

A big step forward in US-India defence ties

US defence secretary Lloyd Austin arrives in Delhi today.

His visit, two weeks ahead of PM Modi's State visit to Washington DC, shows how US-India defence ties have flourished, and marks potential for reciprocity on key issues

US defence secretary Lloyd Austin's arrival in New Delhi on Sunday comes at a critical moment, just two weeks before Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's State visit to Washington DC. As with any ministerial visit, the secretary and his counterpart, defence minister Rajnath Singh, will take stock of recent successes and coming opportunities. They will discuss possible deliverables for the upcoming Biden-Modi summit.

But the visit will be a true success if they dig into discussions of the kind of reciprocal expectations that can take the US-India defence partnership to new heights.

First, it is important to recognise and enumerate the long list of accomplishments of US-India defence ties, which have been the load-bearing pillar of the strategic partnership. The two countries have built intelligence-sharing channels and assessment capabilities to better identify and prepare for threats; developed access agreements for military logistics to support each other's reach; and conducted regular military exercises to improve our capabilities and interoperability.

India has been able to leverage state-of-the-art defence acquisitions from the US to coun-

ter Chinese assertiveness, including strategic lift to transport and resupply its troops deployed along the mountainous Line of Actual Control, as well as a variety of advanced maritime patrol aircraft to defend its maritime approaches. Washington has quickly backed New Delhi in all of its recent border crises with China and Pakistan. Most significantly, during the 2020 military crisis with China that claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers, the US shared vital intelligence, rushed critical supplies, and then approved the lease of MQ-9B drones for deterrence by detection. The two countries are taking another major step toward a shared mission of securing the Indian Ocean commons through India's recent participation in the Combined Maritime Force, and the Quad launch of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness.

Second, Austin's visit to India presages several opportunities. Reporting suggests the US government is poised to authorise joint production of GE F-414 jet engines in India to power indigenous fighter aircraft. Insiders have also reported the two defence ministries are planning to co-launch an innovation bridge first promised when both national security advisers launched the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology last year. The INDUS-X event in June will kick off a bilateral process to connect our national security innovation ecosystems to research, develop, and produce cutting-edge military technologies. Such a combination of high-level technology sharing and bottom-up co-development efforts would be unprecedented. Despite

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India's licensed production of Russian fighter aircraft for 60 years, it has never been able to obtain or derive technology as advanced as what the US is offering today. The prospect of Indian defence startups designing, prototyping, and producing in partnership with leading US defence companies will accelerate India's indigenisation process.

Of course, the US is not doing this out of altruism; it is operating from a theory of "integrated deterrence" where India's enhanced ability to defend itself and deter aggression and coercion will contribute to regional peace and stability. Deterrence will not stem simply from India's existence or expansion of its latent power. If that was enough, India's rapid rise over the past two decades should have deterred Chinese aggression along LAC and the Indian Ocean, which it clearly has not. Deterrence will depend on what India does, how it operationalises and postures its power, and who it cooperates or at least synchronises with. These are the most important issues for US and Indian leaders to discuss, if only in private.

The US government has undertaken Herculean efforts to bypass or disrupt standard bureaucratic processes to produce the jet engine offer and defence innovation bridges. One senior American defence official told us, "we've broken all the china." To secure a US offer to share this level of technology, India has the opportunity to take some reciprocal strides toward the shared goal of deterring China and major power conflict. Calls for reciprocity have often been mistranslated as demand for more Indian defence purchases, and India rightly points to \$20 billion purchased from

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The United States is seeking greater operational cooperation from India to share the burden of deterring aggression by any major power, including China.

the US over 15 years. This misses the mark entirely.

The US's priority with India is not just defence sales, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine has generated tens of billions of dollars in more European purchases in 2022 alone. What the US seeks from India is greater operational cooperation to share the burden of deterring aggression by any major power, including China. Indigenous Indian capabilities help, but the key is more effective deterrence activity that complicates adversary planning, increases their uncertainty, and creates hesitation. Sowing doubt is key to convincing your foe to delay military aggression for another day.

For both the US and India, more effective collaborative deterrence requires more complex military exercises, more frequent use of logistics arrangements, more presence in different theatres, and greater access and overflight, all of which keeps China guessing. More frequent employment of already signed logis-

tics arrangements—such as ship-to-ship underway replenishment or US maritime patrol aircraft refuelling in Port Blair—can add to this uncertainty.

India and the US are partners, not allies, and neither expects the other to make ironclad commitments to mutual defence. But routine access and active military engagement needed to enhance deterrence need not fall under an alliance paradigm. Even non-aligned countries can tilt and strategically enable their partners' efforts to maintain peace and stability. Singapore and Malaysia—both steadfast in not choosing sides—have enabled US and Australian air surveillance missions in the South China Sea, not out of alliance commitments but because they see these advancing their own security and deterrence interests.

Finally, just as the US helps India assess and plan for the LAC crisis, India can also start to engage more seriously on the central challenge that vexes US defence planners—a potential cross-Strait crisis over Taiwan. Dis-

cussions with US interlocutors on potential Taiwan scenarios will not tie Indian hands, or commit it to send ships to the Taiwan Strait, or take up arms against China during a crisis. India might also initiate more serious internal assessments about the likelihood and consequences of a Taiwan crisis and its direct effects on India and the region, which could be far more severe than the terrible impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Overall, with bilateral relations strong, the upcoming visit will mark a strengthening of the defence partnership. The US is taking a big step forward. India should consider reciprocal steps of its own.

Samir P. Lalwani is a senior expert in the Asia Center at the US Institute of Peace. Vikram J. Singh is a senior adviser at the US Institute of Peace and a former US deputy assistant secretary of defence for South and Southeast Asia.

The views expressed are personal.