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## **New Drivers for India's Expanding Cooperation with the West**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited France and the United States this past month. Despite some tensions in each bilateral relationship, the visits were largely successful. The success boils down to the fact that there is a convergence between India and its Western partners on the geopolitical threats they face and how they can help each other. This convergence continues to drive the relationships, despite differences over issues such as the war in Ukraine and bilateral trade.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visits to both the United States and France in June and July 2023 were major milestones for both the bilateral relationships. In addition to the honours and tribulations that PM Modi received, both visits succeeded in inking new deals on defence cooperation. India agreed to procure 31 MQ-9B high altitude, long endurance drones for a [price](#) of US\$3 billion from the United States. When PM Modi visited France, the Indian Ministry of Defence cleared the [procurement](#) of 26 Rafale fighter jets and three more Scorpene-class submarines for the Indian Navy. The visits kicked off the long-term objective of achieving closer collaboration between India and its partners' defence industries.

During his visits to both countries in February 2025, Prime Minister Modi was able to continue this momentum, despite some tensions in each bilateral relationship. India's engagement with Russia has not gone over well in Europe. Media reports have also speculated that disagreements over immigration and [visa issues](#), as well as on [bilateral trade](#), could create friction between India and the United States.

The success of Modi's two visits highlights that the areas of convergence continue to dominate the bilateral agenda. The changing global security environment appears to be creating a recognition that the countries need to cooperate. This not only includes

India's and the West's deteriorating relationship with China, but also the so-called return of long conventional wars.



Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to the White House on 13 February 2025.

*Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

## The Old Paradigm

For much of the post-Cold War era, the Indian security establishment believed that long-duration conventional wars were falling out of fashion. The political realities of the post-Cold War order did not permit the conduct of such wars. The new emphasis during the 2000s and 2010s was on “short, swift, and intense” wars. In South Asia, nuclear weapons would also severely limit the scope and scale of warfare. Thus, a limited war, whose size and scope would be constrained and short in duration, was the thinking within the establishment. As wars were not expected to last long, importance was placed on managing the gap in capabilities between India and China. Key policies were pursued in line with this approach.

Indian War Wastage Reserves (WWR), the stock of ammunition and spares held in case of conflict, was [reduced](#). From a previous requirement to maintain materiel to sustain 40 days of intense warfighting, the requirement was revised in 2017 to just 10 days in the event of a war with Pakistan. For a war with China, the requirement was revised down to 30 days. India's fighter requirement of maintaining 42 operational squadrons for a “two-front war” was never fully reached. As of 2023, it is [estimated](#) that India has approximately 31 operational fighter squadrons.

Defence cooperation with the United States was also focused on assisting India's rise and not always tied to national security needs. There was a desire to move [beyond](#) a “buyer-seller” relationship between the two countries and towards joint development. Thus, India and the United States launched the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). The initiative aimed to enhance cooperation on jet engine and aircraft carrier technology, among other critical technologies. The DTTI achieved very few measurable outcomes since its launch in 2012 until 2020. Despite identifying some areas for potential cooperation on military technology, very few projects have materialised, and the initiative stalled. Similarly, India's efforts to [procure](#) 126 Medium

Multi-Role Combat Aircraft from France faced inordinate delays. It was ultimately cancelled owing to disagreements over cost and transfer of technology.

To address the military threat at the border, Indian leaders have prioritised enhancing firepower and quick reaction capabilities. Thus, India [procured](#) the M-777 ultralight howitzers, Apache attack helicopters, Chinook transport helicopters, and the C-130J transport aircraft. To improve intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, India procured platforms such as the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft. Despite these procurements, defence modernisation overall lacked urgency because India's predominant concern was [conflict](#) with Pakistan, rather than with a much more powerful China.

### **New Threats, New Avenues for Cooperation**

The Galwan valley clashes in June 2020 and Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022, however, have changed Indian assessments and pushed India and the West closer. After the clashes, India recognises China as its primary adversary. However, a key development that has shaped India's defence engagements is the nature of warfare. As noted above, Indian officials believed that wars would be short, swift, and limited. But the Russia-Ukraine war is forcing India to reconsider this assumption. India's chief of defence staff (CDS) has [stated](#) that India needs to develop a healthy mix of capabilities to address both short and swift, as well as long-duration conflicts. These include "precision weapons with long-range strike capability" in the case of short and swift wars but "large stocks of artillery and tank ammunition" if the conflict is prolonged. Moreover, India's [army](#), [navy](#), and [air force](#) chiefs have all recognised that the security of defence supply chain is critical to sustaining fighting capacity in a prolonged war.

These assessments are translating into avenues of cooperation with the West, beginning with the United States and France. The breadth and depth of the India-US and India-France defence partnerships have expanded to explore cooperation in securing defence supply chains in the event of long wars. With both countries, India has articulated defence industrial roadmaps and is looking to acquire a broader range of capabilities required for longer and larger conventional conflicts. Many of these dovetail into longstanding plans of the Indian military to modernise its equipment profile in [artillery](#) and [mechanised infantry](#).

India recently floated an [Expression of Interest](#) to procure Terminally Guided Munitions (TGM) for its artillery regiments. India and the United States are also [exploring](#) collaboration on developing an extended-range version of the M-777 howitzer. The India-US defence roadmap focuses on mobility as an area of cooperation. In addition, the United States is [exploring options](#) to sell and set up production facilities for Stryker armoured personnel carriers and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles in India.

Identifying the growing [vulnerability](#) of Russian supply chains to Chinese coercion, India and the United States began [negotiations](#) for a Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA) and Reciprocal Defense Procurement Arrangement (RDPA) in 2023. The agreements aim to ease India's access to US defence equipment and supply facilities "in the event of unanticipated supply chain disruptions". India and the United States [concluded](#) the SOSA agreement in August 2024 and [began](#) negotiations for RDPA in

February 2025. India's negotiations for the United States' General Dynamics jet engine and France's Safran [helicopter engine](#) to be manufactured in India, aim to improve the serviceability of India's aircraft fleet — again, a key requirement for sustaining fighting capacity in a long-duration conflict.

Integrating supply chains through initiatives like the INDUS-X programme serves US interests as well. Speaking on India contributing to global defence supply chains, US-India Business Council (USIBC) chief, Atul Keshap, [notes](#) that India can play a key role in defence production in the event of a long conflict where a high speed of production is necessary. India's desire to play a greater role in production and logistics support was an area of cooperation [discussed](#) between then-US secretary of defence Lloyd Austin and Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh. The United States is also looking to India to become a logistics hub for its ships and aircraft in the Indo-Pacific. The US Navy is [exploring](#) cooperation with Indian shipyards for repair and maintenance functions, having already signed one agreement in April 2023 with Larsen & Toubro. Both [Lockheed Martin](#) and [Boeing](#) have also established repair and maintenance facilities in India to service India's growing inventory of Western aircrafts.

The changing global security environment has forced both India and its Western partners to reconsider the capabilities they require to deter war and prevail if deterrence fails. This convergence in threat perceptions and interests will certainly help overcome other bilateral tensions in the relationships. This may ultimately lead to a more durable defence partnership than previous efforts hoped to achieve.

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