

2. India–Us Defence Deal & Strategic Relations – I R

India has finalized a ₹7,995-crore follow-on support deal with the U.S. for its fleet of 24 MH-60R Seahawk helicopters, ensuring five years of sustained maintenance and supply

MH-60R Seahawk Helicopters – Significance & Features

About the MH-60R – The MH-60R, built by Lockheed Martin/Sikorsky, is the most advanced multi-mission naval helicopter in service globally. Designed for all-weather, day-night operations, it primarily supports Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Anti-Surface Warfare (ASuW), Search and Rescue (SAR), Electronic Intelligence (ELINT), and Special Operations. It integrates next-generation avionics, mission computers, radars, sonobuoys, and electro-optical/infrared sensors.

Key Features – Maritime variant of the UH-60 Blackhawk, optimized for naval deployment. Equipped with ALFS (Airborne Low-Frequency Sonar), multi-mode radar, and sonobuoy launcher, giving it strong undersea detection capabilities. Capable of carrying torpedoes, Hellfire missiles, and precision weapons, enhancing maritime strike capability. Supports network-centric operations via secure datalinks, enabling coordination with ships, aircraft, and submarines. Improves India's ability to counter Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), filling a longstanding capability gap.

India's Procurement – India signed a \$2.6 billion deal for 24 MH-60R helicopters in February 2020 under the U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) programme. Deliveries began in 2021; aircraft are currently undergoing integration and training phases with the Indian Navy. Strengthens India's maritime security posture amid growing PLA Navy activities.

India–US Defence Partnership – Overview



Evolution of Defence Ties – Based on the New Framework for India–US Defence Cooperation (2005), renewed for 10 years in 2015. In 2016, ties were elevated to a Major Defence Partnership (MDP)—a unique classification granted only to India. The partnership has evolved from buyer–seller dynamics to technology-centric, co-development and co-production cooperation.

Pillars of Contemporary Defence Cooperation – Regular institutional dialogues (2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, DEFEXPO, etc.). Increasingly sophisticated joint military exercises across domains—land, air, sea, cyber. Expanding defence procurement including P-8I, C-130, C-17, Apaches, Chinooks, M777 howitzers, and MH-60R. Growing cooperation on emerging technologies, including AI, space, quantum, and semiconductor supply chains. Shared focus on a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Key Defence Agreements (Enabling Framework)

Foundational Agreements Enabling Interoperability – LEMOA (2016) – Allows reciprocal logistics support (fueling, berthing, supplies) during exercises and humanitarian missions. COMCASA (2018) – Enables secure communications and interoperability between both militaries through encrypted systems. ISA (2019) – Facilitates the protection of classified information and enables deeper industrial collaboration. BECA (2020) – Allows sharing of high-end geospatial intelligence, improving targeting accuracy for aircraft, drones, and missiles.

Additional Cooperation Mechanisms – Memorandum of Intent on Defence Innovation (2018) – Supports DARPA-style joint R&D via iDEX and the US Defense Innovation Unit (DIU). Security of Supplies Arrangement (SOSA) – Ensures timely delivery and priority access to defence supplies in crises. Growing cooperation under INDUS-X initiative (2023) for start-up and industry collaboration. These agreements collectively enhance interoperability, logistics synergy, intelligence sharing, and strategic trust.

Military-to-Military Engagements

Bilateral Exercises – Yudh Abhyas – Largest India-US joint army exercise. Vajra Prahar – Special Forces interoperability. Malabar – High-end naval exercise involving India, US, Japan, Australia. Cope India – Air combat and mobility cooperation. Tiger Triumph – Tri-service HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) exercise.

Multilateral Engagements – Participation in RIMPAC, Red Flag, and joint naval cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. In 2022, India joined the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Bahrain, strengthening maritime domain awareness and anti-piracy operations.

Strategic Significance – Enhances India's preparedness in maritime security, counterterrorism, cyber defence, and HADR operations. Aims at deterring coercive behavior in the Indo-Pacific amid rising Chinese naval presence.

Issues & Challenges in the Partnership

Technology Transfer & Co-Production Bottlenecks – Though agreements promise high-end technology sharing, the actual pace is slow. U.S. export control laws (ITAR), licensing constraints, and congressional oversight limit rapid transfer of cutting-edge systems.

Procurement & Bureaucratic Hurdles – India's procurement cycle involves lengthy approval processes and technical evaluations. Differing procurement philosophies—India's focus on indigenisation vs. U.S. commercial FMS model—often creates mismatches.

Geopolitical & Economic Frictions – Recent tensions following U.S. tariffs on Indian goods (August 2025) caused diplomatic strain. Differences on Russia policy, especially after the Ukraine conflict, influence defence dynamics. India's insistence on strategic autonomy sometimes slows deeper integration.

Industrial Base Constraints – India's defence industry is still developing capacity for absorbing advanced technologies. Joint R&D outcomes remain limited compared to potential.

Conclusion & Way Forward

Current Trajectory – India-US defence cooperation has expanded into a strategic, capability-centric partnership. Strengthens India's maritime and air domain awareness, counters security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, and fosters indigenous defence growth. MH-60R induction is a symbol of deepening operational collaboration.

Way Forward – Streamline Defence Procurement – Reduce timelines, simplify trials, integrate joint working groups for faster acquisition. **Expand R&D Cooperation** – Focus on cyber warfare tools, AI-enabled military systems, space security, undersea domain awareness. **Promote Co-development & Co-production** – Advance projects under INDUS-X, including UAVs, jet engine technology, and secure communications. **Strengthen Maritime Cooperation** – Boost collaboration in IOR surveillance, submarine tracking, and joint patrols. **Institutionalize High-Level Dialogue** – Make 2+2 Dialogue outcomes more actionable and time-bound. **Maintain Strategic Autonomy** – Balance relations with U.S., Russia, and others to preserve India's independent foreign policy choices.

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