

Rapidly Growing U.S.-India Military Ties



India Defence Minister A.K. Antony with Chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen (New Delhi, July 23, 2010)

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July 23, 2010 – The growth of military-to-military cooperation between India and the United States is “stunning,” and it is poised to continue to increase, U.S. officials told reporters here today.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is in New Delhi to explore ways to increase the military partnership between the two nations.

“It is stunning how many things we are working on with the Indians ... and how fast our partnership is growing,” said one U.S. official, speaking on background to reporters traveling with Mullen. “The chairman’s visit, obviously, is reflective of the important cooperation we have in terms of the defense side and the strategic partnership.”

The defense relationship between India and the United States is fairly mature and goes back to 1995, when then-Defense Secretary William Perry signed the first memorandum of understanding with his Indian counterpart.

Today, military-to-military cooperation between India and the United States mostly involves bilateral exercises, personnel exchanges and training.

“We do more with the Indians than the Indians do with any other country,” said another U.S. official. “That shows the importance of the relationship to the Indians.”

India and the United States have many bilateral exercises with some multilateral, officials said. India has been invited to be an observer at next year’s Cobra Gold multinational military exercises, and India has participated in Air Force Red Flag exercises at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

U.S. forces exercise with Indian navy ships throughout the Indian Ocean region, and U.S. and Indian servicemembers cooperate with each other around the world, officials said. American and Indian servicemembers also have worked together closely in U.N. peacekeeping operations.

U.S.-India military exercises, officials said, are becoming more complex and more joint. In the past, the individual services tended to operate with their counterparts, the official said. Special operations forces will be part of up-coming exercises.

India also is looking at buying U.S. defense systems.

“This is the next step ahead,” said the official, noting that India has bought six C-130J Hercules transports. With the purchase of these aircraft, Indian military noncommissioned officers and other enlisted personnel will travel to the United States for training, the official said, and this opens up a whole new window for cooperation.

“We’re hopeful that we will conclude the contract for 10 C-17s,” the official said. “That will change the depth of the relationship as we move along.”

U.S. defense firms also are competing for a \$10 billion contract to replace India’s aging fleet of MiG-21 jet fighter aircraft, the official said. Lockheed-Martin has offered the F-16 Falcon and Boeing the F/A-18 Super Hornet. They are competing against Russian, Swedish and French firms for the 126-plane deal.

The United States also cooperates with India on counterterrorism, including sharing intelligence, the official said, noting the two countries also cooperate on regional issues.

Pakistan is always a topic of discussion between the United States and India, officials said. Pakistan and India have fought a number of wars since both countries became independent in 1947, and continue to regard each other with suspicion.

The Mumbai terror attacks on November 26, 2008 – what Indians call 26-11 – killed 166 people and wounded more than 300. The Pakistan-based terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba was responsible for the attacks.

Most Indians want a stable Pakistan, said another U.S. official, and they believe Pakistani officials now realize how serious the threat from terror groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba is.

India also is working with the international community and specifically the United States in Afghanistan. “India has provided \$1.3 billion in economic aid and governance support in Afghanistan,” an official said.

Meanwhile, the India-U.S. military partnership continues to grow, officials said. In addition to normal land, sea, air and space cooperation, they said, the United States and India are looking at the problem of cyberdefense.