US-INDIA STRATEGIC TECH ALLIANCE (UISTA): AN ASSESSMENT

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

The United States' National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) in its recent report[1] proposed the creation of a *US-India Strategic Tech-Alliance* (UISTA). The core objective of this US initiative would be to centre its *Indo-Pacific Strategy* vis-à-vis emerging technologies for defense and security purposes around its relation with India.

The National Security Commission on AI, established in August 2018 under the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232),[2] is an independent commission established to identify resources and mechanism essential for the rapid development of AI, machine learning (ML), and related technologies which are necessary for an all-inclusive defense and national security requirements of US.[3] In its *2020 Interim Report* and *Third Quarter Recommendations,* the commission identifies India as a "key ally and partner" for building cooperation in the realm of emerging technologies, especially AI. It has proposed the creation of a US-India Strategic Tech-Alliance (UISTA). The Department of State would lead the UISTA process in collaboration with the Department of Defense and Commerce. UISTA will be composed of regular working groups and high-level dialogues between the

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[1]   The National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2020 Interim Report and Third Quarter Recommendations (October 2020): 23, https://www.nscai.gov/home.

[2]   John S. Mccain National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2019, Public Law 115–232—Aug. 13, (2018), https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ232/PLAW-115publ232.pdf.

[3]   National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, Charter, accessed on November 20, 2020, https://www.nscai.gov/about/about.

two states in seven key areas: promotion of technological innovation; expert human resource exchanges; strengthen joint research and development (R&D); accelerate security and defense cooperation; improve data –sharing ecosystem; counteroffensive information operations; technological standardization and norm building for AI; and any other technological aspect of broader strategic landscape.[4]

Currently, the commission has submitted its report to Congress and the US President. The Commission`s final report in May-June 2021 will provide much deeper insights and specified potential of this initiative. The formal negotiation process will start after the Congressional and Presidential approval in 2021.

This tech alliance would be one of the key component of a broader US agenda to keep India "as a key focal point" for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.[5] In last fifteen years, US have made countless efforts for the political, economic, ideological and military integration among Quad members. The three US-India bilateral agreements namely "the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)," "Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)" and "Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)" hints towards a bigger tech alliance in the form of UISTA between two major Quad members in the coming years. US is also encouraging Australia and Japan to enhance technological cooperation with India. The basic objective behind this US encouragement is to build "mini-lateral relationships" between India and other Quad members in the areas of emerging technologies. Therefore, India and Japan are coming up with a "Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)" in 2021. The MoC will focus on AI, block chain, spectrum chain, wireless ICTs, cyber security, 5G technology and submarine cable.[6] In June 2020, India and Australia entered into a "Cyber and Critical Technology Partnership". According to the media release of Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs office, this partnership is one of many measures to not only shape the

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4   Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2020 Interim Report, 25.
5   "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue*," Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*), March 16, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-diamond-past-present-and-future-quadrilateral-security-dialogue.
6   "Cabinet approves memorandum of cooperation between India, Japan for ICT," *The Hindu*, October 29, 2020, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cabinet-approves-memorandum-of-cooperation-between-india-japan-for-ict/article32973080.ece.

global technological landscape but also promote a vision of open technological cooperation in Indo-Pacific region.[7]

Following the same model of "mini-lateral relationships", US have established a new trilateral partnership around emerging technologies with India and Israel, famously known as **"T3"**. Announced in September 2020, T3 will ensure the reliability, openness and interoperability of 5G technology. T3 will serve as a base for a bigger coalition of states in the realm of emerging technologies outside Quad and NATO. Another initiative by the Department of State in the same domain is the "Clean Network Program," designed to protect the global critical technological infrastructure from intellectual property right issues. US and India are also members of a new tech alliance named as **"D10."** The D10 coalition is a brainchild of the United Kingdom (UK). D10 aspires to bring together ten democracies of the world – US, UK, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Australia, India, Canada and South Korea for the global technological supply chain management.[8]

The important question from here onwards is not "how" UISTA and all these initiatives will be materialized but "why" they are conceived in the first place. Interestingly, the idea of UISTA and all other bilateral and multilateral initiatives by the US and the Western states appear to be disconnected if studied individually. However, close analysis will reveal that all these arrangements are like beads on one string. The underlining themes running throughout these initiatives are India, data sharing, and technological interoperability. All three themes point towards the US goal to achieve strategic advantage over China and Russia in the realm of dual-use emerging technologies. The Commission's report specifically pointed out that US should develop an overarching global strategy, for military and non-military use of emerging technologies that connects all cooperative initiatives of US allies across the globe, especially Indo-Pacific region, EU and NATO. With the re-emergence of great power competition, US is aspiring to unite all partners for the international standardization of key emerging technologies to ensure the uniform and rapid inclusion of these technologies into national security capabilities. The report has identified the

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[7] The Government of Australia, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Media Release, *Australia and India agree new partnership on cyber and critical technology,* June 4, 2020, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/australia-and-india-agree-new-partnership-cyber-and-critical-technology.

[8] Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 2020 Interim Report, 198 – 204.

formation of this global technological alliance as the most viable option to offset China`s Digital Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) over the course of the next decade. The Commission's report suggests the appointment of a new "Technology Advisor to the US President" and the establishment of a "White House-led Technological Council" to oversee this complex process.[9]

What does this mean for the strategic stability in South Asia? As majority of these emerging technologies are dual-use in nature, these bilateral and multilateral agreements would enhance Indian capabilities both in civilian and military domains. Along with LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA, the UISTA will enhance data collection and analysis, access to advance satellite imagery, target acquisition capability, hypersonic missile capabilities, and advance encryption of classified communication for Indian armed force. It will also boost Indian intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities vis-à-vis China and Pakistan in South Asia and Indo-Pacific region. UISTA will provide a huge boost to stationary as well as robotic applications of military AI. India is building its military capabilities in the realm of emerging technologies with the help of US and its allies on the pretext of Chinese threat. This advancement of Indian emerging military technologies could not only be easily shifted towards Pakistan but also increase the military asymmetry between India and Pakistan. India would be pushing Pakistan towards an unintended and dangerous new arms race in South Asia. Keeping in view the long-standing Pakistan-China friendship, this emerging dynamic would directly as well as indirectly affect the digital initiatives under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan.

So, what options does Pakistan have? Pakistan must build cooperative framework with friendly countries across the globe and focus on the indigenization of emerging technologies. The security institutions and policy makers in Pakistan must understand the importance of available time frame in this regard. They must realize that all these bilateral and multilateral arrangement of India and US are at either conceptual or early development stage right now. However, they will become operational in ten years' time. Pakistan has no other option except catching up with these developments before it is too late.

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[9]   Ibid, 201, 8.