U.S.-India Divergence and Convergence on Defense Operationalization Concepts

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Much of the writing on the U.S.-India defense partnership focuses on the convergence of their interests. The two countries align on defending a free and open Indo-Pacific (with freedom of navigation and overflight), deepening strategic technological cooperation, and countering the hegemony the People's Republic of China in Asia. Yet they differ on how to pursue those interests—as well as the ideas and values that underpin them. Understanding their divergent approaches can help identify the potential limits of the relationship as well as how to bridge those differences for a deeper defense partnership between the two.

At its core, the objective of a defense partnership—even one short of an alliance—is explicitly or implicitly to coproduce security for both parties, ideally by coproducing deterrence. If deterrence and security are the ends of the defense partnership, it is important to examine how the United States, its allies, and India differently approach the means and ways to those ends: the what, where, and how of deterrence coproduction. Those differences can be divided into three categories: capability (what), geography (where), and interoperability (how), each of which are underpinned by differently held ideas. Luckily for Washington and Delhi, those divergences are surmountable.

Capability

One foundational requirement for producing security is the mobilization of resources, or more specifically, defense investment, and their conversion through organizational and technological processes to defense and deterrence applications. [1] Nearly all countries choose to do this in some capacity, but their investments range in scale and efficiency. Some countries exhibit alternative behaviors to balancing threats—such as bandwagoning, hiding, or transcending—which can free them to invest less or inefficiently in defense.[2] Correspondingly, countries can prioritize other means of influence, such as relying more on diplomacy, taking a declared position of neutrality, or opting to be a client of a great-power patron.

India sometimes prioritizes other national concerns—development, civilian control, and indigenized technology acquisition—over deterrence and security. This leads not only to several capability deficiencies, but also to a disconnect with the United States.

The primary reason the United States and India diverge on capability is because of the massive difference in the resources they allot to defense. The United States' defense spending is ten times greater than India's and double as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). This discrepancy reveals implicit preferences and sets of values.

For much of its history, India has chosen to spend less on defense and more on domestic development, unlike its neighbor, Pakistan. [3] This approach to spending is significantly different than the United States'. In recent years, India has spent close to 1.9 percent of its GDP on defense, while the United States has spent closer to 3.5 percent.[4] Furthermore, in line with its domestic development priorities, India sees its military as much a means of employment as war fighting. Thus, even within the two countries' defense budgets, the lion's share of Indian defense spending (over 55 percent) goes toward personnel, rather than investing in modern capabilities for the armed forces.[5] By contrast, the United States spends about a quarter or less of its defense budget on personnel.

A second divergence is the role that civilian governance plays in the generation of defense capability. While the United States relies on joint services and integrates civilian expertise and oversight into decision-making, India, by contrast, lacks effective integration of its civilian government into defense procurement, organization, training, and strategy. This, too, is rooted in ideas and norms: Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, perceived the military as an instrument of colonial control and so set up a system of "crushing civilian dominance."[6]

Today, this civilian dominance manifests in an "absent dialogue" between civilians and the military services, producing suboptimal capability outputs—for instance, a premium on prestige weapons platforms rather than military efficacy.[7] In other words, even controlling for fiscal resources, dollar-fordollar the Indian defense budget punches well below its weight due to organizational deficiencies.[8] Distinct civil-military configurations also challenge U.S.-India military-to-military cooperation due to different levels of empowerment, presenting a challenge for working-level cooperation between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Indian Ministry of Defence.

A third area of divergence in capability is the approach to technology development. Although most U.S. allies and partners have balanced capability and performance, or enabled technology transmission through private-sector integration, India has often diverged, prioritizing indigenous technology development and state-to-state technology transfer over enhanced military capability.[9] In fact, India's techno-nationalist ambitions have driven "a quest for defence industrial self-reliance almost since independence."[10]

Furthermore, India has historically favored public sector defense enterprises for technology development over the private sector. This near exclusion of the private sector (until the past decade) stems from India's historical penchant for socialist central planning.[11] However, over the past seven decades, the dominance of India's public sector in defense—including in research and development (R&D), prototyping, technology demonstrations, and commercial production—has constrained India's capacity to absorb advanced defense technologies that were acquired by or licensed to India.[12] The public sector's monopoly on defense R&D and production has constrained the core elements of defense innovation including information flows, competition, labor mobility, and external knowledge spillover.[13] In sum, the particulars of India's defense spending, organization, and technology acquisition—rooted in ideas of development, anti-colonialism, and self-reliance—contribute to assessments of India's suboptimal deterrence capabilities as well as a perception that India is "underbalancing" China.[14]

Geography

The United States and India also diverge on where to prioritize their security and deterrence efforts. India has historically focused on its subcontinental borders (principally Pakistan, and increasingly China) as well as the Western Indian Ocean (i.e., the North Arabian Sea to the East African coastline), while the United States has traditionally oriented itself to counter the hegemonic dominance of the Eurasian landmass.[15] To be fair, in recent years, each country has adjusted their priorities: India has widened its focus to the broader Indian Ocean region to account for the growing threat of China's navy, while the United States has arguably narrowed the scope of its priority interests to its homeland and East Asia, with secondary attention to Europe and the Middle East.

The difference in geographic orientation can lead U.S. policymakers to see India as shirking or passing the buck, and Indian policymakers to see the United States as attempting to entrap India in peripheral conflicts. For instance, India's neutral approach to the Russia-Ukraine war prompted mutual recriminations along those lines: U.S. leaders have expressed dismay and disappointment with India.[16] Conversely, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar has defended India's position by stating that Europe's problems are not the world's.[17]

Three foundational ideas can explain the United States and India's different priorities. First, much of the Western world has long operated with an implicit belief that there are real and meaningful contagion or domino effects in international politics that warrant early action. This fear of domino effects— whether in communist revolutions, conquest, financial collapse, or state fragility—have animated multiple U.S. global interventions and expeditionary wars.[18] While the United States and its Western allies have been inclined to believe this since World War II, India has generally not subscribed to this fear. Consistent with that, India has not conceded that the Russian invasion of Ukraine sets a precedent that erodes the norm of sovereignty globally, or even in its own theater, and so it is not moved to take costly actions in Europe. Although India is still debating its level of exposure to China's aggression in the Pacific, it expresses greater concern for China's encroachment on its neighbors, because this impacts India's neighborhood and its borders.

Second, even if India accepted the prospect of contagion, it could take comfort in a belief that distance confers safety. One reason for this attitude could be an expectation of the "loss of strength gradient," where a state's power projection diminishes the greater the distance from its home territory due to logistical challenges.[19] Another possible influence is the "stopping power of water," which complicates the reach of even the most able militaries when separated by oceans.[20] Although the East and South China Seas lend themselves to control, Indian policymakers believe the open geography of the Indian Ocean renders it more of "a trading highway rather than a battle space."[21] Mountainous terrain also imposes severe logistical and physical constraints on military power projection.[22] India then is fortunate in that 85 percent of its territory is surrounded by either the Indian Ocean or the Himalayas. This could limit the extent or time horizon of India's concerns, even with Chinese aggression. Even the conquest of Taiwan or formal acceptance of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea may not directly threaten India for a decade, allowing domestic and regional focus.[23]

Third, some hold that India is not yet a global power, but rather a regional power in capability and influence, so even its non-material stakes are lower in most parts of the world. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has been careful to posture India not as a "great power" but rather as a "leading power." Consequently, India can sidestep the burdens of a global hegemon and opt to "keep [its] head down" and be a "navel gazer."[24]

India, however, cannot sidestep Pakistan. Every so often, a major military crisis (such as in May 2025) sparked by a heinous cross-border terror attack reminds Indian policymakers they face a persistent border threat. This triggers demands to concentrate focus on the "one front" with Pakistan and widens the divide with the United States on geographic priorities for defense.[25]

Interoperability

Beyond capability and geographic focus, a third method by which the United States assumes it can collaborate with India on security and deterrence is through interoperability of military forces. As the United States has done with other allies, it aims for their militaries to be able to operate together in a combined manner. In theory, interoperability becomes a force multiplier by leveraging not just the aggregation of capabilities, but also their synergy, rendering the whole greater than the sum of its parts.[26]

Although both countries have rhetorically embraced building military interoperability, considerable differences remain, both in potential capacity and implementation. Military interoperability can be broken into three domains: personnel, equipment, and information and communications technology (ICT).[27] As one U.S. official put it succinctly, "men, metal, and electrons."[28]

At the human level, considerable strides have been made on building individual, procedural, and command interoperability. U.S. and Indian military counterparts now regularly communicate, trust

each other, and are growing better acquainted with each other's procedures (and in some domains, seeking to align them). Human interoperability has developed through U.S.-Indian military exercises, which have grown considerably over the past decade, as have command and staff engagements and expert exchanges.[29]

At an equipment and defense-industrial interoperability level, the United States and India have made moderate progress. Much of India's defense equipment is still of Russian origin, but this is surmountable, and there are areas such as tactical lift and maritime reconnaissance where India has heavily adopted U.S. platforms.[30] This further offers the prospect of interchangeability at the level of defense-industrial production, where each country can rely on each other's spares and sustainment capacity.[31] Moreover, shared equipment opens the door to India being integrated into U.S. defense supply chains, with opportunities to become a regional hub for maintenance, repair, and overhaul services for the United States and its allies on equipment ranging from ships to airframes.

However, the United States and India remain considerably far apart in terms of ICT. Despite signing agreements for sharing technical knowledge and intelligence, the lack of shared networks considerably inhibits this process. Modern military operations require integrated battle networks connecting sensors, commanders, and shooters with low latency.[32] (India's lack of systems integration within its own battle networks may have resulted in costly losses in recent military crises).[33] The United States and India are nowhere near this level of interoperability, lacking shared tactical data links or interoperable combat management systems.[34] In a crisis or conflict situation where both parties want to combine operations to defend against anti-ship missile attacks or track adversary submarines, they currently cannot do so in an effective and time-efficient way.

Furthermore, the reason to build military interoperability is to enable routine deterrence operations to deter potential threats or adversaries. However, the United States and India still lack a joint operation or mission. India worked alongside the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to reopen shipping in the Red Sea, but avoided joining the coalitional operation (even while its other defense partners like Australia and Singapore did). By opting out of the shared operation, India missed an opportunity to improve the interoperability of tactics, equipment, and capacity for integrated air defense or counterdrone operations.

Another method to build interoperability in practice would be through a joint military base or mutual access to each other's geography and logistics. India has historically been averse to U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean—leave alone access, basing, and overflight—though there appears to be some shift in Indian thinking toward creative concepts. For instance, a joint maritime reconnaissance task force involving U.S. and Indian P-8 maritime patrol aircraft could provide an opportunity to jointly detect and deter potential threats at sea.[35]

Despite the obvious security benefits of interoperability, one key value drives India's continued divergence: strategic autonomy. The principle of strategic autonomy to protect its agency manifests itself through the pursuit of diversification and self-reliance.[36]

Diversification offers a method to avoid overdependence on any one partner, sidestep the risk of entrapment, and leverage the competitive geopolitical marketplace to "exploit opportunities" and "maximize its gains."[37] As a result, India continues to lean into its relationships with countries the United States deems unsavory or adversarial, such as Russia, and to some degree Iran. India's reliance on Russia for critical strategic capabilities, including nuclear power, space-launch capabilities, missiles, nuclear submarines, and advanced integrated air-defense systems, all pose a direct challenge for greater U.S.-India military interoperability. ICT interoperability specifically is threatened because India's Russian systems could expose U.S. networks to malign elements of infiltration, espionage, and cyber exploits. India's multi-alignment, or strategic promiscuity as some term it, with Russia in particular, or even Iran at times, complicates this level of integration.[38]

The other principle of self-reliance—manifested in India's policy of defense indigenization—anticipates a more assured form of national defense rather than depending on external partners. However, pure internal balancing or self-reliance could result in diminished capabilities and considerably longer time horizons for security. States often choose external balancing, even if less reliable, because it can provide quicker security support and deterrence. Additionally, over-indexing on indigenous equipment can constrain military interoperability—whether in operations or supply chains—if the humans, equipment, or technologies employ different capabilities, standards, or protocols.

Conclusion: A Case for Optimism

The United States and India have undoubtedly made considerable strides over two decades in converging on strategic and defense cooperation. Nevertheless, hurdles remain for their future military cooperation, the most significant rooted in some differing beliefs and values. Though a few underlying ideas and preferences cause the United States and India to diverge on the means, location, and manner in which to produce deterrence, those differences seem surmountable and potentially diminishing.

Improvements in Indian defense-capability generation are visible on the horizon. Indian defense budgets will continue to naturally grow in tandem with India's growing economy. Reforms to defense integration institutions—with a new Chief of Defence Staff architecture overseeing all three services and joint theater commands—as well as defense R&D and acquisitions procedures suggest the Indian government is becoming more comfortable with an integrated and powerful military, as well as a greater role for the private sector in defense technology development and production.[39] These steps will boost the capabilities the Indian military brings to the table in conjunction with the United States to coproduce deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

The United States and Inda are also increasingly looking to concentrate their deterrent capabilities in similar geographies. U.S. policymakers have narrow expectations of India's geographic engagement, and seem comfortable to work with India's "division of labor" as a "regional sheriff" and "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean.[40] At the same time, India is growing and becoming more alarmed by threats far beyond its shores, such as in Taiwan.[41] China is increasingly challenging India's ability to remain isolated or hidden from its power projection with its military infrastructure buildup across the Tibetan plateau, ballistic missile stockpiles, dual-use port infrastructure, and massive expansion of surface warfare capacity that can easily project power into India's backyard. [42] India's growing realization of China's formidable power projection could align with the U.S. pivot to Asia.

Corresponding advances in military interoperability suggest that India's commitment to strategic autonomy could also be changing. India has grown more comfortable operating with the United States in frequency and at scale. The United States is now India's leading military exercise partner annually and India has joined coalitional campaigns, such as the Combined Maritime Forces, as well as intelligencesharing networks such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness.[43] The recent Joint Leaders' Statement suggested the prospect of joint humanitarian and disaster relief operations and maritime patrols.[44]

Moreover, the Joe Biden and Donald Trump administrations both deepened strategic and defense technology collaboration initiatives, including on autonomous systems and artificial intelligence applications for the battlefield.[45] Those efforts combine traditional arms sales with joint production, technology transfer, and developing India's indigenous supply-chains from chips to algorithms. Both partners will be able to leverage this interoperable defense innovation ecosystem to accelerate greater insight, autonomy, and decision support in their military operations. Meanwhile, U.S. concerns with India's partnership with Russia could diminish as the Russia-Ukraine war draws down, the United States prioritizes China above all other threats, and India pivots to U.S. defense technology in advanced domains such as undersea, space, and artificial intelligence.

The United States and India will never perfectly converge on defense operationalization, because they are fundamentally different countries with different capacities, visions, and historic legacies. But despite those differences, steady advances in jointly producing the means and ways of deterrence—that is, in their capabilities, geographic orientation, and interoperability—will enable the two countries to more readily balance China and defend a free and open Indo-Pacific.

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