

Guest Editorial

*Cherian Samuel**

The India–US defence relationship has seen significant growth over the past two decades, evolving into a comprehensive global strategic partnership, with defence and security cooperation as a cornerstone. With the current Defence Framework Agreement coming up for renewal in 2025, it is an opportune time to assess whether the defence partnership has lived up to its goals over the past two decades.

Whilst there was some sporadic cooperation in the early years of Independence, especially during the Sino-Indian war of 1962, when the US supplied India with critical military assistance, those initial efforts faded away when the world was divided into two camps with the onset of the Cold War. The US bias towards Pakistan led India to seek a counterbalance through closer relations with the erstwhile USSR which resulted in a significant amount of armaments also being sourced from there. It was only after the end of the Cold War that renewed efforts from both sides to seek stronger ties that ultimately resulted in the robust and multifaceted partnership we see today, encompassing technology transfers, joint exercises, defence trade, and collaborative efforts to promote regional and global security. Each of these was the result of painstaking efforts by key interlocutors on both sides spanning multiple administrations and governments on both sides. Some initiatives fell by the wayside, and others went back to the drawing board time and time again. The long years of mutual distrust have now given way to habits of

* Dr Cherian Samuel is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi, India.

cooperation. India now conducts more joint exercises with the US than with any other country, consistently enhancing interoperability and operational readiness. Both sides have established robust channels for counter-terrorism efforts, maritime security operations and intelligence sharing, aligning on issues ranging from piracy to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). India has also purchased over US\$ 20 billion worth of US military equipment, including C-130J aircraft, Apache helicopters, M777 howitzers and P8I maritime reconnaissance planes.

India–US defence cooperation has been driven by shared concerns over regional security and a mutual commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. Key milestones such as the ‘Next Steps in Strategic Partnership’ and the civil nuclear deal formed the initial stepping stones to enhancing bilateral relations. The signing of foundational defence agreements like LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA have further solidified the operational aspect of the partnership, enabling greater interoperability and technology sharing.

The annual ‘2+2 dialogues’ have further cemented the defence ties between the two nations. The scope of cooperation has now expanded to encompass diverse domains, including space, cyberspace, maritime domain awareness, cyber issues, AI, quantum technologies, undersea capabilities, electronic warfare and hypersonic capabilities.

Even towards the fag end of the Biden Administration with the enhancement of several existing initiatives such as the Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) aimed at enhancing technological innovation through defence start-ups, as well as the inception of several new ones, such as the conclusion of a new Roadmap for U.S.–India Defence Industrial Cooperation, launch of the Advanced Domains Defence Dialogue, and the establishment of the India–U.S. Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X).

In the summit between Prime Minister Modi and President Trump shortly after the latter’s inauguration, the two leaders announced their intention to sign the US–India COMPACT (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology for the 21st Century) agreement, a comprehensive, multi-dimensional initiative, integrating military, economic, technological, energy and diplomatic pillars under a unified strategic framework for US–India relations. They also announced their intention to renew the 10 Year Framework for the U.S.–India Major Defence Partnership in the 21st Century signed in 2015

by then Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and Defence Secretary Ash Carter. Though both have passed away, their legacy and their contribution to India–US defence relations lives on. The framework now functions as the defence pillar within the wider COMPACT, providing the actionable roadmap for implementing the COMPACT's defence and security objectives. The existing initiative on critical and emerging technologies (iCET) has been expanded and renamed Transforming Relations Utilising Strategic Technologies (TRUST). While iCET laid the groundwork for collaboration in areas like semiconductors, AI and quantum computing, TRUST builds upon this foundation with a more comprehensive approach, and a focus on ensuring the security of sensitive technologies. It was also announced that the US would also review International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), in order to streamline defence trade, technology exchange and maintenance, spare supplies and in-country repair and overhaul of US-provided defence systems. A new industry alliance—the Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA)—was also announced to scale industry partnerships and production in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, COMPACT incorporates various sectoral initiatives including the 10-year Defence Framework, Mission 500 (which seeks to elevate bilateral trade to US\$ 500 billion by 2030), the TRUST technology initiative, the Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA), and expanded energy and multilateral partnerships.

The running thread across the articles in this issue centres on the evolving and multifaceted nature of the India–US strategic and defence partnership. Several articles trace the journey from the Cold War period when India and the United States were considered estranged democracies, highlighting the subsequent shift towards a comprehensive and multifaceted strategic partnership. This historical perspective underscores how defence cooperation has become a cornerstone of the bilateral ties, moving from limited engagement to a robust, institutionalised partnership. With a new era of strategic competition in the offing, both countries have no alternative but to share the burden of responding to new challenges through strategic collaboration.

One key aspect that propelled the partnership forward in the early stages was the US willingness to customise its standardised defence agreements that enable enhanced military interoperability, joint exercises and technology sharing. These agreements provide the legal and operational framework for cooperation, addressing challenges such as harmonising military capabilities

and overcoming technological differences. Each agreement systematically addressed longstanding barriers, enabling unprecedented levels of cooperation, interoperability, technology transfer and strategic alignment.

The Indo-Pacific region emerges as a critical theatre where India and the US are aligning strategic interests. It has emerged as a defining strategic geography that has fundamentally transformed the India–US relationship, serving as both catalyst and framework for cooperation between the two countries. Its position as a focal point for the security interests of both countries stems from the position of the region amidst crucial sea lines of communications. The region also includes the top global economies and major military powers with historical legacies of conflict translating into current flashpoints. Cooperation on maritime issues, both at the military-to-military level as well as the policy level is a *sine qua non* for the two countries in these turbulent times. Articles discussing maritime cooperation emphasise joint efforts in maintaining regional stability, ensuring freedom of navigation and countering emerging security threats. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) cooperation is highlighted as a practical expression of this partnership, reinforcing India's role as a net security provider while enhancing interoperability with US forces and other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific.

In the eyes of many analysts, the first demonstration of the extended capabilities of the Indian military was during the tsunami of 2004. The Indian Navy was among the first responders, deploying ships and helicopters within 12 hours of the disaster. Nineteen ships of the India Navy were deployed to conduct relief operations across Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Maldives. Two of these ships were converted into hospital ships to provide medical aid in Indonesia. Subsequently, the Indian Navy and US Navy worked together, focusing on HADR operations. Many of the joint exercises carried out since then have included an HADR element, even as they have increased over the years in scope and intensity. The two countries have also participated in multilateral HADR exercises in the region including the QUAD and RIMPAC, the world largest naval exercise. Likewise, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), launched by India in 2019, was co-chaired by the US along with India for two years. As noted in the paper on 'Enhancing Interoperability and Strategic Convergence: India–US Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', as the United States has a limited geographical reach in the IOR, working together with India complements each other's capabilities and capacities of handling HADR operations.

A recurring and complex theme across these writings is the tension between advancing defence technology cooperation and India's commitment to strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Concerns regarding technology transfer restrictions from the US side can impact joint development projects and indigenous capability-building in India. Balancing these factors is crucial for India to achieve technological superiority in its armed forces while navigating divergent national interests and preserving its independent foreign policy stance. For instance, in the article titled 'Indo-US Defence Cooperation: Punching Below Its Potential', the authors note that while there have been many momentous achievements, especially in the light of the many challenges and barriers that had to be overcome, the time is opportune to take a dispassionate look at the opportunities missed. The empirical evidence amassed by the authors show a number of missed opportunities over the years which they put down to inflexibility on the American side when it comes to negotiating contracts as well as the lingering distrust about the US reliability as a trustworthy partner. The article has suggested many remedial steps that the US could take to bring Indo-US defence cooperation realise its full potential.

Despite the willingness to collaborate, challenges in meeting India's immediate defence needs via technology transfer remain. The article titled 'Balancing Strategic Partnerships and Sovereignty: The Impact of Technology Transfer Concerns on India-US Defence Cooperation' notes that the US focus has traditionally been on weapon sales rather than full technology transfer, underscoring the need for timely delivery of results. A detailed examination of the evolution of the India-US defence partnership including scrutiny of the record of technology transfer, comparative assessments with transfers to other nations highlights that, due to India's independent foreign policy stance, rapid technology transfer from the US or its allies is limited. This limitation accentuates the urgent necessity for India to invest heavily in research and development to build a largely self-reliant defence industrial sector.

As another article notes, a key prescription, therefore, involves India enhancing its R&D base by committing greater resources and funding, fostering equal partnership in technological projects, and pooling talent including the Indian diaspora working abroad. The development and operationalisation of iCET, INDUS-X, alongside India's Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) scheme, if properly harmonised, can be game-changers that align with government policy reforms aimed at indigenisation of defence production, including advanced technologies. These initiatives

have yielded substantial gains over the past two years, with lessons learned that are guiding further progress.

Indo-US cooperation has ramifications beyond defence and the bilateral stage. They also have a bearing on larger geopolitical issues. The challenges and opportunities in India-US defence cooperation to promote a stable nuclear framework are analysed amidst the ongoing deterioration of the global nuclear order. Respective positions on disarmament, nuclear treaties and the evolution of bilateral nuclear cooperation highlight the shifting nuclear order and make necessary joint efforts for fostering a secure and resilient nuclear environment. The ultimate goal is to minimise risks of accidental nuclear conflict amidst the proliferation of missile forces, weapons of mass destruction and tactical nuclear weapons.

Similarly, cybercrime represents a contemporary and evolving threat to societies and governments, especially given the pervasive reliance on cyber networks across critical sectors such as energy, healthcare, finance, infrastructure and national security. Due to its dominance in the global technology sector, the United States holds a key role in establishing mechanisms to secure cyberspace. India's cybersecurity resilience depends on close collaboration with the US government and leading technology companies—such as Meta, Amazon and Google—to enhance infrastructure and strategic preparedness. The traditional rigidity of governmental organisations in addressing cyber threats often hampers effectiveness against sophisticated cybercriminal groups, some potentially engaging in state-sponsored cyber warfare. Addressing these complex challenges calls for enhanced intergovernmental cooperation, innovative policies and agile cybersecurity strategies aimed at mitigating risks and protecting national interests in the digital domain.

The partnership also has to be seen in the larger context of the global power competition, especially between the US and China in terms of technological supremacy and strategic influence. The ongoing tech competition between the US and China, often dubbed 'Tech Race 2.0', mirrors the Cold War Space Race between the US and the Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s. The US ultimately prevailed in that race due to its democratic foundations, freedom of speech, and robust innovation and business ecosystems. China shares several characteristics with the former Soviet Union, suggesting history might repeat itself if the US fails to recognise and address the challenges posed by China. To maintain global leadership, the US must invest heavily in cutting-edge technologies and innovation. As the tech competition between the US and China intensifies, this

partnership gains even greater significance—not only for bilateral progress but for the preservation of a liberal, democratic world order that champions innovation, freedom and shared values. India's role as a strategic partner and a rising technological power complements US endeavours to maintain global leadership in cutting-edge technologies, underscoring the necessity of sustained investments in R&D and knowledge exchange. Ultimately, it is crucial for the global community to prevent authoritarian powers from gaining dominance in this critical technological race.

Finally, beyond hard power and technology, the relationship also includes defence diplomacy through soft power instruments that foster trust, political goodwill and long-term cooperation, reinforcing shared democratic values and mutual respect.

The overall thrust of these articles is that the India–US strategic partnership stands as a pivotal axis in shaping the security, technological and geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Rooted in a history of overcoming estrangement, it has blossomed into a complex, resilient and forward-looking partnership that balances mutual interests with India's commitment to strategic autonomy. Through collaborative efforts in defence cooperation, technology development, nuclear stability and cybersecurity, both nations are not only addressing immediate challenges, but also preparing for future uncertainties in a rapidly shifting global order.

It is hoped that these articles provide a useful perspective on the past, present and future possibilities of the relationship. By highlighting its complexities, achievements and challenges, they offer valuable insights into how this partnership can continue to evolve and strengthen. As both nations navigate a changing geopolitical and technological landscape, informed dialogue and collaboration will be essential in unlocking the full potential of this strategic partnership for mutual benefit and regional stability.

