

U.S.-India Defense Relations: Strategic Perspectives

Aero India 2007, India's biennial aerospace exhibition, witnessed some 400 aviation companies from 33 countries competing fiercely for coveted Indian defense deals. U.S. presence at the show, the largest international presence represented, was seen as yet another indication that strategic relations between India and the United States continue to strengthen. The two countries share some important strategic priorities, including their views of Indian Ocean and Asian security. However, they have fairly different outlooks on the Middle East and in some respects on China, issues that will require more serious discussion. How this relationship develops in the next decade or so will hinge on careful management and long-term thinking by both New Delhi and Washington.

Two photos captured the mood of the moment at India's annual air show, Aero India 2007, held in Bangalore, India, in February 2007. They showed Ratan Tata, CEO of the company that founded Air India and that has become a byword for India's international corporate



Source: Associated Foreign Press

presence, about to take to the air at the controls of an F-16 and an F-18. Both aircraft were contestants for the show's most sought-after deal, a prospective contract from the Indian Air Force for 126 multi-role combat aircraft over the next five years. The procurement budget of the Indian Air Force is estimated at between \$8 billion and \$10 billion, a substantial portion of which will be spent on the combat aircraft deal. This is the first time that the Government of India is seriously considering major U.S. manufacturers such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin for defense deals. Clearly, the improved relationship between both countries has fostered a more conducive environment for the defense dialogue to move forward.

The emerging U.S.-India defense relationship has been

defined largely in operational terms by the increasingly numerous and sophisticated joint exercises the two countries have conducted and their growing willingness to work toward interoperability and defense trade. It is also based on an overlap in their strategic interests that is only partly covered by the formal strategic dialogue between the U.S. Defense Department and the Indian Ministry of Defense. Both the common elements and the differences will shape the U.S.-India relationship over the next decade.

New Delhi's strategic goals: India's strategic interests in Asia are two-fold: ensuring security in its immediate neighborhood and protecting India's interests, including its economic and energy needs, in the rest of Asia and the Middle East. Indian officials believe that the most likely military contingencies they face in the medium term are "Kargils and Tsunamis"—sharp, limited land engagements on their borders and broader humanitarian problems in the extended region. They seek capabilities that would equip India to make its presence felt in the area, from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia, and to respond if necessary to other kinds of contingencies.

India's national security policy is based on the premise that its immediate neighborhood is dangerous and that regional instability from neighboring countries fuels India's internal insurgencies. India's relationship with Pakistan has been troubled from the start and has often been a sticking point for the United States. Insurgents in Kashmir have close ties with counterparts in Pakistan. Central India's "Naxalite" revolutionaries are said to have loose ties with Maoists in Nepal. India has traditionally discouraged any direct U.S. involvement in the region's geopolitics. Improved relations with the United States, however, have brought Indian and U.S. policies into closer alignment on problems in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Beyond the immediate South Asian region, India's broader concerns in Asia include ensuring the security of India's lifelines for trade, investment, and most importantly, energy. Indian security analysts draw a

distinction between the promising area to India's east and the troubled region to India's west. To the east, India has built up its political, economic, and military relations, especially with Singapore and Japan. The fact that Indian officials see their economic relations in Asia as a security issue is in itself an indication of how their view of security has broadened in the past decade. Maritime security in the Indian Ocean has become an increasingly important strategic concern as India's energy needs continue to grow.

India's defense policy in the South Asian region is essentially land-based, and the army has long been the dominant service. By contrast, security in an Asian and Indian Ocean context relies much more on the sea and the air. As a result, the bulk of India's plans for procurement of major new military systems are for the navy and air force. The Indian Navy wants to remain the predominant military force in the Indian Ocean. Its doctrine makes a distinction between areas close to India's shores, where the navy expects to be able to exclude other powers, and those further out to sea, where it recognizes that exclusion is not feasible and, implicitly at least, that it must aim to operate in cooperation with other powers. In recent years, its relations with the U.S. Navy have become closer and friendlier. The prospect of a future Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, on the other hand, is something India's security analysts are watching uneasily.

In the west, by contrast, India believes that instability and Islamic extremism could spill over from Afghanistan and Central Asia, to India's detriment. India's need for energy supplies makes the Persian Gulf a particular concern. India currently imports 70 percent of its oil needs and in the next decade expects to import almost 90 percent of its increased oil demands. In addition, India has a substantial number of its nationals working in the Persian Gulf.

Washington's strategic interests: In the past, the two areas of major U.S. strategic interest were the western Pacific and the Middle East and Persian Gulf. The increasing U.S. focus on political and economic relationships in Asia and the rise of China and India have increased India's strategic importance in U.S. eyes. India's democratic heritage, impressive economic performance, and civilian control of the military are all seen as attractive factors in pursuing a closer strategic relationship. U.S. officials expect India to play a major role in shaping Asia's strategic environment.

The United States would like to include India in its international efforts to prevent terrorism, stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), assist in the war on terror, and ensure the security of energy lanes in the Indian Ocean. India has joined the Container Security Initiative, which is aimed at improving the security of international trade, but has thus far not joined the Proliferation Security Initiative, a loose understanding on procedures for international cooperation to prevent the onward spread of nuclear weapons equipment and technology.

Senior U.S. naval officers have spoken of a "global maritime partnership," or a "thousand-ship navy," a framework for cooperation including both naval and civilian maritime assets of countries throughout Asia and the Indian Ocean. They see India as a uniquely valuable participant in this type of flexible structure for working together. Both this concept and the practical experience of working with India following the Asian Tsunami of 2005 lead the United States to stress the importance of interoperability in its emerging relations with India.

Common ground: Both the United States and India



seek peaceful engagement with China, although both also view China as a potential long-term security concern and neither wants to see Asia dominated by a single country. Nevertheless, China is a major trading partner for both the United States and India, and neither country wants to exacerbate Chinese concerns about "encirclement" or treat China as an enemy. India, however, does not want to be regarded as an element in a U.S. strategy toward China.

The security of energy lanes in the Indian Ocean is perhaps the issue on which U.S. and Indian analysts agree most strongly. Like their Indian counterparts, U.S. security officials consider the safety of sea lanes crucial to national security. U.S. interest in the Indian Ocean is primarily motivated by a desire to protect global energy markets. Over half of the world's oil supplies travel through sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, and disruption of energy supplies would have a major impact on the United States regardless of whether U.S. supplies specifically travel through these waters.

Divergent views: The biggest contrast between U.S. and Indian security goals has to do with India-Pakistan relations. India sees Pakistan as the principal source of terrorism, and one that affects India not just in Kashmir but also in other parts of the country. Washington sees Pakistan primarily as an ally in the war on terror, albeit one that is under U.S. pressure to deal more effectively with domestic Islamic militant groups.

In the Middle East, India and the United States share concerns about terrorism and energy supply but differ on what to do about them. India has good relations with Israel, including important military supply ties, but has generally avoided other actions that could antagonize the Arab countries. It has grave misgivings about U.S. policies in Iraq and on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. India has also declined a U.S. invitation to send an army division to participate in the postwar management of Iraq. Another bone of contention in the Middle East is Iran. The United States would like to see Iran isolated and contained, whereas India continues to pursue energy deals with Iran and depends on Iran to provide it with land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Even where U.S. and Indian strategic goals are similar, there are important differences in how they expect to achieve them. India's desire to diversify its sources of energy and its concern about Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean, for example, have led it to make overtures to the military junta in Myanmar (Burma), a contrast to the hard line Washington has maintained. Similar differences in perspective have come up over Indian oil deals in Sudan and Nigeria.

Turning strategic overlap into partnership: India and the United States have carried on a formal strategic dialogue for almost a decade. The primary regular mechanism for this conversation is the Defense Policy Group, which has focused mainly on briefings on broader U.S. policies and on discussing relatively noncontroversial issues on which India and the United States share similar views. In addition, the two countries maintain a Joint Working Group on Terrorism, which has been most successful in dealing with operational aspects of the problem and has not attempted to resolve differences over Pakistan.

Real strategic exchange is relatively new for both Indians and Americans. India's sensitivity about its relations with China and U.S. concerns about Pakistan have made it difficult for India and the United States to have candid consultations on the issues that are the most

important to their future strategic interests. If the two countries are to achieve a real "strategic partnership," that kind of candor will need to develop, along with increased familiarity with each other's military practices and a nuanced understanding of strategic outlooks.

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