

JUMPSTARTING THE NEXT PHASE OF U.S.-INDIA DEFENCE TIES

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'Beyond the Indo-Pacific, a strong rationale for projecting broader industrial cooperation between Indian and U.S. companies in the defence sector is the existing scale of American investments in India' | Photo Credit: AP

Over the last few years, there has been incredible momentum in U.S.-India ties, driven primarily by their defence relationship. United States Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin travelled to India from June 4-5 to reinforce the major defence partnership and advance cooperation in critical domains. Noticeably, his visit secured an agreement on a road map for defence industrial cooperation, announced as part of the U.S.-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) agreement (announced in May 2022) and which had its inaugural meeting in January this year. The road map envisages boosting defence manufacturing in India through greater technological cooperation. While the objectives complement India's own self-reliance mission and its desire to lessen import dependence, it potentially repositions the U.S. in the broader context of the U.S.-India strategic relationship.

The visit's objective had two important legs: technological innovation and growing military cooperation. One of the most important steps taken during the visit was towards strengthening the bilateral defence relationship by creating a road map to promote collaboration in the defence industry. The road map aims to expedite crucial co-development and co-production initiatives, fostering stronger connections between the defence sectors of the two countries.

There was the launch of a new initiative, Indus-X, which is to provide a new impetus to the defence innovation engagement between the two countries. This builds on the U.S.-India bilateral Space Situational Awareness arrangement signed in 2022, which promises to enhance information-sharing and cooperation in the space sector. Furthermore, new areas in defence space exchanges have been identified based on the cooperation between the U.S. Space Command and India's Defence Space Agency.

India's 'Major Defence Partner' (MDP) status along with the four foundational agreements signed with the U.S. now allow for the sharing of technology and more frequent cooperation. These have not only allowed the sharing of sensitive technologies without India having to become an ally but have also proved to be effective mechanisms to prevent backsliding due to procedural difficulties or structural differences.

During the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in April 2022, the U.S. Defence Secretary referred to the U.S.-India defence partnership as the cornerstone of their engagement in the Indo-Pacific. He outlined broad aspects in the Indo-Pacific including coercive actions by the People's Republic of China; the aggressive actions of Russia towards Ukraine aimed at forcibly redrawing borders and undermining national sovereignty; transnational issues such as terrorism and climate change. The combined threat assessments by India and the U.S. in the region point to China as a common and most conspicuous challenge. As stated in China's Military Power Report 2022 brought out by the U.S., the People's Liberation Army Navy is the world's largest navy by number of ships. With the Indo-Pacific region getting more contested, it is estimated that the subsurface presence of China is likely to increase in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

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Beyond the Indo-Pacific, a strong rationale for projecting broader industrial cooperation between Indian and U.S. companies in the defence sector is the existing scale of American investments in India. Behind this is an almost declaratory support by the U.S. government exhorting its companies to support India's defence modernisation. In the long run, this could lead to at least three dominant trends under the umbrella of U.S.-India defence cooperation: nurturing and growth of an ecosystem of joint ventures between companies; the U.S. incrementally gaining a larger share in the Indian defence manufacturing, and both sides ironing out existing impediments in co-development and co-production. American companies led by Boeing, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems, Honeywell Aerospace, Raytheon, Textron and others partner across a range of manufacturing activities related to the defence sector with Indian companies, most prominently with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and the Tata group. These are likely to be supplemented by linking defence start-ups from both countries through an 'innovation bridge' that was announced in the iCET agreement.

The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) has often been criticised for being too ambitious and caught in the maelstrom of bureaucratic resistance, technicalities related to sensitive technology transfer, and structural differences in how the India-U.S. defence ecosystems work. However, recent steps promise to jump start the DTTI by providing specific momentum to co-production and co-development in the defence sector. A standout in this regard has been the elevation of the India-U.S. relations strategic partnership with the iCET agreement.

The visit of the U.S. Defence Secretary has prepared the ground for the official state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the U.S. on June 22 which could see a few big ticket announcements, especially in the area of defence cooperation. The sky, it seems, is the limit in the emerging defence partnership between two of the world's leading democracies.

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