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Moving forward on defence and security

Narendra Modi's forthcoming visit to the US provides an opportunity to highlight the value of an India that is willing to play a greater burden-sharing role

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets US President Donald Trump for the first time, the focus will be on establishing a good rapport between the two leaders. There remain concerns that their two governments' objectives are not compatible: that Trump's "America First" approach, which conceives of US interests in narrow, transactional terms, will be at odds with Modi's agenda to transform India. But one area of natural convergence is in the defence and security realm.

Part of the bilateral security agenda involves developing India's capacity to assume a bigger role as a net security provider in its region. Unlike parts of Europe and Asia, India is not dependent on US security guarantees, and is eager to have a larger military presence, particularly in the Indian Ocean. Indian efforts have complemented US interests, including in patrols of the Strait of Malacca, counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and the evacuation of civilians from Yemen.

But to play an enhanced role in the Indo-Pacific, India will have to upgrade its military capacity. Defence sales and co-production offer an area to do exactly that, while creating jobs in the US and achieving some of Modi's "Make in India" objectives. Continuing the joint working group on aircraft carrier technology cooperation and negotiating the sale of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) represent ongoing efforts to accelerate this process. Given India's recent acquisition of US military transport aeroplanes, maritime surveillance aircraft, and towed artillery pieces, there may be other possibilities worth exploring. This could extend even further in the homeland security and counter-terrorism space, including at municipal and state levels when it comes to law enforcement, and in terms of cybersecurity at the national level.

Another element of strategic cooperation involves information sharing. The two countries talk more regularly and frankly about strategic developments than at possibly any time in the past. These conversations have been particularly fruitful when it comes to developments in India's east, including in trilateral dialogues with Japan, and it is still important to discuss perceptions of China frankly.

However, the two sides have been less successful at sharing perspectives on developments to India's west, including Pakistan. A partial exception is Afghanistan, about which the US has become more sensitive to Indian concerns. But events are unfolding rapidly. The US is less willing to play a role of security guarantor in the broader Middle East than it has in the recent past. Meanwhile, India's interests in West Asia—given its sizeable diaspora, dependence on oil and gas imports, and security concerns—remain significant. The Gulf states are concerned about their post-Arab Spring security environment and are

preparing economically for post-hydrocarbon contingencies. Both Washington and New Delhi also have important and evolving relations with Israel, share concerns about the Islamic State, and need to better manage their differences on Iran. An India-US dialogue on West Asia is a natural outgrowth of the partnership.

A third element of strategic cooperation concerns interoperability. In an increasingly uncertain world, both India and the US must prepare for various contingencies. These may or may not involve working in tandem, but preparedness widens both countries' options. Having similar or complementary equipment helps, but is not always a requirement for better coordination. Greater familiarity can also be engendered through staff talks and military exchanges.

Beyond those kinds of engagements, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations and military exercises offer concrete ways for the two countries' armed services to work together. The Malabar exercises have significantly helped in building trust and enhancing cooperation between the two navies, with another edition scheduled for July. Since 2004,

the Yudh Abhyas exercises have increased familiarity between the two armies, although on a small scale. Bilateral air force engagements, including Cope India and Red Flag, have been fruitful, if episodic. Beyond existing patterns of military exercises, some creative thinking may be required to further institutionalize military-to-military interactions. Efforts at leveraging military education and training, enhancing coordination between civilian defence bureaucracies, and promoting joint or mul-

ti-service initiatives remain underdeveloped.

Modi's forthcoming visit is, therefore, a chance to boost security cooperation, understand each other's strategic priorities, and build constituencies for the bilateral relationship in both countries. While greater clarity on issues such as China will facilitate cooperation, uncertainty can impede these efforts. There will continue to be differences, and these too should be addressed candidly. India will also need to follow up words with actions, and promises with performance. But on security and strategic matters, India has a good story to tell. Modi's visit provides an opportunity to highlight for Trump the value of an India that is willing to buy American military equipment, play a greater burden-sharing role, enhance dialogue on regional security, and work more seamlessly with the US military to meet common objectives.

This article is the first in a four-part series, co-authored by Brookings India and Brookings Institution scholars, on the India-US relationship.

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