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TRAJECTORY OF INDIA-US DEFENCE AND SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

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National security in the 21st century is playing a crucial role in shaping policies for nations and establishing pacts with strategic partners. The India-US defence partnership can be viewed with varied dimensions and elements. The INDO-US partnership can be conceptualised into two parts:

- The relationship is consequential, given the geopolitical dynamics;
- The relationship escalated very quickly.

Despite both nations having varied views on engagement with the Global South, multi-polarity and the Russia-Ukraine war (ongoing), the ties are getting deeper and deeper because of the geopolitical convergence and acceptance of the reality of mutual national interests. There are newer and intense challenges faced in the Indo-Pacific due to expansionist behaviour of China in the region.

China is an indispensable part of the global supply chains but at the same time, both nations need to work together to deal with the challenges posed by China accompanied by its aggressive behaviour. China perceives the decline of the USA's hegemony thereby establishing a Sino-centric world order. India and the U.S. need to scale their alliance setup, forge more issue-based regional partnerships, and develop strategic partnerships to mitigate the challenges so faced. A clear Indo-Pacific strategy may help in forging strategic partnerships with the powers in the regions and bridge the gap with China.

Drivers of India-U.S Partnership

As discussed earlier, the India-US partnership is a consequential one which has two perspectives that are the drivers of their strategic partnership:

- **USA's Perspective:** The primary driver of the partnership is the emerging contours of the geopolitics. The US sees India as a key alternative to China in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, complementing India's capability can help get ahead of China in the Asian subcontinent. India's human resources are in

abundance which can help the US create better market opportunities. Lastly, India's Nuclear, space and technological potential is yet to be explored completely and that can provide better avenues for the US.

- **India's Perspective:** The relationship between the two nations can help India develop better economic, political and military outreach. That can help India create a better strategic capability to modernise our country. Moreover, enhancing defence technology with the use of the USA's finesse in the domain can help India better counter the Chinese threat in the region.

Progressive Evolution of Relationship

The relationship between the two nations has been a rollercoaster ride. The turning point in the relations came during US President Bill Clinton's visit to India in 2000, during which he signed the joint statement on energy and environment with then President K.R. Narayan. In the following years, a Civil-Nuclear deal was signed alongside a defence framework was formulated leading to huge cooperation between the two.

Post-2014, the cooperation between the two nations can be segregated as under:

- Till the period of President Trump's administration wherein there was a huge focus on building bloc relationships like QUAD.
- During President Biden's administration (2021-till date), which focused heavily on defence cooperation.

The progress in the relationship between the two was institutionalized by the signing of various agreements such as COMCASA, LEMOA, and BECA. There is cooperation in research development as well.

The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) is a silent enabler in boosting the relationships but did not make it to the headlines. There were tangible achievements and there was convergence between the MEA, MoD and people from industries.

The cooperation between the two can also be witnessed in the military exercises that they conduct regularly viz Yudh Abhyas, Vajra Prahar, and Malabar (multilateral). The most significant development between India and the US is the iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies) which led to cooperation in the defence and technological domain. The latest review meeting was held on 17/06/2024 to assess the state of the initiative.

Way Forward

USA's focus lies in South East Asia and East Asia, whilst for India it is the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Collectively, they make up the larger construct of the Indo-Pacific and bring in tremendous cooperation between these two and the stakeholders in the region, apart from China. While the USA's approach towards China is of competition and contestation, India's apprehension goes beyond and is of becoming a frontline country in the great power rivalry.

Differences in thinking of the nations can be because of:

- Indigenisation program of India, which the US sees as 'protectionism';
- The difference in priorities of the relationships of the two with others;
- The difference in apprehension regarding Russia.

India needs to keep its expectations realistic, giving utmost priority to the national interests and keep building blocks real and operationalising what can be done. Lowering barriers on both sides can help in building a better strategic rationale and foster better ties. Lastly, India needs to develop its capability without developing actual reliance on anyone.