wanted to Be", *Time*, 21 June 2023, <https://time.com/6288459/india-ally-us-modi-biden-visit/>.

Technology Control Regime in 2016, President Barack Obama demurred signing a similar deal with India. It took the Donald Trump administration's reinterpretation of the regime in 2020 for India to secure its aforementioned lease deal.⁵ However, set against the backdrop of China's rise, its quest for regional and global primacy and ensuing US-China strategic competition, defence cooperation between India and the US has become a point of strategic convergence. As India looks at the US to balance against China, Washington also realises the importance of maintaining a powerful regional counterweight against China.⁶ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June 2023 seemed to embody a mutual understanding: the relationship makes too much sense to be hindered by historic, normative or political hesitations. India's recognition of Russia's unreliability and the US' desire to diversify New Delhi's defence dependence on Russia has only provided greater momentum to bilateral defence cooperation.⁷

However, questions around military effectiveness, the impact on indigenous defence production and the regional repercussions of the deal need to be further unpacked.

Military Effectiveness

The military effectiveness of any given emerging technology is primarily contingent upon two factors: its capabilities and the ability of the military to harness the same. Reapers are a versatile platform and any military would likely be able to derive considerable effectiveness. They are widely regarded as the most advanced drones in the world, with an endurance of over 27 hours with payload and an ability to perform diverse functions, ranging from covert surveillance to full-fledged offence.⁸ India will primarily use drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; the leased SeaGuardians have helped the Indian navy monitor over 14 million square miles in the Indian Ocean.⁹ However, there are plans to eventually equip the drones with offensive weapons.¹⁰ The drone's versatility can render it a direct replacement for fighter jets in specific scenarios – a tremendous asset, given that drones require significantly less manpower to operate. Analysts disagree over whether a single drone is cheaper overall than a single fighter jet, but they indeed are when manufactured in significant quantities.¹¹

⁵ Daryl G. Kimball, "US Reinterprets MTCR Rules", Arms Control Association, September 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-09/news/us-reinterprets-mtcr-rules>.

⁶ Li Li, "The US Factor and the Evolution of China-India Relations", *China Review*, vol. 23, no. 1 (February 2023): 107-133.

⁷ James Jay Carafano, "India tilts West as Russian ties cool", *Geopolitical Intelligence Services*, 16 May 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/india-russia-united-states/>.

⁸ Sunil Tyagi, "Reaching New Heights: How the MQ-9 Reaper Drones Enhance India's Defence Capabilities and Foster Global Partnerships", Centre for Air Power Studies, 28 June 2023, <https://capsindia.org/reaching-new-heights-how-the-mq-9-reaper-drones-enhance-indias-defence-capabilities-and-foster-global-partnerships/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alex Sundby, "What is a Reaper drone? Here's what to know about the US military's MQ-9 drones", *CBS News*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-drone-reaper-mq9/>.

¹¹ Jon Harper, "More Drones Needed to Fight Two-Front War", *National Defense*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2020/3/10/more-drones-needed-to-fight-two-front-war>.

However, some doubts can be cast upon India's ability to fully harness the capabilities of these drones due to military deficiencies. The 31 drones will be allocated as follows – 15 for the navy and eight each for the army and air force.¹² Spreading risk and widening access appears to be a reasonable tactic but there exist doubts over the inter-agency coordination of the Indian armed forces. The lack of 'joint manship' is a common point of critique of India's military,¹³ and although the navy and the army hold considerable enthusiasm about drones, the air force is allegedly less convinced.¹⁴ The well-documented culture of incongruence between the different branches of the Indian military suggests that the combined potential of the drones may remain unexploited. Even though these drones represent the pinnacle of Western UAV military technology, they cannot be considered a single-point solution to India's security concerns. Multiple US Reapers have been shot down by rebel groups in Yemen and Libya,¹⁵ highlighting their vulnerability from sophisticated enemy air defences. Despite their formidable endurance and payload capabilities, the Reapers feature relatively poor manoeuvrability and no stealth features, rendering them vulnerable to missile defence systems.¹⁶

Even still, it is likely the tangible military impact of the drones will be eclipsed by their impact on both domestic and international perceptions of India's strength, along with what they symbolise for India-US relations. This deal marks the first time the US has agreed to sell these platforms to a non-ally and will also be the most significant foreign purchase of these drones in history.¹⁷ Even if the drones fail to meet expectations, their symbolic value may justify their price tag. Contrary to official claims, the deal seemingly amounts to over US\$100 million (S\$136 million) per drone, while General Atomics values each drone at US\$32 million (S\$43 million).¹⁸ The Bharatiya Janata Party's hyperbole is par for the course but the unprecedented nature of the deal nonetheless signals to both India and the world that the US appears willing to walk the walk regarding its commitment to "steadily advance its Major Defence Partnership with India".¹⁹

¹² Dinakar Peri, "Explained: The India-US deal for 31 MQ-9B drones", *The Hindu*, 25 June 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-the-india-us-deal-for-31-mq-9b-drones/article67008319.ece>.

¹³ Vinod Bhatia, "Too Little Too Late", *FORCE*, 20 May 2019, <https://forceindia.net/guest-column/guest-column-vinod-bhatia/too-little-too-late/>.

¹⁴ Snehash Alex Phillip, "Inside story of why India's military worked to push mega US drone deal", *The Print*, 22 June 2023, <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/inside-story-of-why-indias-military-worked-to-push-mega-us-drone-deal/1636130/>.

¹⁵ Colin Demarest, "Downing of MQ-9 Reaper is latest US drone lost in contested zone", *C4ISRNET*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/unmanned/2023/03/15/downing-of-mq-9-reaper-is-latest-us-drone-lost-in-contested-zone/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jack Daleo, "India to Make Massive Purchase of US Reaper Drones", *Flying Magazine*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.flyingmag.com/india-to-make-massive-purchase-of-us-reaper-drones/>.

¹⁸ "Congress questions high cost of US drone deal; corruption in Opp party's DNA, says BJP", *The Indian Express*, 29 June 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pawan-khera-press-conference-pm-modi-amit-malviya-drones-fir-8690170/>.

¹⁹ Arun Singh, "The Modi-Biden Dynamic for Next Steps in India-US Relations", *Carnegie India*, 16 June 2023, <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/06/16/modi-biden-dynamic-for-next-steps-in-india-US-relations-pub-89972>.

Domestic Industry

Domestically, the deal represents a Modi masterstroke in simultaneously appealing to two key pillars of his governance strategy – enhancing India’s global reputation and the ‘Make in India’ initiative. Notably, India is purchasing the drones unarmed and will be arming the drones at a later stage with indigenously produced weaponry.²⁰ The production site is also key as some sources maintain that all the drones will be manufactured in India while others claim that 10 will be manufactured in the US, with the remaining 21 assembled locally.²¹ It is currently unclear what exactly the US\$3 billion (S\$4 billion) price tag entails and whether it includes components, manufacturing costs and American assistance. Notwithstanding these concerns, the deal may still mark a triumph for indigenous production and foreign relations.

The MQ-9B Reaper has the potential to serve as a long-term boost to India’s rapidly emerging indigenous defence industry. Shortly after the deal’s announcement, the Indian government announced plans for a further 97 medium-category drones to be built entirely in India. This is expected to cost over US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion) but, more significantly, will be “based on the same process” as the Reaper deal.²² This comes at an auspicious time for India’s drone industry, with investments of nearly US\$50 million (S\$68 million) making 2022-2023 the industry’s best ever fiscal year.²³ To attribute all this to foreign involvement such as the Reaper deal would, however, be unfair; India’s biggest drone manufacturer, IdeaForge Technology, recently went public and listed at a 93 per cent premium to its initial public offering price, and Indian defence production is at an all-time high,²⁴ which arguably is necessary if Modi is to succeed in his dual mantra of ‘Make in India, Make for the World’. Concrete conclusions surrounding this deal cannot be made until its details become transparent but thus far, the deal seemingly strikes a careful balance between India’s foreign and domestic ambitions. Yet again, no singular deal completes either process overnight but as a symbolic step, the MQ-9 Reaper deal is hugely significant.

Regional Shockwaves

Symbolic or not, any action which bolsters India’s military strength, let alone one built upon US support, will surely elicit strong reactions from neighbours China and Pakistan. China and Pakistan remain concerned about the Indo-US strategic partnership and India’s growing defence relationship with the US, which may upset the existing balance of power in Indo-Pak and Sino-Indian military dyads. In March 2022, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated

²⁰ Mukul Sharma, “‘Make in India’ becomes top focus in MQ9B drone deal with the US”, *WION*, 30 June 2023, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/make-in-india-becomes-top-focus-in-mq9-b-drone-deal-with-the-us-610555>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Manjeet Negi, “India to acquire 97 new drones under ‘Make in India’ programme”, *India Today*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-97-drone-procurement-for-china-pakistan-border-patrolling-2407927-2023-07-17>.

²³ Manish Pant, “Indian drone industry flies high with 3x growth in investments over 3-years”, *Business Today*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/corporate/story/indian-drone-industry-flies-high-with-3x-growth-in-investments-over-3-years-374728-2023-03-24>.

²⁴ Meghna Sen, “IdeaForge Technology makes a stellar debut, lists at 93% premium to IPO price”, *CNBC TV18*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.cnbc18.com/market/ideaforge-technology-makes-a-stellar-debut-lists-at-93-percent-premium-over-ipo-price-17148111.htm>.

China respects India's "traditional role in the region".²⁵ Although an ambiguous statement, it is clear that the growing synergy between India and the US does not fit into China's definition of India's 'traditional role'. A hallmark of Indian foreign policy has been its emphasis on nonalignment and strategic autonomy. Beijing fears that with Modi, India's foreign policy may take a different turn. Technological accretion will only add further muscle and resolve to India's military deterrent. However, India's technological push can further intensify the already strong security dilemma in the Sino-Indian dyad. Having said that, its military objectives are status quoist and its military strategy is largely defensive in nature. More importantly, the surveillance capabilities of the drones are likely to deter China from Himalayan land grabs akin to June 2020 and allow India to pre-empt any acts of aggression.

Pakistan meanwhile has reportedly turned to China to bolster its own UAV fleet.²⁶ This is a customary response that serves as both a representation and potential source of the security dilemma at hand. The security dilemma's perpetuity is only mitigated with clear channels of communication and the establishment of a certain degree of trust, a distant prospect with regards to Indo-Pakistani relations. In 2022 alone, there were over 300 hostile drone sightings along the India-Pakistan border – up by over triple from the year before.²⁷ The unparalleled capabilities of the Reapers render them effective tools of deterrence but it is hard to imagine Pakistan ceasing all its current border activities due to the addition of 31 drones to India's arsenal. Indian media has unsurprisingly portrayed Pakistan's response of requesting China for backup as one of fear and desperation²⁸ but it was, in fact, their only course of action under the confines of the self-reinforcing security dilemma.

Conclusion

As significant as the Reaper deal's impact will be on regional security, one must, nonetheless, predict and evaluate its significance with restraint. As a practice, India does not enter into formal security alliances with other states²⁹ and the US has declared no desire to do so with India either. The past few months have represented a convergence of strategic interests for the two states but if their respective strategies diverge in the future, they will be no formal mechanism binding the two together. Realistically, for the foreseeable future, India will continue to see China as a threat to its national security and the US will continue to see India as a potential counterweight to China³⁰ but the defence relationship is likely to be limited to singular deals such as this one and highly unlikely to develop into a formal

²⁵ Vijay Gokhale, "A Historical Evaluation of China's India Policy: Lessons for China-India Relations", Carnegie India, 13 December 2022, <https://carnegieindia.org/2022/12/13/historical-evaluation-of-china-s-india-policy-lessons-for-india-china-relations-pub-88621>.

²⁶ Srinjoy Chowdhury, "Exclusive: After India-US Predator Drone Deal, Pakistan Wants More UCAVs, Weapons", *Times Now*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/exclusive-after-india-us-predator-drone-deal-pakistan-wants-more-ucavs-weapons-article-101276179>.

²⁷ Surya Valliappan Krishna and Ashima Singh, "Drone Intrusions Along the India-Pakistan International Border: Countering an Emerging Threat", Carnegie India, 10 July 2023, <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/07/10/drone-intrusions-along-india-pakistan-international-border-countering-emerging-threat-pub-90149>.

²⁸ Chowdhury, op. cit.

²⁹ "What the China-India détente means for the West", *The Economist*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/07/20/what-the-china-india-detente-means-for-the-west>.

³⁰ Li, op. cit.

alliance. And amidst this perhaps self-evident conclusion lies the true significance of the Reaper deal; in a region with relatively fixed conceptions of state behaviour and foreign policy, the break in continuity the Reaper deal represents eclipses any impact it may have on the battlefield, and signals there may yet be twists in the trajectory of Asian order.

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