



ASSESSING DELHI-LONDON SECURITY PARTNERSHIP AMID JOHNSON'S INDIA VISIT

Mahima Duggal

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



As global attention has been fixated on the Indo-Pacific, India has emerged as a critical power, owing both to the geopolitical positioning that makes it an anchoring state in the Indian Ocean, and to its rise as an active economic and security player in the region. The Russia-Ukraine conflict and India's cautious neutrality stance have only led to Western states further stressing their India outreach in an effort to solidify relations and court Indian support. On April 21-22, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson became one of the latest world leaders to be welcomed at the Rashtrapati Bhavan,¹ amongst other elites like Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Held at a geopolitically critical moment and the 75th anniversary of India-UK diplomatic relations, the trip came as an indication that India – a major economic power and the world's largest democracy – is viewed as a “highly valued strategic partner for the UK in these uncertain times”.

Johnson described the visit – his first to India as Prime Minister – as an effort to advance their bilateral partnership for “peace and prosperity” in the face of threats from autocratic states.² Held at a geopolitically critical moment and the 75th anniversary of India-UK diplomatic relations, the trip came as an indication that India – a major economic power and the world's largest democracy – is viewed as a “highly valued strategic partner for the UK in these uncertain times”.³ It aimed to further their partnership as London looks to actualise its Indo-Pacific tilt.

In 2021, both countries upgraded their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with new investment and commercial trade deals worth £1 billion, as part of their ‘Roadmap 2030’.⁴ Accordingly, much of the media attention has been focused on the

rapidly growing economic aspect of India-UK ties and the likelihood that both countries will successfully conclude their Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which London has pushed for as part of its international economic and trade strategy after Brexit. With the second round of FTA negotiations completed in March 2022, Johnson announced his hope that the deal would be finalised by October 2022. The agreement could boost bilateral trade ties by as much as £28 billion, adding to the already wide trade and investment links between the two states. However, comparatively little attention has been exacted on the crucial security and military dimensions of their partnership, which demands greater focus.

An Evolving Security Partnership

India and Britain have long been natural defence partners, with regular high-level defence consultations and several joint military exercises to advance their technical cooperation, interoperability, and strategic synergy. In October 2021, both states conducted their first-ever tri-services joint exercise, Konkan Shakti off India's west coast. The drills were held during the British Carrier Strike Group (CSG) led by HMS Queen Elizabeth's visit to India, which came as a part of its deployment to the Indo-Pacific and a "symbol of Global Britain in action".⁵ The sea phase of the exercise featured advanced warfare tactics – such as anti-submarine warfare, over-the-horizon targeting drills, air defence exercises, and cross-deck landings, amongst other complex manoeuvres.⁶ In addition to such military exchanges of best practices, both countries also made strides in their security diplomacy through the introduction of a British Liaison Officer in the Indian Information Fusion Centre as well as the institution of an annual UK-India Maritime Dialogue.

Such developments were not out of the blue but came as an effort to further the India-UK 'Defence and International Security Partnership', launched in 2015, that institutionalised their commitment to transforming bilateral security cooperation. It sought to further bolster its standing as a trusted defence partner working in support of a "free, open and secure Indo-Pacific" region. The partnership covered broad areas, including defence technology, cyber security, and maritime security, amongst others.

Since then, London and New Delhi have made a concerted effort to strengthen defence linkages. They reinforced their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Defence Equipment Cooperation in 2020, signed a Defence Technology and Industrial Capability Cooperation (DTICC) agreement in 2019, and concluded a Defence Logistics and Training agreement during PM Johnson's recent visit.⁷ These defence agreements essentially form the three pillars of the evolving security partnership between both states, particularly in the defence trade domain. In fact, reports suggest that under the frameworks provided by these MOUs, India and the UK may see greater defence industrial cooperation in complex air systems and next-generation aerospace programmes. These

could potentially include the LCA Mk2 and, perhaps eventually, even the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA). In other words, Britain is seeking to build a robust and successful defence sector collaboration with India predicated on “co-creation, co-development and government-to-government stewardship”.⁸

Highlighting Defence and Air Power during the Johnson-Modi Meet

To take this focus on defence industrial cooperation forward, both states took several steps during PM Johnson’s India visit ranging from cooperation in defence research, design, development, and production to the maritime and cyber security domains.

Defence Research, Development and Production

Most prominently, both countries finalised an advanced security cooperative arrangement between the British Defence Science & Technology Laboratory and India’s Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) encompassing research, design, development, and production of critical and emerging military technologies.⁹ In this vein, they also announced a Working Group for joint work on maritime integrated electric propulsion systems, in which UK industries are world leaders. PM Johnson also noted the importance of accelerating collaboration in indigenous manufacturing of defence equipment and joint ventures to enable the transfer of technology to meet the needs of not only India’s Armed Forces, but also those of regional powers.¹⁰

Additionally, Johnson announced the award of an Open General Export License to India, which will help streamline technology transfer and therefore facilitate more efficient technology engagement between both countries.¹¹ The conclusion of the FTA, which is now a priority for both states, will add to the expanding defence trade. Herein, some key areas for strategic cooperation discussed included Modern Fighter Aircraft and Jet Engine Advanced Core Technology – both critical technologies for India’s budding defence aviation industry.

Defence Aviation Sector

The UK and India share strong defence production cooperation in the aviation sector historically. This has included several fighter aircraft like the Hawker Tempest FB IIs, De Havilland Vampires, English Electric Canberra, Folland Gnat, Hawker Hunter Mk 56 and its variants, SEPECAT Jaguar, Hawker Sea Hawk, British Aerospace Sea Harrier, as well as other transport and trainer aircraft.¹² Of these, the SEPECAT Jaguar, Hawker Siddeley HS 748, and BAE Hawk trainer aircraft are still active in India’s Armed Forces. UK’s British Aerospace (BAE) Systems and India’s Hindustan Aeronautics Limited

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(HAL) have also developed a close working relationship through joint ventures since the 1940s. The relationship was reinforced through collaborations on Tiger Moths, Jaguars in the 1980s, and the Hawk fleet over the past two decades. Notably, in 2010, BAE Systems secured a £500 million order with HAL for 57 Hawk Advanced Jet Trainer aircraft,¹³ making India the second-largest market for the Hawk. The new frameworks put in place now can create conditions for increased cooperation on new projects in the region.

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While cultivating defence industrial collaborations between the two states provides the UK with ample growth opportunities via access to a massive and growing market, for India, these deliverables are a critical way to further its Make in India or *Atmanirbhar* Bharat policy, and defence indigenization goals. This, in turn, will help New Delhi ensure the resilience of its critical defence supply chains, which currently stand disrupted owing to the havoc in Russia, India's major defence supplier.

The joint venture for jet engines is particularly valuable for India since producing indigenous jet engines has been one of the Indian military and civil aviation industry's most enduring challenges. As India looks to expand its national fighter jet program and build on the success of LCA Tejas, a joint venture with a country that has an advanced aviation program like the UK is critical. For one thing, both countries can collaborate on a new design that is ideal for sixth-generation fighter jets that can help India surpass China in engine design.¹⁴ Particularly, both states can potentially work jointly on the development of a highly fuel-efficient 180 KN (wet) jet engine that can help India make significant improvements to the AMCA, including "larger wings, longer fuselage, higher thrust to weight ratio, and conversion into a Naval version with only a few modifications".¹⁵ Considering BAE System's proven track record in aircraft development, its ongoing work on the sixth-generation Tempest Future Combat Air System program, which the UK is keen to bring India on board as an international partner,¹⁶ could be another avenue for bilateral military cooperation.

Furthermore, several states in South and Southeast Asia are dependent on Russia and Ukraine for military equipment and spare parts. In the long-term, India and the UK can look to build a partnership in defence technology that brings together British expertise and Indian manufacturing capabilities for the production and export of critical equipment to states in the Indo-Pacific.

Energy Security

Notably, technological cooperation also stretched into the energy security sector, which has assumed foremost importance for Europe amid worsening ties with its major

energy source, Russia. As the UK looks to phase out Russian oil imports (accounting for 8% of total oil demand in the country),¹⁷ and as both states seek to achieve their climate targets, renewable energy has become a crucial area of importance. In this context, Johnson and Modi announced a new joint Hydrogen Science and Innovation Hub that will add to the existing US \$1.2 billion on green projects in India. In addition to innovating new solutions to ensure secure energy supplies, the Hub also plans to develop a massive offshore wind energy farm, stretching “from the Celtic Sea to Dhanushkodi” in Tamil Nadu.¹⁸

Emerging Maritime and Cyber Focus

Additionally, to build on their maritime dialogue and the three MOUs, Delhi and London also looked towards the speedy expansion of their maritime partnership with the early settlement of their Maritime Information Exchange Arrangement “on dark and grey shipping”,¹⁹ which will likely emulate a similar arrangement that India shares with the US, which provides a framework for intelligence exchanges between the respective navies in real-time.

With regards to the India-UK cyber security partnership too, several promising steps were taken. While calling for greater associations in domains of future conflict, like space and artificial intelligence, Johnson and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised their commitment to a “free, open, peaceful, and secure cyberspace”; the same was outlined in the India-UK cyber statement,²⁰ released during Johnson’s trip to India, which also laid out a strategy for cooperation across the cyber governance, deterrence, and resilience domains.

Towards A New and Expanded Security Partnership

Increased synergy in the military and security domains comes as a crucial advantage when it comes to their presence and outreach in the Indian Ocean. The UK has a limited physical presence in the Indo-Pacific region; in fact, its physical connection is almost entirely built upon its partnerships in the region and the handful of military bases and island territories within the Indian Ocean Region. Here, enhancing bilateral and multilateral military drills between both states can help London project its presence in a geographically distant region while also equipping both militaries with greater expertise and preparedness.

New Delhi and London are clearly moving in the right direction to build a new and expanded defence and security partnership that is as comprehensive as it is deep. Now, the challenge for both will be to ensure that political will and momentum for such a

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partnership are sustained and cultivated. Britain's commitment to work with India in building fighter jets alone commits the country to not only New Delhi but the Indo-Pacific concept at large, for decades to come. By further ensuring it did not 'lecture' India on its neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict or pressurise New Delhi to move away from Moscow, London has further demonstrated it values India as an equal partner. India and the UK must look to cement a middle power-driven security partnership that is robust and capable of navigating the tense geopolitics of today.

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Notes:

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¹¹ Prime Minister's Office et al, "PM statement at press conference with Prime Minister Modi: 22 April 2022," UK Government, April 22, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-press-conference-with-prime-minister-modi-22-april-2022>. Accessed on April 28, 2022.

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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Mr Mohit Sharma, Ms Mahima Duggal and Mr Rohit Singh

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