

Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S. - India Defense Partnership

WORKSHOP REPORT

THE RELEVANCE OF INDIA-U.S. DEFENSE RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

27 May 2022, 11:00 hrs – 12:30 hrs IST

SUMMARY

At the first workshop under the Defense News Conclave Project, experts discussed the relevance of India-U.S. defense relations in the context of contemporary developments in the Indo-Pacific region. The panel discussion focused on the significance of the India-U.S. partnership, the evolution of the defense relationship between the two countries, and the prospects for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. They also discussed the role of the Quad, and the need for the grouping to deliver practical outcomes. In addition, the panel addressed geopolitics, geoeconomics, and maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific region through the prism of the India-U.S. partnership.

PANELLISTS

- Pradeep S Mehta (*Secretary General, CUTS International*) [Welcome Remarks]
- Adrian Pratt (*Public Affairs Officer, U.S. Consulate General Kolkata and Director, American Center Kolkata*) [Opening Remarks]
- Pushan Das (*India Head, Aerospace & Defense, U.S.-India Business Council (USIBC)*) [Introductory Remarks]
- Jyoti Malhotra (*ThePrint, Senior Consulting Editor*) [Moderator]
- Sanjaya Baru (*Distinguished Fellow, United Service Institution of India and Member, Management Board, CUTS International Washington DC Center*)
- Cmde. Sujeet Samaddar (*Founding Member, Society for Aerospace Maritime and Defence Studies (SAMDeS) and former Principal Director, Naval Plans*)
- Indranil Banerjee (*Analyst, Foreign Policy and National Security Issues*)

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The [Defense News Conclave](#) project is being implemented by CUTS International with knowledge support from the U.S.-India Business Council (USIBC). 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 first workshop focused on the growing India-U.S. defense partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

INTRODUCTION

The workshop began with welcome remarks by Pradeep S Mehta. He emphasised the relevance of the India-U.S. relationship as a pillar of stability in an increasingly unsteady and uncertain world. Following this, Pushan Das gave brief opening remarks and said he looked forward to further programmes being organised under this initiative. Adrian Pratt, in his remarks, observed that the U.S supported India's role as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. Noting that the world depended on U.S.-India cooperation, he stated that growing military and diplomatic ties, along with increasing collaboration on disaster relief, will ensure that the India-U.S. partnership is a force for global good.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In his remarks, Sanjaya Baru noted that the India-U.S. defense partnership was primarily driven by commercial rather than strategic considerations. In his opinion, the partnership is business-driven, led by the sales of defense equipment from the U.S. to India. He observed that the U.S. had identified defense sales as an essential component for reducing the trade deficit with India. As far back as in 2005 itself, the U.S. was ready to sell defense equipment to India as a complement to the India-U.S. nuclear deal.

Baru observed that while India faces multi-dimensional security threats, including those arising from territorial borders, the U.S. remains focused more on the maritime domain and larger Indo-Pacific issues. In addition, U.S. policy in Afghanistan will create serious security complications for India in the years to come. A meaningful security relationship should address all these concerns.

He also pointed out that given the current scenario in Ukraine, arms exporting countries are conveniently using the anti-Russian sentiment to boost arms sales to other countries. In this context, he noted that the shift in India's defense policy to greater self-reliance or *atmanirbharta* marked a paradigm shift. India's aims are now not just limited to attracting greater American investments in building India's domestic manufacturing capacity, but also to parallelly reduce reliance on defense imports.

On joint research and development and matters of technology transfer, Baru said that India and the U.S. have been discussing collaboration in the strategic domains since 2000, but there is still a reluctance towards technology transfers.

Cmde. Sujeet Samaddar provided a comparison of the naval deployment capabilities of India and the other Quad countries on the one hand, and China on the other. He emphasised that Chinese deployment in the Indo-Pacific to support their anti-access and anti-denial strategies is significantly higher than what the Quad is capable of doing. He cited various reports which have estimated that Quad naval presence in the Indo-Pacific would be substantially weaker compared to that of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) by 2026. China is able to deploy at least two aircraft carriers, 30-40 destroyers, submarines, and at least seven-eight nuclear submarines.

In addition, Samaddar also observed that China's capabilities in space technologies, especially in positioning, navigation, and timing systems, may be far ahead of the U.S. This can disrupt shipping in the region. China's capacities and capabilities are dramatically changing the geopolitics in the region. He was of the opinion that China's naval predominance in the Indian Ocean region would mean that other states beyond the region would crowd inwards in order to counter China in the future.

He suggested that the India-U.S. defense partnership be expanded to cover programmes on nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers, which would be advantageous for India. He also recommended that the defense and technical partnership not be limited to joint naval exercises, but also include collaboration on hardware exchanges in order to promote genuine interoperability. Joint research on critical technologies was another prospective area for India-U.S. collaboration which he identified.

Samaddar stressed on the need for practical cooperation between the Quad countries in order to counter the Chinese advantage in naval capabilities. He proposed establishing maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facilities in India for repair and replenishment of Quad+ navies. Given that there are no such facilities in the stretch of the Indian Ocean between Bahrain and Singapore, this will be a long-term strategic investment.

Observing that there were commonalities in the requirements of Quad countries regarding specific naval capabilities, such as minesweepers and submarines, he mooted a shared framework among them for co-production and design. This would significantly reduce the unit cost of production, create business among them and improve their naval capabilities.

Samaddar also emphasised on the need for the Quad to take a proactive position in addressing transnational, non-traditional security challenges like rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Indranil Banerjee pointed out that the Galwan valley clash in 2020 was a turning point for India and the region. The ambiguity on China had gone and it became the primary adversary, while it was earlier only a potential threat. India has since taken actions on diplomatic, economic, and military fronts to counter the threat. In his opinion, the renewed engagement of the Quad could also be seen from this perspective.

He noted that although India does not realistically expect military involvement from the Quad or any formal military alliances, India does expect something more than only cooperation on non-traditional security challenges, particularly since Quad countries face first-line military threats from China.

Indranil also focused on the need for the Quad to adopt a practical approach in order to make a meaningful impact in the Indo-Pacific region. In his opinion, inadequate maritime capability is a key challenge to India's maritime security. India requires significantly enhanced defense capabilities and technologies, as well as adequate production levels, to meet the projected naval requirements.

In particular, he observed that India expected help from the U.S. in three areas: for the purchase of naval weapon systems and technologies; assistance to boost capacities for indigenous production of naval systems and transfer of technologies; and practical help at the time of hostilities with adversarial countries. He noted that the entry of Chinese forces into the Indian Ocean Region had altered the strategic chessboard.

Indranil lauded the recently unveiled Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), observing that it had an immediate deterring effect, leading to China curbing its fishing activities in the Northern Indian Ocean region. He opined that the real utility of the Quad actually lay in such practical help for India against China.

The panel discussion was followed by a lively Q&A session. Participants posed questions on diverse topics such as the prospects of an International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) waiver for technology transfer to India, the Quad-AUKUS relationship, area denial versus area dominance strategies, minesweeping capabilities, and the position of Pakistan vis à vis India.