United States-India Defense Relations:

A Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century

John Pedro is a junior government major at Cornell University. He focuses his degree in the role of America in the world.

Introduction

Starting with a high profile push through the region in 2011, the Obama Administration has made the "Pivot to Asia" a central part of American foreign policy. Enlisting regional partners who share strategic interests will be critical to ensuring the success of such efforts, which will be discussed below. U.S.-India relations have flourished since 2001, and a series of initiatives and expanding agreements, such as the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), have formalized the two countries' military relations to a degree previously unseen. The uptick in U.S.-India cooperation originated late in the Clinton administration, was carried through the Bush Administration, and has been continued by the Obama Administration's pivot to Asia and recent renewal of the mutual defense framework. I argue that although past relations have been tumultuous, collaboration will continue to grow in the future as a result of converging interests and strategic necessities. India is rapidly growing in influence and power; with 1.3 million active personnel, it is the world's third largest military, and with 1.2 billion people, its largest democracy.¹ In an increasingly complex world characterized by war, uncertainty, and clashing interests, the history and future of this bilateral relationship is critical to understanding the prospects for

U.S. influence and power in the Asia-Pacific region.

Post WWII Historical Paradigm

In the aftermath of World War II (WWII), U.S. relations with newly independent India were typically characterized by indifference. Starting with their first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, India practiced nonalignment in foreign policy.² This strategy revolved around foregoing formal alliances and focusing instead on asserting independence on the world stage. The overarching goal of India's defense policy was self-reliance, seen in the creation of the Defense Research and Development Organization in 1958, which sought to advance India's understanding of military technology and properly equip their armed forces.³ From independence to the mid 1960s India focused on self-sufficiency, from the mid 1960s to the late 1980s they finally realized greater self-reliance, and since the 1980s they have focused on coproduction and modernization.⁴ Over these three stages, relations with the United States have shifted along with India's interests and capabilities. The relationship has evolved from one of relative indifference, to one of occasional annoyance, to a cooperative, exercise-based partnership; India now performs more military exercises with the United States than with

any other nation.⁵ This evolution was not inevitable, but its occurrence is a boon for both India and the United States.

With its manufacturing of weaponry during WWII, the modern militarization of India began.⁶ Post-independence, India began establishing technology for transport vehicles and trainer aircrafts, the building blocks for future technology.⁷ As India grew on the world stage and perceived a threat from a rising communist China, they were forced to bolster their military capabilities through foreign acquisitions. These included buying jeeps from Japan, trucks from West Germany, and tanks from Britain.⁸ Notably, these acquisitions did not involve the United States.

India was displeased in 1948 when the United States imposed an arms embargo during the first Indian-Pakistani (Indo-Pak) war over Kashmir, although the embargo was placed on both countries.⁹ Yet India's actions have also angered the United States, especially their refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968.¹⁰ Differences over nuclear policy have been one of the main inhibitors of successful U.S.-India defense relations over the last 40 years.¹¹ U.S.-India relations were significantly harmed by India's nuclear test at Pokhran in 1974, and moreover when India bitterly opposed the U.S. - supported permanent extension of the NPT in 1995.¹² During the Cold War the United States was continually frustrated by India's adherence to nonalignment, seemingly in contradiction with their reliance on the procurement of Soviet equipment and arms, such as MiG

fighter aircraft.¹³ It often appeared that Pakistan and India were regional proxies of the United States and Soviet Union, respectively, yet this development was not significant enough to create lasting damage to U.S.-India relations. A recent change in nuclear policy is encouraging; the United States-India Nuclear Cooperation Approval and Nonproliferation Enhancement Act was finalized in 2008.¹⁴ This accord has been instrumental in nurturing closer political relations, which serve as the backbone of current and future defense cooperation.

As the Cold War wound down, U.S.-India relations gradually improved. India participated in small-scale arms trade with the United States from 1986-1988.¹⁵ They also provided military logistical support for the 1990 Gulf War.¹⁶ The Indo-U.S. Steering Committee of the two Navies was formed to resume naval exercises in 1992, leading to the restart of the annual Malabar naval exercise that same year.¹⁷ Malabar focuses on anti-piracy measures, rescue operations, and counter-narcotics training, among other objectives. Naval-military relations are the most prominent aspect of U.S.-India defense relations.¹⁸ Naval capabilities, fundamental to power projection in the Pacific, will continue to be a critical component of the U.S.-India relationship.

In January 1995 the United States and India signed the Agreed Minute on Defense Relations, providing for military-to-military exercises between the countries. This agreement was an important step leading to the signing of the so-called "Vision Document" in 2000, which provided a

Differences over nuclear policy have been one of the main inhibitors of successful U.S.-India defense relations over the last 40 years.

Common interests will foster closer relations and greater collaboration... the United States will need to make concerted efforts and find reliable partners to maintain a balance of power, ensure peace and security, and retain the ability to influence regional events.

The primary drivers of this relatively new relationship are enhanced acquisition activity and an alignment of naval interests around issues such as anti-piracy and counter-narcotics.

roadmap for future relations.¹⁹ Also that year, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. President to visit India in 22 years.²⁰ After the attacks of September 11th India escorted U.S. ships through the Strait of Malacca and launched Operation SAGITTARIUS, providing escorts to U.S. ships in the Indian Ocean. This strategic move helped relieve the regional security burden on the U.S. Navy and thus facilitated operations in Afghanistan.²¹ Moreover, India offered its bases to help in the invasion of Afghanistan.²² This is a prime example of the converging strategic interests that are driving advancements in U.S.-India defense relations. These developments led to what is today a budding strategic partnership for the 21st century.

Although past disagreements indicate India is far from being in lockstep with the United States, the 21st century has seen a coalescence of American and Indian interests around several policy issues. Common interests will foster closer relations and greater collaboration. With China rising, Japan flexing its muscles, and considerable regional economic development continuing, the United States will need to make concerted efforts and find reliable partners to maintain a balance of power, ensure peace and security, and retain the ability to influence regional events. With its shared interests, India will be

a close partner in this venture.

The 21st Century: Acquisitions, Joint Exercises, and Nuclear Power

Defense relations between the United States and India had been on the upswing since 2001,²³ and their successful military cooperation in the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 solidified the basis of their promising regional partnership.²⁴ The United States provided aid and conducted joint rescue operations with the Indian Navy. A 2002 Department of Defense released a report in which it concluded that it was clearly in the interests of the U.S. to pursue a strategic partnership with India.²⁵ The primary drivers of this relatively new relationship are enhanced acquisition activity and an alignment of naval interests around issues such as anti-piracy and counter-narcotics. In the 2006 Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement, the United States and India outlined collaboration in promoting the free passage of goods around the world and cracking down on the illicit trafficking of weapons.²⁶ Additionally, this agreement produced an increase in intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation.²⁷

Military acquisitions are an indispensable area of U.S.-India cooperation with the potential to greatly expand in the future. India purchased

more conventional weapons than any other developing country in the period from 1992-2004.²⁸ April 17, 2002 marks the first major weapons deal between the two countries, consisting of 12 radar sets, a remarkable strategic development considering Indian procurement reliance on the Soviets during the Cold War.²⁹ Defense trade has increased since, but often with ambivalence from U.S. lawmakers; because India refuses to sign a formal defense accord, the United States cannot share certain classified defense technologies. The Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) are two formal defense accords.³⁰ These agreements establish protocols for the sharing of military technology; certain sensitive technology and advanced weaponry can only be sold to countries that have signed one or both agreements.³¹ As defense relations have warmed, India's refusal to sign has become a sticking point.

In 2005, India and the United States signed

a ten-year defense framework in which they committed to increasing defense trade, the transfer of technology, and counterterrorism collaboration.³² The 2005 framework was followed in 2006 by an agreement on cooperation in science exchange and development to foster co-production of defense technology. The United States also offered India the ability to purchase F-16 and F-18 fighter aircraft.³³ These platforms are among the most sophisticated in the world. However, a potential 8.5 billion dollar Indian procurement of U.S. fighters fell through, and India shifted focus to European options.³⁴ Despite this, acquisitions have boomed: defense sales to India went from zero dollars in 2008 to over 9 billion dollars in 2014.³⁵ As a result, the United States surpassed Russia as the biggest supplier of arms and military equipment to India. Despite the fighter deal falling through and minor scuttles over technology, India has generally looked to the United States for military procurements over the past decade, leading to a 13 billion dollar backlog of Indian defense procurements.³⁶ Bureaucrats in both countries are still

Developing U.S.-India Air Force cooperation opened the opportunity for the Indian Air Force to purchase technology from the United States, including C-130J Hercules aircraft, pictured below.

Despite the fighter deal falling through and minor scuttles over technology, India has generally looked to the United States for military procurements over the past decade... bureaucrats in both countries are still working out the details of Indian acquisitions.

working out the details of Indian acquisitions that amount to over 13 billion dollars of arms, systems, and technology. This acquisition activity, absent in the past, will be a central driver of closer U.S.-India relations in the future.

U.S.-India Air Force cooperation is also rapidly expanding. Participation in the annual Cope India air-based exercises eventually led India to purchase six C-130J Hercules aircraft and related equipment and services for over 1 billion dollars.³⁷ This was followed up by a 2.1 billion dollar acquisition of eight P-81 maritime surveillance aircraft from Boeing in 2009.³⁸ And in 2010, India purchased ten C-17 Globemaster III cargo aircraft, a sale approved in 2011 for 4.1 billion dollars.³⁹ India's most recent defense purchase, pending approval by India's Cabinet Committee on Security, includes 22 AH-64E Apache and 15 CH-47F Chinook helicopters from Boeing totaling over 2.5 billion dollars.⁴⁰ All of these purchases reflect India's efforts to bolster their strategic proficiencies in the region - the P-81 maritime surveillance aircraft will augment antipiracy measures, the C-17 is an excellent aircraft for strategic airlift and airdrop missions, and the helicopters serve as vital transport for special operations missions and provide tactical flexibility. All of these acquisitions demonstrate India's desire to step into their growing role in the region.

The Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) grew out of meetings between senior officials about fostering co-production and

transfers of defense technology. The idea behind DTTI is to develop military capabilities for both countries to use.⁴¹ Current plans include building a mobile solar power source for use in remote areas and creating a lightweight chemical and biological protective suit for hazardous environments.⁴² India's Defense Research and Development Organization and the United States' Pentagon Research Labs will oversee these projects.⁴³ Before, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has stated that the DTTI must overcome "the historical burden of bureaucracy,"⁴⁴ a burden seen in the 13 billion dollar acquisition backlog. The DTTI is the centerpiece of the newly signed ten-year defense framework between the countries, and through it, the United States and India seek to change their defense relations from a buyer-seller relationship to one based on joint technological development.⁴⁵ Because India will have a greater investment in the relationship, it is possible this could lead to clashes over events in the region or the strategic direction of cooperative efforts. Yet with similar policy interests, a U.S.-India clash remains unlikely.

Military to military exercises now constitute the most tangible aspect of U.S.-India defense relations. As some analysts have suggested, the U.S.-India defense relationship can be characterized as an "exercise-based relationship."⁴⁶ In addition to Malabar, the U.S. and Indian Navies now take part in three other annual exercises together.⁴⁷ Areas of focus in naval exercises include anti-sub warfare, counter piracy,

and disaster response.⁴⁸ In addition to this close working relationship, India has begun to exercise maritime leadership apart from the United States, as seen in the creation of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2008. The Symposium seeks to bring together the heads of the Indian Ocean Navies for information exchange.⁴⁹ Exercises between Air Forces began in 2002, and were followed by U.S.-India Army exercises in 2004.⁵⁰ In contrast with the global reach and presence of the United States Air Force, the Indian Air Force typically has a limited, regional focus.⁵¹ As a result, air exercises typically concentrate on India's regional security. Other air-based projects include public-private partnerships. For example, Boeing now works with India to co-develop software for navigation systems, landing gear, and cockpit controls.⁵² The countries recently began partaking in combined Special Forces training in addition to conventional military exercises.⁵³ India and the United States have also formed various groups and projects to foster a greater working relationship. These include the U.S.-India Defense Policy Group, which since its revival in 2001 meets annually, and the U.S.-India Cyber Security Forum which was launched in 2002.⁵⁴ U.S.-India cooperation has also extended to humanitarian efforts such as recovering the remains of WWII soldiers previously lost on the subcontinent. All of these developments are signs of a budding strategic relationship.

Differences over nuclear policy and weapons have long been the greatest source of strain between India and the United States, but the Bush Administration's 2006 nuclear deal successfully turned the page. The deal distinguished between India's civil nuclear facilities, which were put under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, and their military facilities. Because it recognized and allowed India to use nuclear energy for military purposes, the deal was criticized as undermining the NPT, which

India has never signed.⁵⁵ However, 65% of India's nuclear generating power is under international guidelines, and analysts have shown that India's use of military-specific nuclear technology will be primarily for submarines, not more warheads.⁵⁶ That being said, India's nuclear arsenal sits between 60-100 warheads.⁵⁷ The United States' legitimizing of India as a nuclear power, though criticized domestically, was a strategic move that significantly and positively affected relations with India over the last decade.

Defense Relations Moving Forward

The Obama Administration's strategy of pivoting to Asia makes a strategic partnership with India increasingly enticing to the United States.⁵⁸ The formal nature of this relationship was renewed in June of 2015 with the signing of a new 10-year U.S.-India defense framework highlighting the cooperation between their respective militaries.⁵⁹ In the future, relations will likely improve and not change in any dramatic way.⁶⁰ However, important modifications must be made. Co-production, information exchange, and joint exercises are not an end in and of themselves; they must be utilized to build an understanding of shared strategic interests, and create a positive working relationship to act when those interests are threatened. In the future, defense relations between the countries must move from being merely transactional to being more strategic in nature.⁶¹

There are also a series of issues that could derail future relations. India's controversial Cold Start doctrine, which is considered offensive and specifically directed at Pakistan, has been criticized by and hampered relations with American military commanders.⁶² Beyond doctrine, Indian military modernization has been driven by its relationship with the United States, which has the potential to upset regional power

President Barack Obama shaking hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

dynamics with Pakistan.⁶³ With respect to Indo-Pak problems, the United States has maintained that the issue of Kashmir should be resolved through negotiations.⁶⁴ Other challenges to future India-U.S. relations include India's continuing acquisition of arms from Russia, the relative closeness of U.S.-Pakistan relations, India's refusal to sign CISMOA or LSA, and potential strategic differences with regards to a rising China.

Although India purchases more weapons from the United States than they do from any other country, India remains the top purchaser of Russian arms. With tensions rising between Russia and the United States, India could find itself forced to choose between suppliers in the future. Lastly, the domestic politics of both countries could affect the relationship. A failure to adequately address domestic instability could lead to mass uprisings, and thus complicate relations with the United States. Moreover, in the wake of two long and unpopular wars, the United States' populace is wary of any foreign engagements. India is not the only regional partner for the United States, but it holds the greatest prospects for increased strategic collaboration.

Despite the issues on the horizon, there are also a number of areas ripe for future cooperation, and these issues of unity are

of greater consequence than the issues of division. A recent movement towards U.S.-India collaboration on space endeavors demonstrates a growing opportunity for further collaboration.⁶⁵ There are also strong prospects for cooperation in fighting transnational crime, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and responding to natural disasters.⁶⁶ Other opportunities exist in maritime security, counterterrorism, and military logistics support.⁶⁷ Although it is not publicly acknowledged, in pursuing their strategic partnership, both countries have kept in mind the growing clout of China,⁶⁸ especially as it has taken aggressive action in the Pacific region to assert their increasing influence.⁶⁹

President Obama has endorsed the prospect of India having a permanent seat on the U.N Security Council. This move was met with wide applause but remains only a sentiment.⁷⁰ As the 21st century unfolds, India has been moving closer to the United States while simultaneously promoting a multipolar world.⁷¹ It remains to be seen how exactly leaders in both countries will move forward from a transactional paradigm to a more strategic one, as India neither seeks nor wants official "allied" status with the United States.⁷² However, there are myriad opportunities to foster defense familiarity

and a closer working relationship. Defense relations could fluctuate with politics. Despite this, India's unique position in the region will continue to provide common ground upon which to build upon the partnership.

Conclusion

In September of 2014, President Obama and Prime Minister Modi agreed to “revitalize the existing partnership and find new areas for collaboration and mutual benefit.”⁷³. Successfully fostering the U.S.-India defense relationship will continue to be strategically crucial for both countries as they look to combat Chinese aggression, piracy, terrorism, and the trafficking of narcotics and weapons. The United States' pivot to Asia will depend on it.