

Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S. - India Defense Partnership

WORKSHOP REPORT

India-U.S. Geo-Political Relations: Past, Present and Future

26 SEPTEMBER 2022, 1800 hours – 1930 hours (IST)

SUMMARY

The past 75 years have witnessed significant shifts across the various dimensions of India-U.S. relations, from India's non-alignment during the Cold-War era but coming together for UN peacekeeping missions to eventually becoming major defense partners. This growing relationship between the two great democracies is essential for global peace, security, stability and prosperity. Therefore, the objective of this workshop is to take stock of the geo-political relations that India and the U.S. have embarked upon and what the way forward should look like.

PANELLISTS

- **Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury**, *Diplomatic Editor, The Economic Times*
(Moderator)
- **Bipul Chatterjee**, *Executive Director, CUTS International*
(Vote of Thanks)
- **Raymond E. Vickery**, *Senior Advisor, Albright Stonebridge Group*
- **Swasti Rao**, *Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*
- **Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda** (Retd.), *Senior Fellow for Military Strategy, Delhi Policy Group*
- **Anit Mukherjee**, *Associate Professor, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The [Defense News Conclave](#) project is being implemented by CUTS International. Supported by the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Consulate Kolkata), this project aims to create awareness about the importance of U.S.-India defense relations, particularly in the context of contemporary developments in the Indo-Pacific region. The target audience is media professionals, including journalists from all over India. The fourth virtual workshop focused on India-U.S. geopolitical and strategic relations, with a particular focus on the bilateral defense relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The Master of Ceremony welcomed the Panellists, Moderator, and Participants and briefly introduced the Defense News Conclave Project to the audience. The Moderator set the tone for the session by laying out the importance of India-U.S. defense relations, the growing bonhomie since 2005 nuclear agreement deal between the two nations as well as the shape the bilateral relationship may take in the coming 25 years.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda drew focus on the strategic realignment underway globally, emanating from recent international events. This is providing both challenges and opportunities for bilateral relations. He noted that India-U.S. ties are stronger ever today, given the trade and defence partnership, people-to-people connections and, most importantly, strategic commonalities.

Hooda pointed to the challenges arising out of three main recent international events. First, the Ukraine-Russia conflict and growing criticism over India's stand on it. He also observed that India values its strategic autonomy. Russia was a long-standing partner and the largest defence weapons exporter to India, not just in terms of quantity but also in terms of the kind of high-technology weaponry it was ready to offer. Therefore, the first challenge to overcome between India and the U.S. is India's stance on the Ukraine conflict and reaction towards Russia.

Secondly, Hooda cited U.S.'s chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, handing over power to the Taliban. India, as part of the region, is affected because of the potential for instability in the entire region. There are also worries about the implications of U.S.-Pakistan relations for India. This has been a contestation in the past and is once again being seen with concerns over U.S. support to Pakistan's F-16 fighter jet modernisation programme.

The third event, he mentioned was the India-China relationship. Since May 2020, the clashes along the India-China LAC have created a shift in India's threat perceptions. He pointed out that it is in the interest of the Indo-Pacific region, and of the U.S., for a capable India to counterbalance the rise of China. India would like to manage its relationship with China without any open hostilities. However, India's economic and military capability needs to be strengthened for the stability of the region. Here, the role of the US as a facilitator would assume great importance.

Raymond E. Vickery focused his remarks on three aspects: (1) 75 years of India-U.S. history, (2) the next 25 years of this relationship, and (3) the legacy of the civil nuclear deal.

In terms of history, he pointed out that India-U.S. relations go much beyond 75 years.

Vickery opined that post-India's independence, India-U.S. relations could be divided into two main phases. The first phase is from 1940-1991, and the second phase is from 1991 to date. In the first phase, the relationship had many fluctuations involving events such as the 1962 India-China war, the Enterprise Aircraft Carrier incident, and the infamous PL-480, among many others. Overall, these contributed to various ups and downs in the bilateral ties.

However, he pointed to the Post-1991 period marking the beginning of strategic and economic relations between India and the U.S. This was particularly because of the decline of the USSR and the crash of the Indian economy. During the Kargil war, the U.S. stood with India and post 9/11, India stood with the U.S. in jointly condemning terrorism in all its forms. The great breakthrough was in 2005 with the signing of the Civil Nuclear Deal along with the provision of U.S. transfer of high-end technology.

Vickery argued that today, there seem to be tensions between India's foreign policy and strategic posture. India's ideals, as stated by India's Prime Minister, are reflected in the remarks, '*this is*

not an era of war but of democracy, diplomacy, and dialogue', yet Vickery observed that India was ambivalent on the Ukraine crisis, refusing to condemn Russia's egregious violation of the UN Charter. India, as the largest democracy, needs to see the strategic value of defending democracy. He also pointed to India's excessive reliance on Russian weaponry, stating that this was not strategic autonomy, but this is strategic dependence if it's overdone. The U.S. and its partners need to step up to meet India's arms demands. Overall, he was confident that the relationship with India is indispensable and that is the guide star for what is going to happen in the future.

Anit Mukerjee pointed out that India-U.S. ties are based on common interests, and placing the relationship on common values can lead to a charged debate. He stated that like people-to-people connections, trade, and strategic partnership are key factors of focus in the bilateral relationship. He argued from a realist point of view that interests were what shaped the relationship. Invariably there are agreements and disagreements when it comes to interests, such as on issues like Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, climate change or even on the trade. In his opinion, a desire to counterbalance a rising China is the strongest point of interest common to both countries.

Mukherjee stated that the bilateral military-to-military and defence ties, when seen in five-year periods, overall showed progress, primarily in the form of greater defence trade, more joint exercises and equipment procurement. Further, he added that the U.S. should make the quality of its equipment do the talking.

He further noted that there was a much greater willingness to collaborate at the Government-to-Government level than what was generally perceived in the media and think-tank community. He felt that if India refuses to strongly condemn Russia's attack because of equipment dependence and imports of high-end technologies, it will not reflect well. Concluding his remarks, he said that India should pursue privatisation and indigenous production of defence equipment which is the way ahead for enhancing defence partnership between India and the U.S.

Swasti Rao observed that with the current situation in Ukraine, Europe's stand is shaping the global security architecture. The Indo-Pacific region is becoming increasingly important with

each day and more bilateral and multilateral cooperation is taking place in this region. The region's relevance is growing not just because of the pertinent threat of China, but also because climate change and pandemic related challenges are perceived as common threats.

India and the U.S. are also expanding their strategic partnership by being part of groupings such as the Quad, I2U2 and other groups, which are coming together to check Chinese advances in the Indo-Pacific region.

She mentioned that if the EU has to increase its footprint in this region, it has to engage in the Indo-Pacific more actively. The post-Brexit scenario and the Ukraine war situation is creating a ground for maritime convergences which could see merging of the Trans-atlantic and the Indo-Pacific Security architectures. Towards this end, she mentioned that while there cannot be any two countries with identical foreign policies, it was important to map convergences and find common ground in the various Indo-Pacific initiatives.

A lively Q&A session followed the panel discussion. Participants posed questions on diverse topics such as the importance of the U.S. in India's Indo-Pacific policy, Pakistan's relations with the U.S. and how it would affect India-U.S. ties, the question of ASEAN centrality and questions related to transfer-of-technology, and impact of a depreciating rupee on India's defence deals, among others.

The session concluded with a brief Vote of Thanks by Bipul Chatterjee who thanked the speakers and the audience for their participation. He gave an overview of the workshop series and the roadmap for further activities under this project, and also spoke about his vision for the future of the India-U.S. relationship. He highlighted that in the coming decades, the way forward would be for the two great democracies of the world to work together, and show that democracies not just can, but will deliver