

The Flawed US-India Military Relationship

By

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The Biden Administration has suggested that India is the centerpiece of its Indo-Pacific strategy. As [Siddharth Iyer](#), the Office of the Secretary of Defense's director for South Asia policy said, "Our belief is that getting the US and India relationship right is not just necessary, it's essential to achieving our strategy in the Indo-Pacific." This strategy views India, along with Japan and Australia, as part of the Quadrilateral Initiative, working to contain China in the fastest growing economic region in the world.

On paper, India looks like a good candidate. It is a nuclear weapons power. It has a large army that in recent years confronted China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) along the disputed border between the two countries. It shares democratic values with the United States as well as the objective of a free and open Indo-Pacific. There are several problems, however, on both sides that will prevent this partnership from achieving its objectives.

Militarily, the United States, Japan, and Australia have the same technology and weaponry making interoperability easy between the three countries. India, on the other hand, presents an obstacle since its weaponry is largely of Russian origin and its technology is a generation behind that of the other three Quad members. This means that the Quad is actually a 3+1, because in a real conflict it would be difficult for the four countries to successfully coordinate their efforts.

Politically, while the US, Japan, and Australia share values and are strong alliance partners, India has significantly divergent views from Washington on Russia and the Ukraine invasion, its position on nonproliferation issues, and because of its unwillingness to be in an open alliance against China.

Technologically, while India wants the latest technologies for its armed services, and would like to build these weapons systems domestically, it does not have the financial resources to pay for these systems or, arguably, the ability to absorb the latest technologies. The Indian government prioritizes butter over guns and has kept defense expenditure below 2 percent of gross domestic product to pay for social welfare programs. (And unlike the United States, the Indian defense budget includes the pensions paid to retired servicemen.)

These financial constraints led to India cutting its order for the Rafale fighter from 126 to 36 aircraft and to the government delaying acquisitions like a new conventional submarine, a new aircraft carrier, and additional fighter jets. Fully modernizing the Indian armed forces requires selling weapons at subsidized rates to the Indians—something the United States will not, and cannot, do, since this would up-end the United States' arms-transfer policies that have been in place for decades.

Additionally, the Indian government has a policy of techno-nationalism which requires that new weapons systems be built in India. The problem with this approach is that [such production is marked by delays and quality-control issues](#). The Indian Air Force's long and troubled procurement history of the Tejas Light Combat Aircraft is testimony to these failures. Not only is production marred by delays, but the procurement of weapons from foreign companies moves at a glacial pace and can take decades. It took twenty years for India to buy the Hawk Trainer and fifteen to purchase the Rafale. More recently, the Indian Navy has put out a tender for a new conventional submarine but the takers are few since the Navy's requirements

are considered impractical by major suppliers and some have [dropped out of the competition for supplying the new submarine](#).

The other problem for India, of course, is the cost of weapons systems and here the United States can be of little help to New Delhi because the latter would need high-quality arms at subsidized rates—something that the US has not done in significant numbers since the Cold War. Further, some of India's most pressing needs—like a conventional submarine—cannot be met by the US which decades ago gave up producing those subs.

Despite these problems, if given proper assistance, Indian capabilities can be improved to the extent where the country's armed forces can pose a greater challenge to China and in doing so complicate the threat calculus of the People's Liberation Army in the Indo-Pacific. As of now the Chinese have two divisions in Xin Jiang which are heavy units with armor and over 10,000 soldiers in each of them. In Tibet, the Chinese have four brigades with 4,000 soldiers each and 10–12 regiments with 2,000 soldiers in each unit.

The units in Tibet face the India border, and as of now, there is no major Chinese build-up of forces in the region. Instead the Chinese are modernizing their air defenses and infrastructure to allow for the rapid movement of troops and materiel into the area. Facing an Indian Army that has better weaponry, and more effective intelligence assets, would force the PLA to divert more resources, especially manpower, to the border and tie down those forces.

Better weaponry does not necessarily mean better aircraft and submarines, it requires building up the fundamentals of the armed forces which is cheaper to do and leads to combat effectiveness. Thus, the Indian Army still does not have a decent assault rifle since the factory that is supposed to produce Russian AK-203s is still not fully functional and the Army was forced to import 73,000 Sig Sauer rifles from the United States. The Indian Army also operates largely without night-vision equipment and is only now beginning to acquire drones at the tactical level for its units. Given that it has engaged in skirmishes with the PLA, the Indians need to be in a better position to handle such localized conflicts.

The other area where the United States and India can cooperate is in developing a set of affordable drones for surveillance and carrying out tactical strike operations. The Indian Army is buying off-the-shelf First Person View (FPV) drones in sufficient numbers and, eventually, the three services will acquire 31 Reaper drones, although these are both expensive and, given the vast ocean, mountain, and desert territories of India, too few to make a substantial difference to Indian combat capabilities. What the country needs is an affordable Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) drone to back up the FPV drones and provide a redundancy in drone capabilities. There are several medium-sized American companies that can collaborate with the Indians to build such drones thereby fulfilling the Indian desire to manufacture in India but also allowing for the procurement of affordable systems for the military.

The other key area where the US can help the Indians is by providing intelligence on Chinese positioning and basing along the border. This was done in 2022 because of [an intelligence-sharing agreement that gave the Indians the location of Chinese forces](#), which allowed the Indians to successfully engage and deter the Chinese. Such agreements should expand to significantly enhance Indian capabilities along the border since New Delhi lacks the space-based assets to comprehensively monitor its border.

While the India-US military relationship may not prove as successful as those with NATO or Israel, it can develop to give the Indians a better ability to defend their interests along the disputed India-China border. That is good for America's interest in containing China in the Indo-Pacific.



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