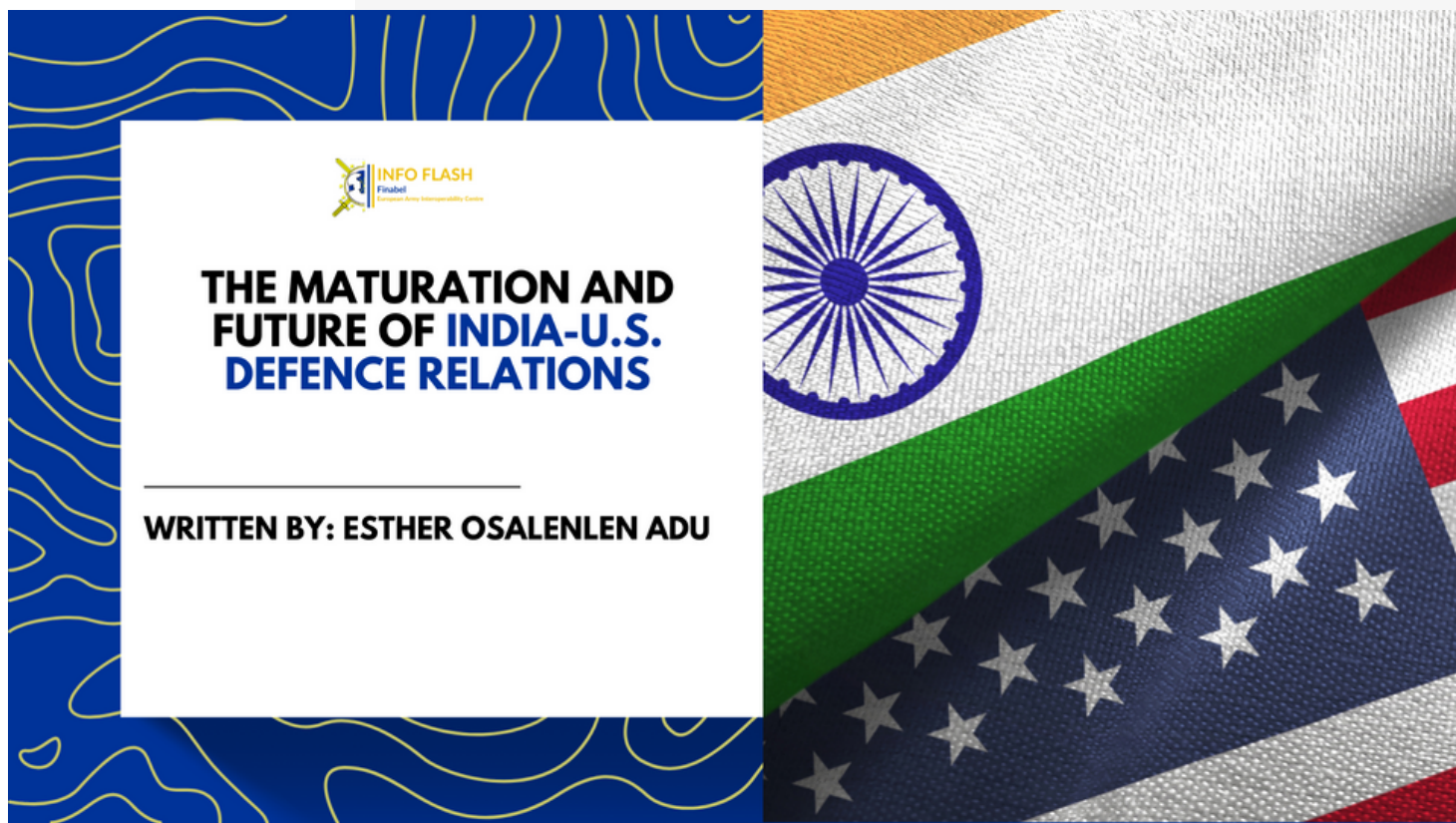


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Abstract

Amidst a changing geopolitical landscape, one intriguing phenomenon that has occurred is the advent of a more pronounced U.S.-India defence cooperation partnership (Sanghera, 2023). This trend was primarily precipitated by India's emergence as a critical global governance actor in the geopolitical arena. This is none more evident in the country's membership and role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), BRICS and its current G20 chairmanship (Panda, 2020). As such, one cannot overlook the saliency of India-U.S. defence relations, particularly in its implications on the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Therefore, this paper will briefly parse through the origins of India-U.S. defence relations and its dynamic progression since the post-Soviet era (Panda, 2020). This will provide the groundwork to assess the future of India-U.S. defence relations in the coming years.

The Historical Background of India-U.S.-Defence Relations

One of the earliest examples of India-U.S. defence relations in India's post-independence era can be traced to the U.S.'s military assistance to India at the height of the 1962 Sino-Indian War (Sanghera, 2023). This also coincided with the Cuban Missile Crisis at the height of the "expansion of communist China" (Davydov & Kurpriyanov, 2022). During this period, India was increasingly recognised as a strategic partner to repel this expansion into Southeast Asia. This is substantiated by the U.S.'s repeated efforts to strengthen its standing in India's domestic affairs through cash and food aid, which amounted to \$57 billion (\$25 billion was focused on food aid) between the period 1954 and 1971 (Davydov & Kurpriyanov, 2022). But this strategy appeared to reap minimal results. This was partly attributable to India's neutral stance during the Cold War, as underpinned by the country's role in founding the Non-Alignment Movement (Wankhede, 2022; Khan, 2022). In turn, the U.S. began its renewed focus on cultivating defence relations with Pakistan. This is evident by the U.S.'s commitment, between 1954-71, of "\$5 billion worth of military aid and \$1.6 billion worth of weapons" (Davydov & Kurpriyanov, 2022).

Coupled with this, there was a marked decline in India-U.S. relations in the following decades. This preceded the Third Indo-Pakistan War in 1971 and its consequential impact on U.S.-Pakistan defence relations following the dramatic defeat of Pakistan. Subsequent events in the region, such as the catastrophic war in Vietnam that led to the U.S.'s withdrawal in 1973, the U.S.'s reproachment with China, and India's signing of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union further waned the U.S.'s influence in Southeast Asia and stalled any real progress in India-U.S. defence relations (Olson, 2023).

This foreshadowed the decades of apathy that lasted well beyond the end of the Cold War (Khan, 2022). One consistent fixture that indicated strained India-US defence relations was India's controversial domestic nuclear weapons program and its subsequent nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998 (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2022). Whilst domestic actors in India insisted that the program was solely for civilian purposes, the U.S. consistently maintained its hard stance not to cooperate with India through the imposition of a "moratorium on nuclear trade" that lasted for 34 years and the array of economic sanctions that the Clinton administration imposed in condemnation of the 1998 nuclear test (Bajoria & Pan, 2010; Ghoshroy, 2016).

That said, the post-9/11 era marked a clear departure from this apathy as India began to be seen as a strategic partner in US-led counterterrorism campaigns in the region. During the Bush administration, this reconfiguration towards India was substantiated by the removal of all sanctions imposed on India following the 1998 nuclear test and the arms embargo that impeded upon the indigenisation of India's defence industry. These defence cooperation activities provided fertile ground for deeper cooperation in the coming decades.

Post-9/11: India as a "Strategic Partner" in the Indo-Pacific

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil and subsequent U.S.-led counterterrorism campaigns, primarily in Afghanistan and Iraq, there were visible signs of a reconfiguration in Washington's approach towards India. This was signalled through the removal of all outstanding sanctions that were imposed on India following the 1998 nuclear test. From there, the U.S. made consistent overtures, particularly under the Bush administration, to engage with India in strategic dialogues. The 2004 "Next Step in Strategic Partnership" (NSSP) was an early development of this objective as the Agreement provided the groundwork to evolve India-U.S. defence trade relations, specifically related to "civil nuclear, civilian space programmes, high-technology trade and missile defence" (Mishra, 2023, p.3). Marking a clear departure from the previous decades of inertia in India-US defence relations as it opened the possibility of deepening bilateral and mutually beneficial defence-related trade (KPMG, 2021, p.9.).

Such an approach would prove fortuitous in later years, notably for India's 2020 economic agenda known as the 'Self-Reliant India Mission', which aims to indigenise a competitive, innovative and advanced defence sector that meets domestic needs and positions the country as a major hub to procure advanced military hardware and services (Clear IAS 2022; Radhakrishna, 2022). In any case, the introduction of such an ambitious domestic defence strategy does provide a strong indicator of the maturation of India-U.S. defence relations and its impact on India's defence industry. This phenomenon can be partly traced to key frameworks that were ratified in the early 2000s and 2010s. One such example is the 2005 India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement that provides a "waiver from the rules of the Nuclear Suppliers Group" without the need for India to become a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Ghoshroy, 2016).

The Agreement provided a boon for India's energy sector as the waiver made it possible for India to engage in nuclear trade. Significantly, the Agreement tactfully addresses one of the most contested issues that hampered any real progress in India-U.S. relations in the preceding decades. So, it cannot be overstated that this Agreement opened the proverbial door to reconstructing India-U.S. relations into a strategic partnership. This is substantiated by the array of agreements that followed the 2005 Agreement, with the aim to expand and diversify defence trade and cooperation between these respective states. Chiefly the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications, Compatibility, General Security of Military Information Agreement Security and the Industrial Security Agreement.

As a result, India-U.S. weapons sales grew from their negligible pre-2008 levels to over \$8 billion in 2013 (Shalal-Esa, 2013). By 2020, defence sales topped over \$20 billion (U.S. Department of States, 2021). This dramatic rise in bilateral sales may be partly attributed to Washington's decision to designate India as a 'major defence partner' in 2016 (Carmack et al., 2022). As a corollary, in 2018, the U.S. Department of Commerce elevated India to the Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 list that enables India to trade on the "same trade benefits afforded to the United States's closest allies under License Exception STA" (HHR, 2018). Together these designations streamline defence trade between India and the U.S. by loosening export controls on military and sensitive dual-use technology (KPMG, 2021, p.8), thus facilitating opportunities for technology transfers that contribute to developing India's defence manufacturing capabilities (KPMG, 2021, p.15). In fact, between 2022-23, India's exports of indigenous defence equipment amounted to \$1.5 billion, and there are plans to reach \$5 billion by 2024-25 (Mandal, 2023).

The U.S.'s "Pivot to Asia"

But beyond the dramatic rise in bilateral defence sales, specific policies have also contributed to positioning India as a strategic partner of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. Under the Obama administration, one such policy was the 'Pivot to the East'. In sum, this policy advocated the need for the U.S. to gradually disengage from the Middle East and Europe and reassert its presence in Southeast Asia by focusing on trade and diplomacy (Singh, 2023). The necessity for this shift was primarily attributed to the dramatic economic rise of China and its ambition to become a major actor in global economic governance (Werner, 2021, pp. 14-16). Whilst this policy did not lead to substantial inroads in the region in terms of economic ties, as evidenced by the short-lived trade agreement – the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (Granville, 2017). Or that the U.S. remained bogged down in Europe due to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea (Olszanski et al., 2014). It did, however, reassert India's crucial role in the Indo-Pacific and its ability to potentially counter China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. Arguably, the designation of India as a 'strategic partner' of the U.S. in 2016 and India remaining a core member of the Quad, elucidate this assertion (Associated Press, 2022).

Besides, the renewal of the 2005 NSSP in 2015 and the establishment of the annual '2+2 ministerial dialogue' in 2018 marked a clear progression in India-U.S. defence cooperation. In particular, the '2+2 ministerial dialogues' have created synergies between defence and foreign policy personnel to address matters of security and defence (Mishra, 2023, p.8). Coupled with the renewal of NSSP, it significantly contributed to building points of commonalities that have encouraged "military-to-military exchanges and partnership", such as inter alia, joint or combined military exercises (especially targeting maritime security and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific), counterterrorism operations, and sharing intelligence information (Mishra, 2023, p.4). As an aside, these engagements have tacitly contributed to establishing a common objective shared by the respective partners on the future of the Indo-Pacific as "free, open and secure" (Mishra, 2023, p.5). The fact that this objective is shared amongst Indian and U.S. counterparts demonstrates that the reconfiguration towards India in the early 2000s has begun to pay off. More significantly, it substantiates that India-U.S. defence relations have begun to shift beyond defence sales or cooperation into a broader strategic partnership that could guide future bilateral engagements beyond the Indo-Pacific. Whether this points to a maturation of India-U.S. defence relations remains to be seen as evident by later engagements between New Delhi and Washington from 2016 and onwards.

A Changing Geopolitical Landscape Requires a New Vision

The U.S.'s 'Pivot to Asia' policy certainly laid the groundwork that would redefine India-U.S. defence relations for years to come. The policy reasserted the saliency of building diversified defence relations between India and the U.S. to manage Southeast Asia's multipolar environment. More importantly, it highlighted the crucial role of India in managing this new geopolitical environment, thus representing a strategic partner for the U.S. and Western allies (Saha, 2020, p.26). Both states frequently tout this ambition, particularly when it concerns the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific in key forums, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as the Quad) (Mishra, 2023, p.5; Panda, 2020). Even India's foreign policy approach reflects this objective for the Indo-Pacific, as indicated by the country's 'Act East Policy' (Kaura, 2018). A policy that emphasises the need for India to foster strategic partnerships in its vicinity to counter China's growing influence in Southeast Asia (Kaura, 2018). Examples like these indicate shared interests between India and the U.S., but it is unclear whether this has translated into a shared vision.

For instance, various commentators have remarked that despite the shared interests concerning the Indo-Pacific, this has not transformed into a mutual strategic outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Kaura, 2018). This is evident in India's focus on more economic aspects, such as regional trade and development, whilst the U.S. seems to downplay this aspect and is more focused on establishing strategic security advantages, primarily through military assets (Saha, 2020, p.10 and 23). This partly explains why recent defence agreements and dialogues have been focused on facilitating bilateral defence trade, technology transfer and military-to-military exchanges, as mentioned earlier (Mishra, 2023, p.4). Or that the U.S. has committed about "60 percent of its global naval assets in the region" (Saha, 2020, p.3). Whilst this has contributed to enhancing India's defence capacities, it should be seen as an opportunity to diversify and thus deepen India-U.S. defence relations. (Saha, 2020, p.27). If not, there is a risk of a repeat of the previous decades of apathy in India-U.S. relations once the current geopolitical tension in Southeast Asia has been abated. This will not be easy as India's "strategic autonomy remains an unconditional priority" (Davydov & Kupriyanov, 2022).

To allay this concern, the U.S. should refocus its efforts on economic aspects related to trade and investment in India's defence and manufacturing sector to unlock joint-venture or co-developed projects between public and private actors. These exchanges may enhance India's defence capabilities to engage in "greater operational cooperation to share the burden" with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific (Lalwani & Singh, 2023). Likewise, India should reemphasise its "Act East Policy" to emphasise that India can play a crucial role beyond countering China's influence in Southeast Asia. This shift could contribute to building a long-term vision for India-U.S. defence cooperation that projects a shared vision or strategy concerning the Indo-Pacific. Such an approach would be a sharp departure from the past as it would establish India-U.S. defence cooperation as the status quo, not a momentary necessity.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that India-U.S. defence relations have rapidly progressed into a strategic partnership that will have broader implications for the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region for years to come. As such, both states should capitalise on this momentum and work on a shared strategy that deepens, thus diversifies India-U.S. defence cooperation to sustain a degree of longevity that would mark a sharp departure from the preceding decades. If some semblance of this sentiment can be realised in the coming decades, India-U.S. defence relations will have genuinely matured into a strategic alliance.

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