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Beyond Shared Interests: The US and the Evolution of Indian Military Strategy

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Arzan Tarapore, Asia Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "While shared interests between the US and India are real – and while they have driven some marginal evolution of Indian military posture and doctrine – they have not prompted an alignment of US and Indian military strategies."

The US-India defense relationship is stronger than ever. Since the low-point in relations following India's 1998 nuclear tests, the partners have engaged in an unprecedented tempo of senior-level visits, training exercises, and arms transfers. Progress in developing the relationship has been frustratingly glacial at times, but the trend towards closer alignment is undeniable. The recent bonhomie, in what has historically been a fraught relationship, is founded on shared interests – especially over international terrorism and the rise of China. The Joint Strategic Vision signed in January 2015, for example, proclaimed that the US and India stood shoulder to shoulder to defend freedom of navigation, "especially in the South China Sea," and the lawful resolution of territorial disputes. But while these shared interests lend a sense of inevitability to much closer bilateral relations, their effect on India's military strategy remains unclear. How has India's capability and intent to use force evolved since its nuclear tests, and how much of that evolution can be attributed to the defense relationship with the US? These questions have significant implications for India's role in Asian security, and for the future of the bilateral relationship.

The most obvious change in India's defense posture is its increasingly expansive definition of security interests and activities. India is incrementally building its capability to project military power – including with the recent and planned acquisition from the US of strategic lift aircraft such as C-130s and C-17s. Along with increasing capabilities, it has declared a wider span of security interests around the Indian Ocean region. It has thus carried out humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), providing relief after the 2004 tsunami and multiple cyclones in Bangladesh and Myanmar; and non-combatant evacuation operations, rescuing Indian (and non-Indian) civilians from Lebanon in 2006, Libya in 2011, and Yemen in 2015. This expansion of security interests has focused on the Indian Ocean and its littoral and, accordingly, the most visible evolution in military strategy has occurred in the maritime domain. India has claimed leadership in the region through multilateral exercises and sponsors initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and chairing Indian Ocean Region Association, and through bilateral security assistance to neighboring states. The Indian Navy released a new maritime security strategy in late 2015, in which India went further than ever in proclaiming itself to be a net security provider – a formulation first articulated in the U.S. 2012 Department of Defense Strategic Guidance – especially in the form of deterrence, security cooperation with regional partners, and non-traditional military operations including counter-terrorism and HADR.

Unsurprisingly, Washington has welcomed and encouraged this evolution. As the US began to rebalance to Asia and react to China's increasingly assertive posture, it redoubled efforts to partner with India; and through concerted policy action it has sought to develop Indian military capabilities. US arms transfers to India, which had been

negligible until 2006, have risen sharply – the US is now India's second-largest supplier, behind its traditional key source, Russia. More importantly for India, this arms transfer relationship also holds promise – albeit yet to be realized – for technology transfer. Additionally, the US and India engage in a wide range and high tempo of military training exercises, in all domains and often with third parties. The US has leveraged its own well-established training and diplomatic relationships across Asia to create opportunities for Indian participation – for example, in Exercise MALABAR between the US, India, and Japan – and more broadly, for a wider normative acceptance of India's burgeoning military presence.

However, although India's military strategy has evolved, and the US has helped to shape that evolution, those changes remain marginal. As officials and analysts on both sides have argued, current institutional arrangements in both India and the US have slowed and frustrated many well-meaning policy initiatives. The once vaunted Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), established in 2012 to facilitate defense technology transfer, has been reduced to little more than a mechanism to enable continued regular contact. Even aside from these regulatory hurdles and lack of institutional capacity, India's military evolution is hidebound by other, deeper structural factors.

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Most particularly, India's security strategy remains dominated by land-based threats from Pakistan and China, and traditional responses to them . Having fought five conventional wars against Pakistan and China, and with an ingrained if overblown fear of a two-front war, the vast majority of Indian defense spending, materiel, planning, and preparedness is devoted to fighting a conventional land war in the north. Indeed, India is doubling-down on these missions, raising a Mountain Strike Corps to face China and developing an offensive "Cold Start" doctrine against Pakistan. Many of its largest planned acquisitions – from the medium multi-role combat aircraft to the M777 ultra-light howitzers – are designed to modernize or replace existing capabilities. India's military priorities are dominated by deterrence and warfighting on its northern borders.

The evolution of India's regional role also has limits. Even as India widens the span of its security interests, the share of defense budget allocations for the Navy and Air Force – those services which would project Indian force across the region – have actually declined. In the past three budgets, the Navy's share of allocations dropped from 16% to 15%, and Air Force dropped from 23% to 21.5%, while the Army's share increased from 46% to 53%. And other Indian interests place limits on how far its regional policies will evolve. Despite proclaimed shared interests over terrorism and China, India still regards US counter-terrorism activities in the Middle East with suspicion, and quickly quashed reports of joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea. India's emergence as a net security provider has thus been balanced by its enduring political interests in preserving the sanctity of sovereignty, the authority of the UN Security Council, and in avoiding military provocation of China.

While shared interests between the US and India are real – and while they have driven some marginal evolution of Indian military posture and doctrine – they have not prompted an alignment of US and Indian military strategies. India's highest military priorities remain focused on threats at its northern borders; and even the incremental shift in its regional security posture has been driven by an impulse to counter Chinese encroachment and assert regional leadership. New Delhi's hands are tied by the powerful structural constraints outlined above – especially relating to its entrenched security threats and political interests. If Washington seeks to shape and influence Indian military strategy, it should not depend on the self-evident importance of shared interests; it must also understand and ameliorate those structural constraints.

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