

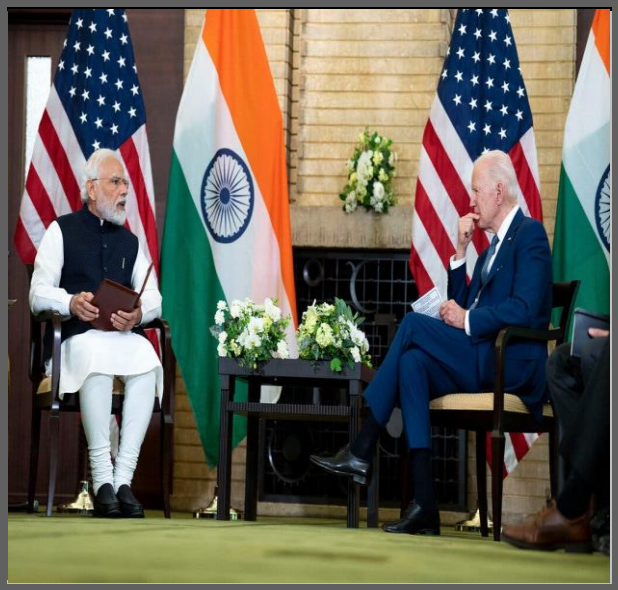
## DECODING MODI'S U.S. VISIT: ANALYZING THE RAMIFICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIA

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



On 10 May 2023, a press release from the White House announced that President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden will host Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for an Official State Visit.<sup>1</sup> The visit, expected between June 21-24, 2023, is to affirm the deep and close partnership between Washington and New Delhi. The press release broadly stated three strategic objectives of the visit. First, the joint commitment of the two nations for ensuring free and secure 'Indo-Pacific' region. Second, the elevation of strategic technology partnerships. Third, expanding educational and people-to-people ties, and confronting mutual challenges such as workforce development, health security and climate change. The visit comes at a time when India has, through several moves, implied its lack of willingness to accommodate the U.S.'s strategic vision. India's current posture towards China at best suggests strategic ambiguity; therefore, despite Washington's unconditional and unrestrained support, New Delhi would seemingly not be ready or able to counter the 'dragon' at its doorstep. On the other hand, the U.S. support to India will further regional instability, especially between India and Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup> White House, "Statement from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on the Official State Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Republic of India" press release, May 10, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/10/statement-from-white-house-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-the-official-state-visit-of-prime-minister-narendra-modi-of-the-republic-of-india/>

Notwithstanding the democratic backslide, internal fissures, human rights violations, minority rights abuses, heightened censorship, and rising populism at home, the BJP government continues to focus on its external front and tout foreign policy 'achievements.' The forthcoming visit would be President Modi's first Official State Visit to the United States. The visit holds significant importance as prior to PM Modi, only two Indian leaders President Radha Krishna (1963) and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2009) have been on Official State Visits, while other prominent Indian leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee not been invited on a State Visit.<sup>2</sup> During this visit, he will be attending a state dinner, the U.S.-India Business Council conference, and addressing a Joint Session of Congress (for the second time). Accepting the invitation to speak at the Joint Session of Congress, Mr. Modi tweeted: "India was proud of the Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership, shared democratic values, ties and support for global peace."<sup>3</sup> Prior to the visit, the stage is being set by visits of high-level U.S. officials to India, such as U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, to decide which deals will be signed and announced.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. hopes that the visit will 'consecrate' India as an important partner, and the Indian government hails the visit as 'historic.'<sup>5</sup>

### 'Counterweight' China

The recent visit by the Secretary Defence Lloyd Austin, prior to the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the U.S., underscored Washington's desire to boost partnership in the backdrop of growing tensions with China in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. invitation for the Indian Prime Minister is meant to fortify ties with a country that also harbours regional hegemonic intentions, along with ostensible

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- <sup>2</sup> 'Visits by Foreign Leaders of India,' *US Department of State Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/india>; Vaishali Basu Sharma, "Modi's State Visit to the US: Expansive Engagement," *Modern Diplomacy*, June 7, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/06/07/modis-state-visit-to-the-us-expansive-engagement/amp/>
- <sup>3</sup> Narendra Modi, *Twitter post*, June 6, 2023, [https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1666101273261912064?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eetweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1666101273261912064%7Ctwgr%5E74f590c2a912ab63349d5fd4a0c6da9702e1177a%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehindu.com%2Fnews%2Fnational%2Fus-nsa-jake-sullivan-to-visit-new-delhi-next-week-ahead-of-pm-modis-washington-visit%2Farticle66938662.ece](https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1666101273261912064?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eetweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1666101273261912064%7Ctwgr%5E74f590c2a912ab63349d5fd4a0c6da9702e1177a%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehindu.com%2Fnews%2Fnational%2Fus-nsa-jake-sullivan-to-visit-new-delhi-next-week-ahead-of-pm-modis-washington-visit%2Farticle66938662.ece)
- <sup>4</sup> Suhasini Haidar and Sriram Lakshman, "U.S. NSA Jake Sullivan to visit New Delhi next week ahead of PM Modi's Washington visit," *The Hindu*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/us-nsa-jake-sullivan-to-visit-new-delhi-next-week-ahead-of-pm-modis-washington-visit/article66938662.ece#:~:text=U.S.%20National%20Security%20Adviser%20Jake,later%20this%20month%2C%20sources%20confirmed.>
- <sup>5</sup> David Brunnstrom and Michael Martina, "US hopes Modi visit 'consecrates' India as most important partner, official says," *Reuters*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-hopes-modi-visit-consecrates-india-most-important-partner-campbell-2023-06-06/>; Darlene Superville and Aamer Madhani, "India's Modi to visit White House in June as Biden seeks stronger ties amid competition with China," *AP News*, May 11, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-modi-india-state-visit-white-house-c969d6e4e9770c105ca7affe7c190714>
- <sup>6</sup> "US and India Agree Defense Industry Cooperation Plan," *The Defense Post*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/06/05/us-india-defense-cooperation/>

desire to serve as a 'counterweight' to China. U.S.-India ties are influenced by mutual antagonism towards China, and a shared long-term vision of the regional order. However, as evident from India's longstanding inclinations towards Russia as well as current posture on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and as argued by Ashley Tellis in his article 'America's Bad Bet on India,' New Delhi would not side with Washington to 'counter' Beijing. Tellis reasons India's relative weakness as well as inescapable proximity with China.<sup>7</sup>

### Transfer of Technology (ToT)

A vital mission for the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the U.S. will be to enhance defence cooperation and secure co-production of the defence equipment. Under the recent Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), an extensive and long-term ToT potential will be assessed that broadly includes semiconductor ecosystem, AI cluster, hyper computers, quantum hubs, and space technology.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the meeting between U.S. National Security Adviser (NSA) Jake Sullivan and his Indian counter-part laid out a course of action prior to the Modi visit. During the meeting, NSA Sullivan emphasised that the visit by Prime Minister Modi to the U.S. would include 'deliverables' that remove obstacles in defence and high-tech trade.<sup>9</sup> This, under the iCET, hinted *inter alia* towards the most anticipated deal of the visit which is the co-production of jet engines with U.S. General Electric (GE). India expects GE to share the technology for the co-production of engines for Tejas Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) for the Indian Air Force.<sup>10</sup> India has been on the hunt for joint jet engine manufacturing ventures for its Air Force and Navy. Presently, engine manufacturing capability rests with only a few industrially advanced countries such as the U.S., UK, Russia, China and France. More details would come forth once the deal is signed; however, it is expected that ToT would allow local manufacturing to produce 60-75 percent of the engine's components. If this deal is inked, India's indigenous defence manufacturing capabilities could secure a significant jump. However, making Indian jets operationally ready to have significant impact on regional stability may take time. Nonetheless, many remain sceptical of the transfer of technology;

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<sup>7</sup> Ashley Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India," *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>

<sup>8</sup> Konark Bhandari, Arun Singh and Rudra Chaudhuri, "United States' Good Bet: One Year of the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)," *Carnegie India*, June 12, 2023

<sup>9</sup> "US to remove obstacles to defence, high-tech trade with India, NSA adviser Sullivan says," *Reuters*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-remove-obstacles-defence-high-tech-trade-with-india-nsa-sullivan-2023-06-13/>.

<sup>10</sup> Suhasini Haidar, "India-U.S. launch dialogue on strategic trade, seek to tighten export controls," *The Hindu*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-and-us-launch-strategic-trade-dialogue/article66942210.ece> ; "India, US agree on roadmap for defence industry cooperation," *Aljazeera*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2023/6/5/india-us-agree-on-road-map-for-defence-industry-cooperation>; Vaishali Basu Sharma, "Modi's State Visit to the US: Expansive Engagement," *Modern Diplomacy*, June 7, 2023, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2023/06/07/modis-state-visit-to-the-us-expansive-engagement/amp/>

rather, they expect that the finished engines would be shipped to India to be mounted onto the Tejas mainframe.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, then India is aiming too high with too many expectations from the U.S.

### 5 Year Long Pending Drones Deal

From the visit, India also plans to procure the 5 year long pending deal of 30 MQ-9B Reaper armed drones from General Atomics, a major U.S. Defence producer. India has had a tough stretch with procurement of these drones. Presently, the Indian Navy operates two MQ-9B Sea Guardian taken on lease from the U.S. in 2020.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. has leased these drones for surveillance in the Indian Ocean, where Indian defence interests do not lie. India rather wishes to deploy these armed drones along its borders with Pakistan and China. The Indian military states that these drones are required for its defence, and they have made efforts to produce the drones indigenously.<sup>13</sup> Some Indian defence analysts are doubtful about the success of the deal as it has gone unfulfilled several times.<sup>14</sup> If the deal is signed, the drones would be deployed to destabilise the South Asian region and become a routine border menace, especially between Pakistan and India.

### 'NATO Plus'

During the visit, talks on the inclusion of India in 'NATO Plus' are also expected. 'NATO Plus' includes non-North Atlantic nations such as Australia, Japan, Israel, New Zealand and South Korea.<sup>15</sup> India expects F-16s as a joining present of 'NATO Plus'; however, U.S. officials stated that India's inclusion into the 'NATO Plus' would not guarantee an F-16 contract.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, India's inclusion would bring 'NATO Plus' to the doorstep of China, and if China felt threatened, it could flare up more regional tensions as has been the case of Russia-Ukraine War. Moreover, India's inclusion in 'NATO Plus' would imply commitment to the territorial integrity of member states by supporting each other

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11 Tahir Qureshi, "India, USA Discuss High-Tech Joint Production Ahead Of PM Modi's Visit," *India.com*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.india.com/news/india/india-usa-discuss-high-tech-joint-production-ahead-of-pm-modis-visit-6096945/amp/>

12 "HAL to provide MRO for MQ-9B drone engines in India," *The Hindu*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/hal-to-provide-mro-for-mq-9b-drone-engines-in-india/article66511720.ece#:~:text=Indian%20Navy%20operates%20two%20MQ,estimated%20at%20around%20%243bn.>

13 Manjeet Negi, "Predator drone deal: Indian Navy wants 60% 'Made in India' content on drones," *India Today*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/predator-drone-deal-indian-navy-wants-60-per-cent-made-in-india-content-on-drones-2334837-2023-02-14#:~:text=Vice%20Admiral%20SN%20Ghormade%20told,is%20a%20capability%20we%20require.>

14 "US and India Agree Defense Industry Cooperation Plan," *The Defense Post*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/06/05/us-india-defense-cooperation/>

15 Joe Saballa, "US Pushes for India's Inclusion in NATO Plus," *The Defense Post*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/06/06/us-india-inclusion-nato/>

16 Wion News, "Ahead of PM Modi's Visit, US Envoy Eric Garcetti says India-US relation strongest & most important," *YouTube*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xxqevfOVgs>

in case of direct attack. However, the 'NATO Plus' countries should not expect India to send troops, given its 'alienating-during-difficult-times' policy. Neighbouring states such as Pakistan and China are unlikely to be the first to attack India due to their focus on regional connectivity and geo-economics. Nevertheless, India has been prone to stoking regional tensions, and inclusion in 'NATO Plus' could serve as India's excuse to procure further military equipment on the pretext of border disputes.

## Conclusion

India-U.S. global strategic partnership continues to gather steady momentum.<sup>17</sup> The Indian Prime Minister's visit to the U.S. and projected 'deliverables' are further evidence of Washington giving substantial leeway and priority to New Delhi, without necessarily asking for corresponding reciprocity. Despite the already existing asymmetry in mutual obligations in the U.S.-India relationship, the U.S. remains much more tolerant and accommodative of the divergences that Washington has with India on several regional and global issues. Quite evidently, the geostrategic calculations including 'containment' of China are shaping Washington's skewed approach.

If during the visit, India secures a deal for the transfer of technology and its inclusion in 'NATO Plus', it is likely that regional tensions would mount, especially in the shape of escalations on the borders and an inexorable arms race. This would also undermine the delicate strategic stability in the region. Given the peculiar approach of India's foreign policy (playing-both-sides-of-the-street), its continued strong historical and military ties with Russia, and its lack of capacity as well as national resolve to 'counter' China, the U.S. appears to be overly accommodative and too generous. Playing its non-alignment card, India would likely continue to bag benefits from its multifaceted partnerships with the U.S. and Russia, while artfully hedging its relations with China.

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<sup>17</sup> "India is a global strategic partner of U.S., says official," *The Hindu*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-is-a-global-strategic-partner-of-us-says-official/article66562349.ece>.