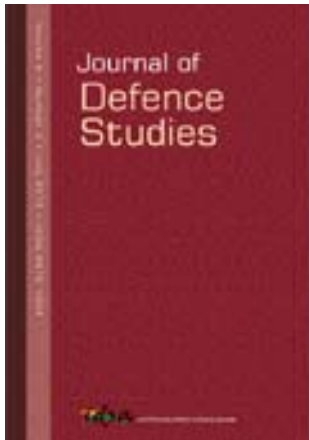


Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: S. Kalyanaraman (2013): The Limits of the India-United Kingdom Defence Relationship, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol-7, Issue-1, pp- 229-238

URL: http://www.idsa.in/jds/7_1_2013_TheLimitsoftheIndiaUnitedKingdomDefenceRelationship_SKalyanaraman

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The Limits of the India-United Kingdom Defence Relationship

*S. Kalyanaraman**

The United Kingdom (UK) is keen on establishing a ‘stronger, wider and deeper’ relationship with India.¹ It is ‘determined to make’ defence cooperation ‘an essential part’ of this relationship.² London sees such a relationship with an India that will shape the twenty-first century as ‘an essential pillar’ in its ‘broader strategy’ to fashion a role for itself in Asia.³

But how important is the UK for India’s role in the emerging Asian landscape? Not very, it appears, from *de rigueur* statements about sharing ‘the same vision for a renewed and enhanced partnership’ and working together to address ‘the challenges of global poverty and development, reform of global institutions, terrorism and climate change’⁴ as well as from appeals for a ‘better appreciation of each other’s core concerns including on the security environment’ and particularly the challenge of terrorism.⁵

The UK’s limited importance for India is partly a function of the steady decline in its relative power over the last six decades, which has translated into a diminished presence in Asia and an inability to play an autonomous role in international affairs.⁶ Ongoing economic travails and the consequent military downsizing will further reduce its ability to carve out for itself a robust role in the Asian arena. What little presence

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the United Kingdom has in India's neighbourhood will also be wound down or has long become marginalized. Its troops in Afghanistan will be withdrawn after 2014 and the UK may retain only a token presence in the form of a training mission for the Afghan security forces. And the Five Power Defence Arrangements in South-east Asia, of which the UK is a member, has long been overtaken by other pan-regional security mechanisms as well as by US security commitments. Today, this 'hangover from a bygone era' plays only a marginal role in South-east Asia's regional security architecture.⁷

Given all this, the UK is unlikely to serve as a useful partner for India in Asia. Nevertheless, New Delhi does see utility in broadening the scope of bilateral defence cooperation, as is evident from the progress made on this front during the last few years. But what is hampering the strategic partnership is a lack of alignment between their security perspectives. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of convergence between their perspectives on the sources of security threats and ways to manage them that constrained bilateral defence cooperation during the Cold War years.

THE FIRST 50 YEARS

Until its withdrawal from East of Suez in 1971, the UK's chief foreign policy objectives in Asia were to contain the threat posed by Soviet communism and preserve its own major role in the Indian Ocean Region through continued influence in the former colonies. In contrast, removing the blight of colonialism, creating an 'area of peace' in Asia and Africa free from superpower rivalries and deterring Pakistan, and later China, were India's objectives. While the UK pursued its objectives by participating in balance of power arrangements (such as the South East Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO] and Central Treaty Organization [CENTO]), India sought to forge a cooperative international order by emphasizing upon Afro-Asian solidarity and non-alignment between the two superpower blocs.⁸ New Delhi's 'independent' foreign policy dashed London's hopes about Indian participation in the defence of the Commonwealth. Consequently, all that remained was Indian dependence upon the UK for weapons and equipment, which was inevitable given that one of India's most important institutional inheritances was the military establishment that the Raj had built and nurtured.⁹

However, in order to free itself from total dependence upon the UK on this front, independent India at first began to diversify its sources of weaponry. This effort more than halved the UK's share of the value of India's total arms imports in the first half of the 1950s, from 100 per cent in 1950 to a little over 47 per cent in 1955.¹⁰ But the US decision in 1954 to establish an alliance with Pakistan and extend to that country defence assistance worth about US\$ 2 billion over the next decade¹¹ not only compelled India to considerably increase its arms imports but also enhance its dependence upon the UK as the source. At the same time, London too overcame its initial reluctance to fuel an arms race in South Asia and became more willing to arm India because of the imperative of bolstering its own defence industries as well as redressing the sterling imbalance (built up during the Second World War) in India's favour.¹² As a result, the UK's share of India's total arms imports reverted back to 100 per cent in 1959. Overall, during the 1950s, nearly 64 per cent of the total value of India's arms imports came from the UK.¹³ India's arms imports from the UK during these years included: *Centurion* tanks, a contract to establish a factory to produce the *Vijayanta* tank based on the *Chieftain* design, factories to produce ammunition and Aden guns—all for the Army; a cruiser and an aircraft carrier for the Navy and *Sea Hawk* aircraft for the Fleet Air Arm; and a range of aircraft for the Air Force including *Spitfires*, *Tempests*, *Vampires*, *Hawker Hunters*, *Canberra* bombers, *Avro* transports, *Percival Prentice* trainers, and *Gnats* (which were also licence-manufactured in India).

An important highlight of the defence relationship during these years was the UK's decision to assist India against China in the wake of the 1962 war. New Delhi and London signed two agreements in this regard in November 1962 and November 1964. Under the first agreement, the UK agreed to provide limited arms and equipment for the explicit purpose of 'defending India against Chinese aggression'.¹⁴ And under the second, it agreed to provide a 10-year £4.7 million loan for the 'reconstruction of the Mazagon Dockyard at Bombay, and the construction there of Leander Class Frigates'.¹⁵ During the latter part of the 1960s, 300-plus Indian personnel engaged in the Leander project gained on-site training in ship-building in the UK. London also shared the design and even drawings related to the project with Mazagon Docks.¹⁶

Yet, the robust buyer-seller relationship between the two countries began to decline steadily through the 1960s and beyond. From nearly 64 per cent in the 1950s, the decadal average of the UK's share of the

total value of India's arms imports declined to less than 34 per cent in the 1960s; to less than 20 per cent in the 1970s; and to less than 14 per cent in the 1980s.¹⁷ This long-term decline was a function of several factors. Firstly, as part of the UK's overall economic decline, its defence industrial sector also began to lose vigour. At the same time, India began to source an increasing proportion of defence equipment from the Soviet Union at 'friendship prices'. This trend was reinforced by the dramatic change in the Asian balance of power brought about by US–China rapprochement and China–Pakistan friendship; India responded to these developments by forging a security pact with the Soviet Union. Together, these factors ensured that the UK ceased to be India's chief weapons supplier from the 1960s. During the remainder of the Cold War, India sourced only a handful of weapon systems from the UK including the (Anglo-French) *Jaguar* and *Sea Harrier* aircraft, the *Sea King* helicopter, and the decommissioned aircraft carrier *HMS Hermes* (rechristened as *INS Viraat*).

THE POST-COLD WAR YEARS

Even though India has continued to source British weapons and equipment such as the *Hawk* Advanced Jet Trainer, the AW101 transport helicopter, communications networks and naval support systems, the UK's share of the value of India's total arms imports have declined even further since the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s, its decadal share of the value of India's total arms imports came down to 6.95 per cent and dropped even further to 4.6 per cent in the 2000s.¹⁸

But even as India's defence purchases from the United Kingdom have declined, there has been a broadening of bilateral defence cooperation especially in the last few years. This change has been a result of two factors: the dissolution of Cold War divergences, and India's reconfiguration of its economic and foreign policies to suit the new geopolitical circumstances, as part of which it has forged renewed partnerships with several countries, including the UK. A key element of these partnerships has been the broadening of defence cooperation, which, during the Cold War years, had largely remained confined to a buyer-seller relationship of arms and equipment. In the case of the UK, the foundation for broader defence cooperation was laid in March 1995 with the decision to establish a Defence Consultative Group (DCG) headed by India's Defence Secretary and the UK's Permanent Under Secretary for Defence. Tasked to promote mutual understanding of each other's security interests, foster greater

familiarization between their armed forces through sustained interaction and training, and develop the potential for collaborative defence research and production, the DCG has met 14 times since 1996 to steer the defence relationship forward.¹⁹

One of the first concrete outcomes to emerge from the DCG's deliberations was the signing of the Defence Equipment Memorandum of Understanding in 1997²⁰ aimed at encouraging defence industrial partnerships, including joint ventures, co-production and joint product development. But more than a decade passed by before the envisaged cooperation could begin even in a limited way. For instance, AgustaWestland and Tata Sons are now collaborating to build a facility in Hyderabad for the production of AW119KE light transport helicopters.²¹ Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. and BAE Systems have established a joint venture for producing a range of armoured vehicles.²² And Hindustan Aeronautics Limited has entered into an agreement with Rolls-Royce to jointly assemble engines for the *Hawk* Advanced Jet Trainer.²³ Besides these ongoing projects, India and the UK are discussing the possibility of collaborating in the latter's Global Combat Ship Programme, which aims to develop a new class of frigates.²⁴

Collaboration is also set to begin in the field of defence science and technology. In September 2011, India's Defence Research and Development Organization and the UK's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory signed a Letter of Arrangement to pool their expertise and work on projects such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, advanced explosives, and factors that impact human performance on the battlefield. Another field of collaboration that the two organizations have identified is the development of better protection, decontamination and medical countermeasures against chemical and biological agents.²⁵

Devising better ways to deal with weapons of mass destruction has become particularly important because of the heightened possibility of terrorist groups acquiring and employing not only chemical and biological agents but also nuclear weapons and fissile materials. In order to institutionalise cooperation for dealing with the challenge posed by terrorism, India and the UK have established a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, which held its eighth meeting in November 2012.²⁶ More recently, the two countries initiated a bi-annual Cyber Dialogue which aims at, among other things, 'enhancing international cooperation to reduce the risk of threats from cyberspace to international security.'²⁷

Another indicator of the broadening scope of the defence relationship is the institutionalization of joint military exercises. The Indian and Royal

Navies were the first to set off the block when they began the *Konkan* series of annual exercises in April 2004. Over the last eight years, these exercises have focussed upon a range of missions including combined maritime air operations, anti-submarine warfare, maritime interdiction operations and naval gunfire support, all aimed at achieving interoperability. Joint exercises between the two armies began in March 2005 with *Exercise Emerald Mercury*, which aimed at honing the skills necessary to plan and conduct a multinational peace support operation. Subsequent exercises—*Himalayan Warrior* (September 2007), *Ajeya Warrior* (August 2011) and *Shamsheer Bugle* (June 2010)—focussed upon counter-insurgency operations. Since October 2006, the two air forces have also begun to hold the joint exercise named *Indradhanush*. This series of exercises has provided useful inputs for the Indian Air Force in particular, by enabling familiarization with Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft as well as with large force engagements.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding these encouraging developments, the fact remains that there has been only limited progress in broadening the India-UK defence relationship since the Defence Consultative Group was established 17 years ago. Even this limited progress was made possible by the end of the Cold War, which dissolved their differences about the international order and geopolitical configurations in Asia. However, the lack of divergence has not necessarily meant a convergence of interests and perspectives. A key difference that has continued to trouble the India-UK relationship is their perspectives on the issue of terrorism emanating from Pakistan as well as on ways to stabilise Afghanistan. Although the UK's current Conservative leadership has sought to bring about a greater alignment of views in this regard by bluntly stating that Pakistan's 'export of terror' cannot be tolerated, strong sentiments in favour of coddling Pakistan and attempting to find an Af-Pak solution at India's expense continue to persist.²⁸ One indication of persisting divergence in this regard is the informed speculation that the Afghan High Peace Council's 'Peace Process Roadmap to 2015' may have been drafted by 'British officials and back-channel go-betweens [who] have long worked toward this type of solution.'²⁹ The implementation of this roadmap, which has begun in earnest as is evident from the talks held between the Afghan government and the Taliban at Chantilly on 20–21 December 2012,

will return Afghanistan to its pre-September 11 state and enable Pakistan to reacquire a preponderant role in Afghan affairs through its Taliban proxy. The UK's readiness to foster a deal with Pakistan and its Taliban proxy is unlikely to be welcomed by India, which will suffer from the adverse consequences flowing therefrom. This divergence in interests and perspectives, combined with the UK's marginal role in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific region, will automatically limit the scope for India-UK defence cooperation.

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