

India-US Homeland Security Cooperation in the Time of Modi and Trump

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ABSTRACT Bilateral ties between India and the United States have strengthened remarkably in recent years and nowhere has cooperation been greater than in the area of security. Despite certain divergences, both countries realise that there is a need for cooperation in combating terrorism to keep their homelands safe from extremist threats. Ever since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014, India has invested political capital in improving this bilateral relationship. US President Donald Trump also appears serious in enhancing India-US cooperation in the field of defence, maritime security and counterterrorism, as manifested in the first summit meeting between him and Modi, and subsequent developments. This brief highlights the positive trajectory in India-US bilateral relationship and recommends measures to create further opportunities for cooperation in the field of homeland security.

INTRODUCTION

The India-United States relationship stands on a solid ground of popular support across the political spectrum in both countries. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in June this year was a success in advancing the security and strategic partnership between the most powerful and the most populous democracies in the world. While it was PM Modi's fifth visit to the US since coming to power in 2014, it was India's first encounter with an American president who does not seem to share his two predecessors' positive views towards India. In fact, it was reportedly one of Modi's most challenging meetings with a foreign leader.

A few days before Modi's meeting with US President Donald Trump, the latter had accused India of seeking to profit from the Paris climate accord: "India makes its participation contingent on receiving billions and billions and billions of dollars in foreign aid from developed countries."¹ Another contentious issue was the Trump administration's review of the visa programme. From the Indian perspective, the meeting was mostly about the continuation of the positive momentum in the two countries' bilateral ties. Leaving all speculations aside, President Trump and PM Modi had a productive meeting. Trump praised Modi for being "such a great prime

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minister” while declaring that the “relationship between India and the United States has never been stronger, never been better.”² In their public statements after the meeting, US officials did not forget to point out that Modi was the first foreign leader for whom Trump hosted dinner at the White House.

After their meeting, PM Modi and President Trump released a joint statement, titled, “United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership”. It emphasised the two countries' cooperation on counter-terrorism, as the two leaders “stressed that terrorism is a global scourge that must be fought and terrorist safe havens rooted out in every part of the world. They committed to strengthen cooperation against terrorist threats from groups including Al-Qa'ida, ISIS, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, D-Company, and their affiliates.”³ The US had officially classified Syed Salahuddin, chief of Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a 'global terrorist' a few hours before Trump met Modi in Washington. While previous joint statements (in 2015 and 2016) have spoken of the need to bring to justice the perpetrators of the Mumbai and Pathankot terror attacks, this year's one specifically mentioned Syed Salahuddin as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist”. Further, both countries instituted “a new consultation mechanism on domestic and international terrorist designations listing proposals.”⁴ Cooperation in the areas of counterterrorism intelligence and ground operations has received greater attention as both Modi and Trump “welcomed commencement of the exchange of information on known and suspected terrorists for travel screening.”⁵ It was also decided that information exchange will be strengthened on plans, movements and linkages of terrorist groups and their leaders, along with terrorist funding.

Yet perhaps the biggest victory for Modi's visit to the US has been on the issue of Pakistan-backed terrorism. The language in the joint statement on Pakistan is particularly sharp: “The leaders called on Pakistan to ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on

other countries. They further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai, Pathankot, and other cross-border terrorist attacks perpetrated by Pakistan-based groups.”⁶

Less than a month after this meeting, the US State Department's 'Country Report on Terrorism 2016' termed Pakistan “a safe haven for terrorists”. Analysing terror activities in 2016, the report unambiguously mentions that many “terrorist groups, including the Haqqani Network (HQN), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), continued to operate from Pakistani soil in 2016.”⁷ In August 2017, the US named the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group.⁸ The listing of the Hizb is a logical step following the classification of Salahuddin as a 'global terrorist'. While Pakistan has been pushing hard to project India's atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir, the move about Salahuddin would validate India's claim of 'cross-border terrorism' as the primary reason behind the Kashmir issue. This issue is as much political as it is strategic, since it clearly demonstrates that, as D Suba Chandran says, “the Trump administration stands with New Delhi.”⁹

These developments are reassuring for New Delhi as they serve to reaffirm what was declared in the joint statement following the June summit between Modi and Trump. During his first state visit in May in Riyadh, President Trump had named India as a “victim of terrorism”, along with China, Russia, Australia, European, African and South American countries; he made no mention of Pakistan.¹⁰ Indeed, there are strong indications of a growing convergence between the US and India's positions on Pakistan's support of terror infrastructure in India.

GROWING SECURITY TIES

Security cooperation between India and the US has expanded in recent years, with more attention being given to the defence dimension. One of the important components of this

cooperation is counterterrorism. The creation of the India-US Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism in 2001 has led to the exchange of intelligence on terrorist financial operations. It has also supported joint trainings in border management, surveillance techniques, and terrorist incident response. In 2010, the Counter Terrorism Initiative (CCI) was signed to forge close and effective cooperation in counterterrorism, information-sharing, and capacity-building. Describing the CCI as symbolic of the “indispensable partnership” of the US and India against terrorism, the then US Ambassador to India, Timothy J. Roemer, had said, “In the coming days and months, there will be even closer information-sharing and collaborative efforts in issues ranging from bomb blast probe and major event security to mega-city policing, cyber and border security.”¹¹ Since then, the CCI has taken the lead in various projects for enhancing joint counterterrorism capabilities through the sharing of advanced techniques, best practices, and investigative skills. It has addressed the issues of money laundering, terrorist financing, mass transit and rail security, maritime transportation, and border security. In December 2013, India organised the first India-US policing conference in New Delhi. Bringing together the US and Indian police chiefs, federal, state, and local officials from major metropolitan areas, the exchange included a focus on strategies for building effective partnerships between police and diaspora communities. In 2014, the US created a Homeland Security working group under the bilateral High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) with the aim of facilitating joint access to counterterrorism-related technology.¹² Then in November 2015, police commissioners from India's top four metro cities went on a study visit to the US to learn the best practices of megacities policing.

Various other activities have been conducted between India and the US in the same vein. Through the Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) Program, American agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have

trained scores of Indian security personnel in counterterrorism activities. However, the outcomes of these activities have not been as visible as compared to the defence segment of the bilateral cooperation. There is enormous scope for cooperation and collaboration between the law enforcement agencies of both the countries to share and learn best practices from each other.

The Indian and US intelligence services have been collaborating on various regional terrorism threats, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, LeT, JeM and the Haqqani Network. The Indian and US defence ministries have also been discussing these regional terrorist threats at the highest levels. In February 2015, India formally banned ISIS and its associated organisations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.¹³ In September of the same year, India and the US decided to transform their relationship into “a defining counterterrorism partnership for the 21st century” during a meeting between India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and the US Secretary of State John Kerry.¹⁴ The joint declaration “reiterated the threat posed by entities such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Lashkar-e-Taeba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, D Company, and the Haqqani Network, and other regional groups that seek to undermine stability in South Asia.” It also highlighted shared long-term counterterrorism goals, and the two countries' commitment to complete “a bilateral agreement to expand intelligence sharing and terrorist watch-list information.”¹⁶

In PM Modi's speech to the US Congress in June 2016, he said that the traditional tools being used to fight terrorism were no longer sufficient. He emphasised the need to “deepen our security cooperation” through a well-crafted policy “that isolates those who harbour, support and sponsor terrorists; that does not distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists; and that delinks religion from terrorism.” The then US President Barack Obama also stressed the importance of finding more innovative opportunities for collaboration in the field of counterterrorism. In their joint statement, “The United States and India: Enduring Global

Partners in the 21st Century', the two leaders acknowledged the grave threat posed by terrorism and condemned the "terrorist incidents from Paris to Pathankot, from Brussels to Kabul. They resolved to redouble their efforts, bilaterally and with other like-minded countries, to bring to justice the perpetrators of terrorism anywhere in the world and the infrastructure that supports them."

An agreement providing for enhanced data exchanges between India's Multi Agency Centre and the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center was also signed at the time of Modi's 2016 visit.¹⁷ The US has already finalised such agreements with 30 countries and the Terrorist Screening Center has details of 11,000 terror suspects on its database, including their nationality, date of birth, photos, fingerprints and passport number. Under this arrangement, both sides agreed to give each other access to terrorism screening information through designated contact points, subject to domestic laws and regulations.

Further, India and the US have recently taken steps to strengthen their cooperation in addressing cyber-terrorism. In 2013 the two governments launched a Strategic Cyber Policy Dialogue that resulted in the Framework for India-US Cyber Relationship, the first such document signed by the US with any foreign government. It commits both countries to various principles such as promoting international law, public-private partnerships, and appropriate norms of state cyber conduct. Both countries also agreed to strengthen cybersecurity collaboration on critical infrastructure protection and malicious and criminal activity, and to adopt a bilateral cybersecurity cooperation agreement.

Defence cooperation has also addressed counterterrorism. The 2016 edition of the annual Yudh Abhyas exercise focused largely on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in mountainous regions.¹⁸ More recent cooperation has expanded to further command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) elements. In August 2016, India's Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar

visited the US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM), the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Air Combat Command (ACC), and the 480th Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Wing.¹⁹ The US designated India as a 'Major Defense Partner' of the US in December 2016, when Parrikar and his US counterpart Ashton Carter held an important meeting in New Delhi. According to the joint statement, the designation as a Major Defense Partner is a status unique to India and "institutionalises the progress made to facilitate defence trade and technology-sharing with India to a level at par with that of the United States' closest allies and partners, and ensures enduring cooperation into the future."²⁰ The three-nation Malabar Naval Exercise involving India, the US and Japan in the Bay of Bengal is the most visible symbol yet of New Delhi's strengthening security ties with Washington.

In August 2017 it was decided that India and the US would replace the existing 'India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue' with another one in which their respective foreign and defence ministers would participate. Commercial issues were left to be discussed in a separate dialogue. Announced following a telephone conversation between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi on the eve of the celebrations of India's 70 years of independence, the new 'two+two' ministerial dialogue will involve the Indian foreign minister and the US secretary of state as well as the Indian defence minister and the US defence secretary.²¹ The purpose of the dialogue is to put defence and security issues at the forefront of the relationship between India and US.

LINGERING UNCERTAINTIES AND PARADOXES

Despite common security interests, Indo-US relations are also constrained by uncertainties and paradoxes. If the Obama administration was charged with being "indecisive" on critically important regional issues, the UPA-II was often accused of being "weak" in implementing decisions on vital bilateral issues. For example,

the UPA government could not take a firm decision on addressing Washington's concerns regarding India's nuclear liability law. For its part, the Obama administration failed to attend to India's long-standing concerns over Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism. The 2008 Mumbai terror attacks aggravated New Delhi's suspicions of Washington, as the US authorities denied Indian investigative agencies access to David Headley, a Pakistani-American who participated in the attacks. Headley's interrogation revealed that he had traveled to Mumbai five times from 2006 to 2008 in preparation for one of the world's deadliest terrorist acts by the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Headley, who gave specific evidence about his close links with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the LeT, subsequently pleaded guilty to the charges.²² The US' lack of priority for India's security concerns has also been reflected in its inability (or unwillingness) to put greater pressure on Pakistan's security establishment to bring to justice the perpetrators of the Pathankot airbase attack.

What really troubles New Delhi is what it perceives as Washington's 'softness' on Pakistan, which it believes to be waging a proxy war against India. The US officials, while informally agreeing with India's accusations regarding the links between ISI and the anti-India jihadist elements, have felt compelled to cooperate with the ISI, as they have considered its help necessary to support America's war efforts in Afghanistan. Not without reason, India has often complained that the US has been pursuing a 'selective' war on terrorism.

Most of the difficulties in Indo-US security relations stem from their contrary perceptions on certain issues. It is perhaps why the Modi government decided not to send Indian troops to Iraq to fight the ISIS. It must be emphasised that the old US attitude towards the threats facing India can no longer be sustained. The current war against the jihadists derives from America's ill-conceived support for Pakistan's ISI and its monstrous jihadist proxies in the Soviet-Afghan War. India believes that the defeat of the non-

state organisations that propagate the jihadist ideology would require a strategy to undermine both the will and capacity of al-Qaeda, ISIS, the LeT and the JeM, and the states that provide material and ideological support for them, such as Pakistan.

Important to the argument here is that the uncertainties and paradoxes in the India-US relationship raises serious doubts among realists about whether or not the relationship will flourish. The underlying logic behind such scepticism is that there is hardly a solid base for common security goals between the two countries, and there is only superficial sympathy in the US for Indian victims of Pakistan-backed terrorism. However, the optimists would strongly argue that ties will only grow stronger and deeper, since the two countries share common goals in eliminating the terror threat to their national security, in ensuring maritime security and in countering the threat from China's growing assertiveness. The optimism seems justified. Neither India nor the US should expect the other to have identical views on regional and international issues. The best approach is to accommodate each other's divergent interests. While overcoming bureaucratic inertia, both sides must pursue sustained and regular engagement at the level of policymaking and policy execution.

CONCLUSION

In these times of global uncertainties, the first Trump-Modi summit was a rather remarkable moment in India-US relations as the trajectory of the bilateral partnership remains positive. Recent developments clearly indicate that Indo-US relations will remain along the trajectory earlier set during the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The continuity across the Obama and Trump administrations on a range of issues illustrates the level of maturity of India-US ties. The Modi government should be commended for learning fast in adapting to President Trump's more transactional approach, rather than the more strategic one that prevailed

towards India in previous administrations. As India adjusts to new global realities, the relationship with the US is likely to be vital for strategic reasons, and the convergence of interests is likely to remain. When Modi said, “We want to take our strategic partnership to new heights”,²³ he was in fact echoing the sentiments of billions of Indians and Americans.


This paper makes the following recommendations:

- Enhanced India-US homeland security cooperation could result in considerable progress towards making India more secure. However, for progress to be achieved, it requires cooperation not only between government agencies, but also among the private sectors of both countries. There are significant opportunities for government-to-government and business-to-business cooperation. The shared experience of working together will likely pave the way for greater Indo-US cooperation across a variety of homeland security issues, including counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.
- There is a realisation in the Indian government that its security agencies can no longer address national security threats by simply having more personnel and buying more sophisticated weapons. A focus on tangible areas of cooperation, particularly those involving training and education of Indian security personnel, will enable the US and India to enhance homeland security cooperation.
- Investment in the appropriate technologies that seek to bolster India's counterterrorism capabilities can succeed only if there is equal investment in human capital through training and education. Particular focus needs to be given to medium and long-term strategies on optimising educational programs.
- Building on successful higher education cooperation between the two nations, Indian and US universities and academies working in the field of policing and counterterrorism could work with each other to develop standardised curriculum and degree programmes. India's intelligence and law enforcement agencies need to collaborate with their American counterparts in this regard.
- Bolstering India's technological capabilities can have significant impact on its capacity to provide security to citizens. India and the US can share best practices in terms of use of technology through information sharing by intelligence and law enforcement agencies, educating personnel on relevant technology to enhance situational awareness through surveillance, and providing analyses of trends and patterns to produce actionable intelligence.
- India faces similar risks at its borders as those faced by the US, such as drugs and human trafficking, weapons smuggling, and illegal immigration. However, the element of cross-border terrorism at the India-Pakistan border makes India's threat perception severe. Therefore, the scope of mutual cooperation in border security is immense between India and the US. Despite some measures having already been undertaken by the Indian government to strengthen border security, much more needs to be done. India would benefit by studying the US methodologies and experience and drawing appropriate lessons. Thus, India and the US could explore the possibilities for working together on strengthening security at the borders of both countries and improving the professionalism of their security forces. India's borders are being guarded by the Border Security Force (BSF), the Sashastra Seema Bal

(SSB) and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), whose interaction with the US border agencies needs to be enhanced.

- By working trilaterally with regional states, the US can work cooperatively with India in building capacity. Similarly, India and the US could consider working trilaterally or quadrilaterally with regional states to build counter-terrorism capacity through trilateral or quadrilateral counter-terrorism exercises among the security forces. In this way, India and the US could take their

homeland security cooperation to a new level.

As partners in security, the governments of Modi and Trump must work together to realise their common goals, collaborating with and learning from one another in order to cultivate stronger homeland security in both nations. With a firm focus on shared values and interests, India and the US are poised to create a strategic partnership that can achieve remarkable progress in homeland security and counterterrorism. 

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