



US-India Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Locating Key Issues

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The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a metageography sitting at the heart of the ongoing churn in global geopolitics. The economic and security interests of both India and the United States converge in the Indo-Pacific, perhaps as in no other region. The vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific has forged a common regional purpose between the two countries, which is directly or indirectly rooted in security. For both countries, their regional concerns, including open sea lines of communication, piracy, trafficking of all kinds, free and fair trade and investment, and above all a favorable balance of power, are all undergirded by elements of security. In ensuring that the Indo-Pacific region remains free and open, but most importantly in providing “autonomy and options” to regional countries, the US and India are strong partners.¹

CHALLENGES

The emerging political architecture of the Indo-Pacific is primarily driven by competition between the region’s major powers. While competition between the United States and China is at the core of this dynamic, it is equally shaped by China’s engagement with other countries—small and big—in the Indo-Pacific. As a result, major powers are scrambling to ensure early advantages in areas of critical strategic importance, including strengthening relations with other countries in the region. For both India and the US, China remains the foremost concern in this regard in the Indo-Pacific, with its increasing ability to influence countries through investments and financial obligations.

The Biden administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) underscores maintaining “collective capacity” and a “strong and consistent defense presence” as strategies necessary to ensure regional security.² Although the US has a number of treaty allies in the

Pacific theater, it considers India, as the world's largest democracy and a recognized "Major Defense Partner," with a vast peninsula in the Indian Ocean, as essential to achieving its strategic objectives and ensuring a favorable balance of power in the region. As such, India's political and economic stability, its status as a credible yet responsible nuclear power, and its concerns regarding China have all contributed to the strengthening of joint India-US resolve in the Indo-Pacific region.

One of the cornerstones of US policy in the Indo-Pacific region is integrated deterrence. As outlined in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific policy, integrated deterrence consists of three components: an intraforce component addressing collaborative activities between the various branches of the US armed forces; an intra-agency approach facilitating efforts between various departments of the US government; and an approach focused on working with partners and allies across various warfighting domains and spectrums of conflict. As India and the US today conduct the largest number of military exercises between any two countries, the relationship could benefit from leveraging integrated deterrence, particularly by promoting jointness between the armed forces of the two countries.³ Integrated deterrence is also critical to reinforcing collective security in the Indo-Pacific, defending against coercive attempts to create new geographies, redraw territorial boundaries, and challenge states' sovereign rights at sea.

The US Indo-Pacific strategy falls short on institutional mechanisms to address regional challenges in a comprehensive manner. This impediment is compounded by the vastness and diversity of a region that transcends traditional geographies. The emerging multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, whereby the European countries are increasingly drawn to the region, also creates opportunities for both the US and India to share burdens with a growing number of stakeholders.

POSSIBILITIES FOR COOPERATION

The western Indian Ocean could emerge as a new area of opportunity for both the US and India in the Indo-Pacific. This subgeography has largely remained outside India's traditional maritime vision. However, the Indo-Pacific concept places the western Indian Ocean at the heart of strategic concerns for both India and the United States.

From its doctrinaire definition of the Indo-Pacific as a region extending from "Hollywood to Bollywood," the US has come to now see the entire Indian Ocean as part of the Indo-Pacific.⁴ This squares the US with India's expansive view of the region. In light of some of the bilateral and multilateral developments in the region, the western Indian Ocean could play a pivotal role in US-India cooperation. There are at least four ways in which this subregion could emerge as a theater of opportunity, buttressing joint US-India strategic efforts.

First, a full-spectrum operationalization of the foundational strategic agreements between the US and India could lead to enhanced jointness and coordination, mutual training, better

maritime domain awareness, and sharing of information in the entire Indo-Pacific, including its western reaches.⁵ Second, as European states increasingly establish a regional vision and presence, a strategic continuum of like-minded actors will emerge from west to east, in the form of Djibouti–Réunion Island–Diego Garcia for coalading security. They can work together with the US and India to offset regional threats. Third, India’s recent decision to join the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which was announced during the Fourth Annual US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, in April 2022, expands the India-US security partnership, particularly in the western Indian Ocean.⁶ The CMF will also integrate India-US joint efforts through close coordination via the CMF headquarters in Bahrain together with the global partnership in the region to uphold the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Bilaterally, India-US strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is guided by established institutional mechanisms such as the 2+2 framework and the Major Defense Partner status of India. At the policy level, the Quad—consisting of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—stands out as one of the most potentially robust institutional mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific. Its strategic importance for the Indo-Pacific makes it a source of constant consternation for Beijing. The inclusion of Australia in the Malabar naval exercise starting in 2020 elevated the Malabar exercise to the same four-country level as the Quad.⁷ Beyond regional security, the Quad’s working groups on vaccines, climate change, infrastructure, space, cyber security, and critical and emerging technologies have further cemented partnerships among the four member countries. To enhance their impact on regional security, Quad members could increase joint patrols on either side of the Strait of Malacca. Involving European partners keen to advance their own Indo-Pacific interests can further bolster the region’s free, open, and inclusive credentials.

Yet, because of underlying core differences in both countries’ outlooks and interests, they sometimes view the Indo-Pacific differently as a strategic space. While the US looks at the Indo-Pacific primarily from a doctrinal and strategic lens, India’s view of the region lies dispersed between a vision, an outlook, and a strategy. Although these nuances have not prevented India-US cooperation, the two countries should develop more institutional mechanisms to guard against possible problems in the future.

The dawn of a reformed multilateral order in which India is negotiating its own distinct place has necessitated larger regional responsibilities in the Indo-Pacific region, and working with like-minded countries like the US is a critical component of that pursuit. In the past decade, India has complemented its partnership with the US in the Indo-Pacific region with a home-grown outlook that seeks to integrate regional growth with national security objectives. The premier framework outlining this vision for India has been the concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).⁸

Nontraditional aspects of security are no longer secondary concerns for the US and India in the Indo-Pacific. Risks of climate-induced changes, food shortages, communicable diseases, terrorism, energy shortages, and inflation all have the potential to rapidly transform

short-term and reshape long-term objectives in the Indo-Pacific. The 2004 post-tsunami cooperation between the Quad countries remains a strong template for collaboration during regional disasters. Furthermore, India's participation in the CMF could be a good start for coordination between India and the US on issues such as piracy, trafficking, and freedom of navigation.

Finally, the evolution of technology brings new opportunities for the US and India in the Indo-Pacific. Technology cooperation assumes significance in a rapidly changing threat domain where technological evolution is directly linked to evolving threats in the cyber realm, in space, and with respect to critical and emerging technologies. Particularly, the India-US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), launched in May 2022, is intended as an outcome-oriented step in bilateral cooperation. This initiative is being jointly led by the National Security Council Secretariat in India and the US National Security Council and has been provided momentum by the inaugural meeting between the national security advisors from the two sides on January 31, 2023.⁹ The initiative is expected to significantly advance US-India bilateral cooperation. In the realm of critical and emerging technologies, iCET envisions creating an "innovation bridge" with India by connecting six of India's Technology Innovation Hubs. This connection is meant to help at least twenty-five joint research projects in fields like AI and data science and apply their results to areas such as agriculture, health, and climate.¹⁰

The US-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) is a framework that can leverage private industry partnerships to affect regional security. For instance, codeveloping air-launched UAVs, counter-unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR) platforms could all be game changers for joint US-India cooperation in the waters of the Indo-Pacific in the future. In the past, DTTI was hampered by a mix of factors ranging from bureaucratic sluggishness to export-control mandates and demand-supply mismatch between the two sides. There is, however, a new momentum in DTTI projects since 2021, based on a revised Statement of Intent focused on "[strengthening] our dialogue on defence technology cooperation by pursuing detailed planning and making measurable progress" on several specific DTTI efforts.¹¹

In this regard, iCET is important as it seeks to bypass bureaucratic hurdles and red tape that frequently impede technological collaboration between the US and India. To accomplish this goal, iCET has introduced a new bilateral defense industrial cooperation agenda aimed at providing a boost to defense technology cooperation with a focus on joint development and production. One of the initial projects under this vision is collaboration on jet engines. Notably, in this regard, the US is evaluating a proposal from General Electric (GE) to jointly produce jet engines for indigenous fighter aircraft in India. This includes the GE-414 engines, which have been designated by India to power its indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA)-Mk2 and the fifth-generation Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). As such, the iCET is expected to buttress DTTI.¹² This type of mutually reinforcing technology cooperation could be just what is needed to help push India-US defense cooperation to the next level.

NOTES

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2. National Security Council, "Indo-Pacific Strategy."
3. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Brief on US-India Relations," June 2017, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_US_brief.pdf.
4. National Security Council, "Indo-Pacific Strategy"; also see Andrew Phillips, "From Hollywood to Bollywood? Australia's Indo/Pacific Future in a Contested Asia," *The Strategist*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hollywood-bollywood-australias-indopacific-future-contested-asia>.
5. The four foundational agreements are General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA); Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA); Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA).
6. The CMF consists of four Combined Task Forces (CTFs), which have their primary activities willy-nilly tethered to the western Indian Ocean: CTF 150 (Maritime Security Operations outside the Arabian Gulf); CTF 151 (Counter-Piracy); CTF 152 (Maritime Security Operations inside the Arabian Gulf), and CTF 153 (Red Sea Maritime Security).
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11. Ministry of Defence, "India and US Hold 11th Defence Technology & Trade Initiative Group Meeting Virtually," November 10, 2021, press release, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseSelfPage.aspx?PRID=1770443>.
12. Mishra, "iCET: Upscaling India-US Partnership."



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