

Balancing Asia and Beyond: India-US Defense Cooperation and the Future of Global Security

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Abstract: *India–United States (US) defense cooperation has undergone a profound transformation in the 21st century, shaped by convergent security interests in the Indo-Pacific, shared concerns over China’s rise, and a mutual desire to preserve a stable global order. This research article examines the evolution, strategic motivations, and global implications of India-US defense cooperation. It assesses the partnership’s impact on the regional security architecture, especially within the Indo-Pacific, and evaluates its broader contribution to global security through defense trade, counterterrorism engagement, maritime security, and emerging technology collaboration. The study also critically identifies structural challenges ranging from divergent strategic cultures to technological constraints and outlines future pathways for strengthening bilateral and multilateral impact. Drawing from academic scholarship and strategic analyses, the article offers an integrated, systems-level assessment of India–US defense relations in a changing global landscape.*

Keywords: India–US defense cooperation, Indo-Pacific security, strategic partnership, maritime security.

1. Introduction

India–US defense cooperation has become one of the defining strategic relationships of the post–Cold War era. Historically constrained by distrust and divergent geopolitical alignments, the relationship has evolved into a comprehensive partnership marked by high-level defense dialogues, foundational interoperability agreements, defense-industrial collaboration, and multilateral coordination within the Indo-Pacific (Pant 2017). This shift has been propelled by structural changes in the international system, notably China’s increasing assertiveness, the United States’ refocusing on the Indo-Pacific, and India’s gradual departure from traditional non-alignment toward multi-alignment (Mohan 2003).

The partnership has strengthened India’s military capabilities, bolstered deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, and enabled greater coordination on maritime security, counterterrorism, and emerging technologies. However, despite these gains, India–US defense cooperation remains shaped by persistent constraints: Indian strategic autonomy, US expectations of alignment, India’s legacy dependence on Russian military hardware, and bureaucratic impediments in defense procurement. A systematic review is thus essential to understand the global implications of this partnership as geopolitics enters a phase of heightened competition.

2. Evolution and Contemporary Dynamics of India–US Defense Cooperation

The trajectory of India–US defense cooperation can be divided into three major phases: Cold War estrangement, post-1991 rapprochement, and post-2005 strategic partnership.

During the Cold War, India’s non-alignment and strategic proximity to the Soviet Union limited cooperation with the United States (Brands 2018). Washington’s military support for Pakistan during the 1950s and 1960s, and again during the Afghan jihad, created enduring mistrust. India’s 1998

nuclear tests initially worsened ties, but the subsequent US–India dialogue led by Strobe Talbott and Jaswant Singh paved the way toward normalization (Raghavan 2017).

The 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement constituted a watershed moment, removing long-standing political barriers and symbolizing recognition of India as a responsible nuclear power (Tellis 2006). It opened the gates for accelerated defense cooperation. The signing of defense framework agreements (2005, 2015, 2021), enhanced defense trade, and establishment of the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) expanded the relationship into technology co-development and strategic planning (Pant and Bommakanti 2019).

The Indo-Pacific emerged as the central theater of cooperation in the 2010s. U.S. doctrines under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations increasingly emphasized a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” complementary to India’s Act East Policy and evolving Indo-Pacific vision (Smith 2020). The revival and institutionalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2017 further aligned strategic objectives among India, the US, Japan, and Australia (Medcalf 2020).

Today, the partnership is underpinned by three foundational agreements: LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020) which enable logistical access, encrypted communication, and high-quality geospatial intelligence sharing. This has allowed India and the US to conduct more sophisticated military exercises, enhance maritime surveillance, and coordinate responses to regional contingencies.

3. Defense Cooperation and Its Impact on Regional Security Architecture

India–US defense cooperation has significantly shaped the Indo-Pacific’s evolving security architecture. The region is increasingly recognized as the central arena for geopolitical competition, where China’s expanding military footprint

presents both immediate and long-term challenges for regional balance (Scott 2018).

Strategic alignment between India and the US is driven in large part by shared concerns about China's assertiveness from its militarization of the South China Sea to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expansion and its aggressive posture along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India. This convergence has encouraged deeper operational coordination, including enhanced maritime domain awareness, anti-submarine warfare collaboration, and regular naval exercises such as the Malabar series. Malabar, now institutionalized among the four Quad nations, has become a symbol of multilateral maritime cooperation focused on safeguarding the Indo-Pacific commons.

Beyond balancing China, India-US cooperation contributes to regional deterrence architectures. As India acquires advanced surveillance systems, helicopters, and aircraft from the United States, its naval and air capabilities gain significant strength, improving the balance of power in contested zones. Intelligence sharing under COMCASA and geospatial coordination under BECA has further enhanced India's situational awareness particularly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where China seeks to establish logistical footholds (Tellis 2013).

The partnership also influences South Asian dynamics. While Washington maintains limited ties with Pakistan, the reduction in US military assistance to Islamabad has strengthened India's position in the regional military balance. Deterrence in the subcontinent arguably benefits from India's improved capabilities, though risks of crisis instability and miscalculation persist (Ganguly and Kapur 2010).

In Southeast Asia, India's growing naval engagement complements US efforts to support ASEAN countries in maritime capacity-building. As China attempts to shape the regional order through military and economic pressure, India and the US contribute to reinforcing norms of freedom of navigation, transparency, and ASEAN centrality (Medcalf 2020).

4. Contribution to Global Security

Beyond the Indo-Pacific, India US defense cooperation supports global security across multiple domains. Counterterrorism remains a major pillar of convergence, with intelligence sharing, joint investigations, and operations targeting transnational terror networks (Fair 2014). US support for India's efforts to sanction Pakistan-based groups reflects deepening alignment in global counterterrorism norms.

The partnership is particularly significant in safeguarding global maritime commons. With 60 percent of global trade passing through the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Smith 2021), India and the US coordinate on maritime security, anti-piracy missions, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR). Their combined naval presence enhances the security of major shipping lanes, ensuring uninterrupted flow of global commerce.

Emerging technologies represent another area of collaboration with global implications. India and the US increasingly cooperate on artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, satellite systems, and unmanned technologies under the iCET (US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies). This collaboration shapes global norms in responsible military AI, digital infrastructure security, and supply chain resilience.

India's prominent role in UN peacekeeping, combined with US logistical and training capabilities, also creates scope for joint global peace operations and capacity-building missions in Africa and other fragile regions. Such cooperation reinforces the global governance architecture. (Kapur 2024)

5. Challenges and Limitations in the Global Security Context

Despite notable advances, India-US defense cooperation faces persistent structural constraints that temper its global impact.

A major friction point arises from divergent strategic cultures. India's adherence to strategic autonomy rooted in its postcolonial identity and geopolitical constraints limits the extent to which it aligns with US expectations, especially in crises involving Russia or Iran (Mohan 2003). The United States, accustomed to alliance-based partnerships, often anticipates stronger political alignment than India is willing to offer.

India's continued dependence on Russian military equipment complicates interoperability with the US. Russia remains India's primary supplier in critical systems such as air defense, submarines, and legacy platforms (Raghavan 2017). US sanctions legislation, such as CAATSA, periodically generates uncertainty about India's acquisitions, particularly following its purchase of the S-400 system.

Technology transfer remains another contentious issue. Washington's reluctance to share certain sensitive technologies jet engines, advanced drones, stealth systems—reflects concerns about intellectual property and end-use monitoring (Pant and Bommakanti 2019). Meanwhile, India's push for indigenization under Atmanirbhar Bharat often slows procurement and complicates joint development.

Regional sensitivities also limit India-US cooperation. Some ASEAN states fear that deeper alignment may contribute to bloc formation in the Indo-Pacific, undermining regional neutrality. China routinely interprets India-US cooperation as containment, which increases military friction along the Himalayan border and in the maritime domain.

Finally, bureaucratic hurdles on both sides India's slow procurement processes and the United States' restrictive export controls continue to impede progress. These structural obstacles require institutional reforms and sustained political commitment. (Medcalf 2020)

6. Opportunities, Future Pathways, and Strategic Recommendations

The evolving global environment presents significant opportunities for India and the US to deepen cooperation and expand their global security impact.

A major opportunity lies in co-development and co-production of advanced military systems. Joint work on jet engines, unmanned systems, anti-drone technologies, and space situational awareness already underway can be scaled significantly (Kapur 2024). Such initiatives enhance India's defense industrial base while bolstering US interests in diversifying supply chains.

Maritime coalition-building represents another pathway for enhancing global impact. India and the US can forge minilateral coalitions with France, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian partners to strengthen maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific (Scott 2018). These coalitions can improve interoperability, information sharing, and crisis response.

Collaboration on emerging technologies should be institutionalized under long-term frameworks focused on AI governance, cyber defense, semiconductors, and space security (Smith 2021). The iCET platform offers a foundation, but greater coordination between private sector, academia, and defense establishments is needed.

India and the US can also jointly shape global counterterrorism architecture. Enhanced intelligence fusion, targeted sanctions, and capacity-building in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa can strengthen global resilience against extremist networks (Fair 2014).

Finally, the two nations should strengthen strategic dialogue mechanisms. A structured India-US Strategic Security Dialogue supported by sub-groups for maritime security, cyber, space, emerging technologies, and counterterrorism would streamline cooperation and reduces misunderstandings. Such institutionalization ensures that cooperation outlasts political changes.

7. Conclusion

India-US defense cooperation has emerged as a central pillar of the contemporary global security order. Driven by shared interests in balancing China, preserving a rules-based Indo-Pacific, safeguarding maritime commons, and shaping technological norms, the partnership has achieved unprecedented depth. Yet the relationship remains tempered by structural challenges India's strategic autonomy, legacy dependence on Russia, technological constraints, and regional sensitivities.

Despite these limitations, the long-term trajectory remains strongly positive. As the world enters a phase of intensified great-power competition and technological disruption, India and the United States possess mutual incentives to deepen cooperation. With institutional reforms, focused investments in defense technology, and expanded multilateral coordination, the India-US partnership can become a cornerstone of global stability in the twenty-first century.

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