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COMMENTARY



How to Get the Most Out of the U.S.-Indian Defense

Partnership

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Upon taking office, President Donald Trump threatened reciprocal duties against “tariff king” India, sent a cargo plane of undocumented migrants back to India, and cancelled a sanctions waiver for an Indian port. This may not seem auspicious for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Washington this week. But it’s not nearly as bad as it looks. Despite tough messaging during a call between Trump and Modi last week, growing U.S.-Indian defense cooperation will provide the ballast to the relationship. This was previewed by the two readouts of the recent call between Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

The first Trump administration made great strides on defense cooperation with India, as did the Biden administration. India is poised to play an important role in deterring Chinese aggression and enhancing stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific. The second Trump administration has an opportunity to take this relationship to new heights and help India play that stabilizing role by advancing defense technology cooperation, enhancing joint military operational cooperation, and updating and reinvigorating the bilateral defense framework. Doing so will require both countries to break old habits and push the envelope of cooperation.

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Defense Technology

The Trump administration can boost India's capacity for burden-sharing by accelerating the pace of defense technology cooperation, defense trade deals, and mutual reforms. Building on successful U.S.-Indian defense technology partnerships like the [Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology](#) and the [India-U.S. Defense Accelerator Ecosystem](#) can deepen defense trade and build a joint defense innovation ecosystem. Both initiatives advance American interests by leveraging Indian technology, driving greater defense trade and co-production, and equipping the warfighter with new capabilities. Such initiatives break information silos and horizontally and vertically network key stakeholders – end users, startups, defense primes, venture capital, research institutions, and policymakers.

The first Trump administration took bold steps to [authorize](#) drone exports, [ease regulations](#) for defense trade, [initiate](#) innovation collaboration, and [sign](#) foundational defense agreements allowing for industrial cooperation and intelligence sharing. It also demonstrated the U.S. commitment to Indian security by [providing](#) rapid intelligence support, equipment transfer, and the lease of predator drones when India faced off against Chinese aggression in the summer of 2020. Those drone leases paved the way for the recent Indian [commitment](#) to purchase 31 predator drones last fall.

The new Trump administration could build on past efforts and move rapidly on a number of projects including sale and co-production of General Electric jet engines to power Indian fighter aircraft, co-development and sale of next-generation Javelin anti-tank guided missiles, and co-production of Stryker infantry combat vehicles, all to boost defense trade and Indian deterrence.

The White House can also encourage India to [reform](#) its [procurement process](#), fix its [inverted tariff structure](#), and support Indian private sector partnerships with the U.S. defense industry for rapid scaling of capabilities. India could also reprioritize its defense dollars – of its latest [\\$78 billion defense budget](#), we estimate only 20 percent will go to capital acquisitions. In its first few months, the new administration should also demonstrate its intention to accelerate approvals and licensing for U.S. exports to trusted allies and partners, and reform the export control community. India, for its part, should propose ways to harmonize its own technology security and export control mechanisms with those of the United States, which will continue to have concerns about cybersecurity and intelligence collection efforts by Russia.

Defense technology initiatives combined with reforms can help catalyze industrial partnerships including opportunities to co-develop and co-produce [sonobuoys](#) and [uncrewed surface vessels](#) to better track China's navy, [air-launched unmanned aerial vehicles](#) for surveillance and combat support, [commercial space collaborations](#) for space domain awareness, and trusted

semiconductor production for advanced sensing, communication, and power electronics. Some members of President Trump's cabinet – including Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Mike Waltz – have in the past year, advocated for greater U.S.-Indian defense technology cooperation.

Both countries could scale these defense innovation collaborations by priming the pump with joint accelerator programs for startups, joint challenges and follow-on contracts, and technology scouting missions by industry.

Military Operational Cooperation

The Trump administration should also focus on deepening military operational cooperation so that the United States and India are not only co-producing capabilities but also co-producing deterrent effects. Defense Secretary Hegseth has affirmed India's status as a major defense partner, but like many in the new administration, he has also called for greater burden-sharing on mutual challenges like deterring Chinese aggression or securing peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Deterrence demands a regimen of activities that signal to adversaries that both countries possess the capabilities, skill, and partnerships to prevail in a conflict. The quantity and quality of military exercises should grow along with more joint tabletop exercises featuring assessments and contingency planning, cross-deployment of military liaisons, and steps for more resilient supply chains and logistics systems.

Three administrations over the past decade have advanced growth of joint defense exercises, including bilateral and multilateral military exercises and civilian tabletop exercises. This trend should continue under the new Trump administration.

Beyond increasing the number of military exercises, the United States and India can also enhance the quality of military exercises by conducting them with more advanced and/or diverse assets, under more complex conditions, and moving up the conflict spectrum from disaster relief to combat exercises. Exercises should also expand in advanced domains like undersea and space domain awareness. India should send a large, high-level participant delegation to Space Command's Global Sentinel Exercise, and get on a path to join the Schriever Wargame which brings partners together to plan for space operations.

Tabletop exercises involving civilian national security decisionmakers can also enhance strategic interoperability. Civilian control of the Indian military bolsters India's democratic institutions, but it has also resulted in an "absent dialogue" between civilian policymakers and military operators that hinders military effectiveness. Both countries have learned to leverage tabletop exercises,

which enable civilians and military personnel to sensitize each other to the contours of conflict scenarios involving both political and military dilemmas. Joint, bilateral tabletop exercises build rapport and individual-level interoperability with Indian civilian national security policymakers, who will be critical to crisis decision-making.

As part of contingency planning, India and the United States should also begin serious discussions and mutual assessments of a Taiwan Strait crisis or another India-China border crisis, which are arguably the pacing scenarios for both respective defense establishments. The United States has already been thinking about how to support India given its experience in the 2020 border crisis. Meanwhile, former and current Indian senior officials have raised increasing concerns about how a cross-strait conflict directly and indirectly threatens Indian security interests.

Opportunities for individual interoperability, training, and logistics can also be “operationalized.” Liaison officers offer an invaluable node of intelligence sharing and communication. After signing the Memo on Assignment of Liaison Officers, India should quickly fill liaison officer billets at U.S Indo-Pacific Command, Special Operations Command, and other offered locations. Visa friction can be a showstopper for joint exercises and staff engagements, so both sides need to ease and expedite visa issuance to build human interoperability.

U.S. International Military Education and Training funds to India – something Marco Rubio proposed doubling to \$2 million as a last year as a senator – can be increased and used to help train Indian military personnel for operational missions, such as training them with U.S. personnel on theater anti-submarine warfare in San Diego or Groton.

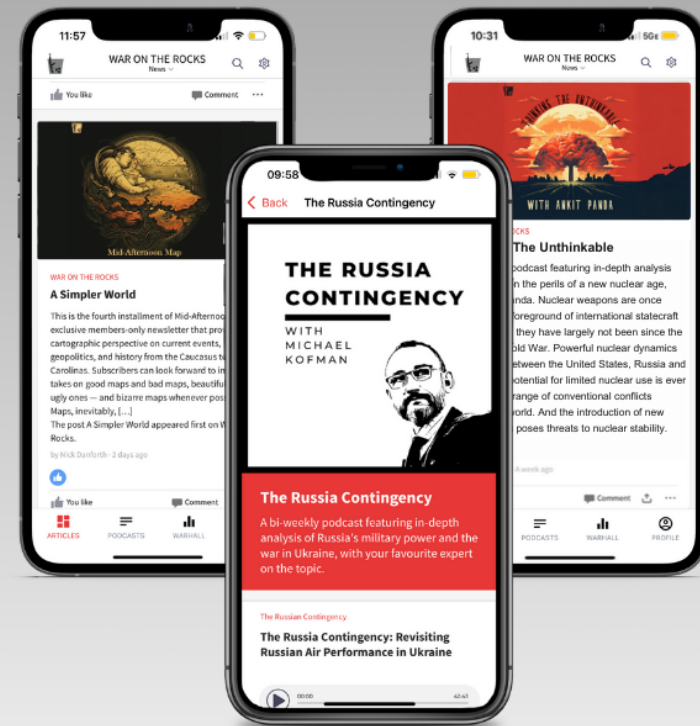
Furthermore, the United States and India could more routinely operationalize logistics agreements by leveraging access to each other’s bases for refueling, conducting underway replenishment, leveraging Indian shipyards for in-theater ship repair, and even rotational deployments, as two U.S. and Indian Navy officers have proposed. The United States and India can also aim to elevate the security of supply agreement to a reciprocal defense agreement to enhance private sector defense commerce. India could also join the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience to build the relationships for more friendshoring and workshare in maintenance, repair, and overhaul.

Now that India is a full member of the Combined Maritime Force, and is poised to take on a leadership role, the United States and India can expand collaboration on joint maritime security missions in the Indian Ocean.

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Institutional Architecture: U.S.-Indian Bilateral Defense Framework

A meaningful deterrent effect on China would complicate Beijing's military planning for seizing disputed territory or invading Taiwan. It would make success at an acceptable cost more unlikely. If U.S.-Indian defense cooperation is going to achieve this, the institutional architecture needs to be modernized with sharper objectives and political-strategic coordination. In addition to building out new defense technology and operational cooperation, the Trump administration has an opportunity to upgrade the Framework for the U.S.-India Defense Relationship, which is up for renewal in June 2025. With its renewal, the Trump administration will be able to reinvigorate the framework's priorities and structures to shape the next ten pivotal years of competition in the Indo-Pacific.

The first challenge is to modernize the framework to account for contemporary problem sets, efforts, and priorities. The fact that the last defense framework, signed in 2015, does not mention the words “China,” “Indo-Pacific,” “deterrence,” “competition,” “interoperability,” or even “threat,” serves as a reminder that this document was written in a completely different era.

Since 2015, the world and the U.S.-Indian relationship have evolved considerably. By 2017, and possibly even before, the United States had embraced new paradigm of great power competition that clearly prioritized China as the pacing threat. India and the United States developed new structures for the bilateral relationship (like the Maritime Security Dialogue launched in 2016, the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in 2017) and also revived the Quad, along with multilateral exercises that regularly included all Quad countries, including Malabar in 2020 and Sea Dragon in 2021. Between 2022 and 2023, the launch of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, the Roadmap for U.S.-Indian Defense Industrial Cooperation, India-U.S. Defense Accelerator Ecosystem, the Advanced Domains Defense Dialogue, and the Strategic Trade Dialogue all elevated technology as a domain of competition and U.S.-Indian cooperation.

These advances should all be incorporated into a new 10-year defense framework. At the same time, some of these can be consolidated for greater focus, such as integrating the older India-U.S. Defense Technology and Trade Initiative and newer defense accelerator ecosystem into a combined effort. This would prevent both duplication as well as working at cross-purposes.

A second reform requires integrating foreign affairs and national security council representatives into the Defense Policy Group framework to offer a wider strategic perspective, geopolitical depth, and coordination to the two defense agencies. This follows from the policy innovation of the 2+2 architecture. The 2+2 was a novel innovation under the first Trump administration to synchronize political and military strategy by pairing the U.S. Departments of Defense and State the Indian Ministries of Defence and External Affairs. An astonishing amount of progress has been made under this 2+2 framework, which continued under the Biden administration, both at the intersessional and ministerial levels. In particular, including civilians from India’s Ministry of Defence, Ministry of External Affairs, as well as National Security Council components (since India has a national maritime coordinator and the United States has a senior director for technology) in the military cooperation group would be especially valuable to infuse it with a diplomatic and strategic sensibility.

Partnering to compete with China, which has fully embraced civil-military fusion, requires both U.S. and Indian systems to better synchronize between defense and foreign affairs. Additionally, because India and the United States differ in their division of capabilities and authorities between their diplomatic and defense institutions, meeting together enables much greater inter-country cooperation and inter-agency coordination.

Integrating the Defense Policy Framework along the lines of the 2+2 will help Indian military participants respond in real time to ideas or opportunities put forward by U.S. defense counterparts rather than taking things back to the Ministry of External Affairs for review and approval. Putting foreign ministry and national security personnel in the room with military and defense ministry counterparts, especially at higher levels of engagement like the Defense Policy Group, Military Cooperation Group, and perhaps even the Joint Technical Group could inject a strategic, wide-angle lens perspective, and help expedite decision loops.

Conclusion

These are not easy steps to take. Technology sharing is still limited by U.S. legal and policy restrictions – further complicated by India's steady relationship with Russia – and by complex procurement systems in both countries. Indian expectations for technology transfer do not always make commercial sense for U.S. companies, and India has not been interested in harmonization with U.S. regimes for technology protection as it seeks to create its own systems. Military operational cooperation grows more robust year-by-year, but both sides tend to be conservative in what they do together and how they portray it. Even joint exercises held close to the Chinese border like Yudh Abhyas in 2022 tend to be described as being focused on peacekeeping or humanitarian assistance and disaster response. China does not quiver at the prospect of U.S.-Indian earthquake relief. And the array of strategic bilateral engagements, which have also grown very candid about the threat from China, have yet to lead to plans to fight together should the need ever arise.

Even on the current trajectory, deeper defense cooperation has benefits for both nations, to be sure. It builds capabilities and supports an industry that is a major employer in both countries. It causes some irritation in Beijing. To meaningfully create dilemmas for Chinese planning, however, the U.S. and India must level up in the next few years.

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Image: [U.S. Department of Defense](#)



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