Enhancing U.S.-India Defense Cooperation

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Great powers are often characterized by a worldview that is widely shared from generation to generation—a strategic culture, and a good deal of consistency in vision and strategic priorities. The present visions of the U.S. and Indian elites go back to roughly World War II. The United States sought—in that war and in the subsequent Cold War—to create a world order in which its economic and ideological interests would be protected; this vision was implemented through a strategy of alliance, institution-building and democracy-promotion. India – which became the world's largest democracy when it became a republic in 1950 – saw a desirable world order as one in which colonialism was rooted out and replaced by a non-aligned block that would be free of Cold War pressures, allowing India to take its proper place as one of the great civilizational powers, even if its economic and military power measured in traditional terms might not immediately rival some of the other great powers. These visions were, in their historical context, like ships that pass in the night.

The implementation of each nation's strategy after World War II led to friction, however. In America's case, while India was the leading recipient of U.S. foreign aid, Pakistan was built up as a bulwark against Communist expansion—and defense ties with India only complicated relations with Pakistan. For India, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Soviet connection were ways of balancing U.S. regional influence in South Asia and obtaining an alternative source of military hardware respectively.

Except for three occasions, the relationship was generally characterized by indifference. After the 1962 India-China war military ties and intelligence cooperation expanded, culminating in considerable grant of military assistance plus sales, and plans for a U.S.-provided air defense system. This dissipated when the United States took a neutral stance during the 1965 India-Pakistan war, and trended towards hostility when Washington seemingly threatened India during the 1971 India-Pakistan war. There began a period when India became totally dependent on the Soviet Union for major weapons systems. It also initiated a nuclear weapons program in this period.

A new period of strategic engagement began after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and there were discussions—albeit futile—of American technology sales to India, especially the development of a light combat aircraft. Americans had serious doubts about India's technical capabilities; India had doubts about America as a reliable source of technology (in the end both were correct). However, India's nascent nuclear weapon program intruded and both Indian and Pakistani nuclear and space programs fell under U.S. sanctions.

The U.S.-India nuclear agreement of 2005 was the third positive milestone; it started the process of resetting the

relationship. Since then – albeit fitfully – both sides have considered the possibility of long-term defense and military ties. Their motives were not symmetrical: the United States saw India as a stabilizing power, especially to India's north and east and south (but not yet in Afghanistan), and India saw the United States as a source of advanced technology with which to develop its domestic industry.

The Joint Statement of September 30, 2014 by President Obama and Prime Minister Modi announced another new beginning. Like earlier statements, it placed defense cooperation – embodied in the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) – at or near the core of the relationship.

This time, however, three developments may make the promise of a transformed defense relationship more likely to be realized.

The first development is the arrival of a new defense leadership in both Washington and New Delhi. India's new Minister of Defense, Manohar Parrikar is a member of Modi's party, and himself a former chief minister. He was trained as a metallurgical engineer in one of India's prestigious technical centers, the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai. His future counterpart, Dr. Ashton Carter, has considerable defense expertise including on matters related to South Asia. A few years ago Carter was the lead Department of Defense official who pushed to develop defense ties between Washington and New Delhi through the DTTI. As for Parrikar, although there were discussions about privatizing the defense sector for decades, he was the first Defense Minister to actually meet with private Indian firms that were trying to produce and sell weapons.

Second, a new realism may be creeping into Indian thinking regarding its overall strategic situation. Modi has, from his first days in office, demonstrated a keen interest in defense and military policy—going to sea on a carrier, witnessing a missile launch, and reviewing the troops. The appointment of Parrikar may indicate that he is interested in reform, not just rhetoric. The mood of "getting real" regarding defense policy may be spreading. There are now many defense correspondents, as well as a lively think tank community. In addition, India's parliamentary Committee on Defense has detailed the shortcomings of the military acquisition process. It pointed to substantial gaps between the defense ministry's promises and its woeful performance. To informed opinion this comes as no surprise, but it was a rare critique of the woeful Defence Research and Defence Organization (DRDO), more notable for its self-promotion than the production of weapons. As if in response, Parrikar fired DRDO's chief.

Third, India now sees its defense relationship with the United States as providing the technology that it lacks, and that other countries cannot provide. India is routinely described as the world's largest arms market. This is true, but there is an irony: massive purchases are primarily a function of the nation's inability to produce quality weapons on its own, as well as the absence of a system to establish defense priorities.

The following steps leading up to and beyond the second Obama-Modi summit can strengthen U.S.-India defense ties as well as the quality of defense policy making in each state:

1) Secretary-Designate Carter should, in his confirmation testimony, indicate that he would be eager to support joint India-U.S. studies that would bring together parliamentary committees to examine concerns common to the two countries. Senator McCain might just agree to this on the spot.

2) Ashton Carter can also announce support for the exchange of defense officials and bureaucrats, including military personnel and defense scientists, and defense contracts between private Indian and American firms. While not a formal ally, this is one area where India can be treated as such.

3) When thinking about expanding U.S.-Indian defense trade policy makers should consider the foreign subsidiaries of U.S. defense firms. In some cases the Japanese

or European branch of an American company—with its own ties to local suppliers and governments—may be better placed to expand defense trade with India than via the America-based headquarters.

4) India and the United States should look for new defense manufacturing projects that have not been publicly discussed. Here are several of varying complexity and technological sophistication:

- Both the American and Indian armies need new rifles, the technology is available to produce a reliable, modular, and advanced system that would have more range and firepower than present sys tems but also be simpler.

- Another medium technology project would be to sell to India the production line of the A-10 Warthog close-support aircraft, assuming the United States makes good on the Pentagon's preference to eliminate the A-10 from its inventory in the years ahead. India lacks a modern close-sup port aircraft, so this could be a win-win proposition. Improving this platform – a big ticket item compared to the co-development of the Javelin anti-tank missile – would be a good test of how the United States and India can work together on developing very good, but not necessarily cutting-edge or gold-plated, technology.

- The United States could allow private firms to sell electric-launch technology to India for a new generation of small Indian aircraft carriers and other platforms.

- There may be areas where cooperation is possible in intelligence, homeland security, and counter-terrorism capability as well, given the two nations' common concerns in this domain.

- After decades of viewing the Indian Navy as a virtual adjunct to the Soviet Navy at times, the United States now tends to see Indian naval power as a useful regional force vis-à-vis China and others; as such, cooperation on other elements of naval power may be feasible as well.

More generally, the two nations can play for the long term. There need not be any rush; indeed, no rush is desirable at a time when Washington is trying to stabilize relations with Pakistan and China while also viewing India strategically as its closest great-power friend in that broader region. U.S. and Indian strategic interests increasingly align, and can be expected to do so into the future. They can be developed slowly, so as not to get ahead of the politics, nationalism, pride or historical baggage. But that baggage is gradually dropping away, and the future is increasingly bright.

A common strategic vision between the U.S. and India is emerging. Washington views China with suspicion, but not outright hostility, it is wary of a militarily strong but politically chaotic Pakistan, and it sees India's own development, democracy and stability as highly desirable. The two counties disagree over a number of other issues (Iran, global warming, technology protection) and in various international fora, but these are "normal' differences, such as the U.S. has with long-time allies. Defense ties will grow as this common vision solidifies, and these will help dispel the misperceptions that developed over sixty years of mutual strategic irrelevance.