Naveen Shodh Sansar (An International Refereed / Peer Review Multidisciplinary Research Journal)
RNI No.- MPHIN/2013/60638, ISSN 2320-8767, E- ISSN 2394-3793, Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF)- 8.054,
July to September 2026, E-Journal, Vol. I, Issue LV (55), ISO 9001:2015 - E2024049304 (QMS)

# The Institutional Story of India-US Defence Relations: From LEMOA to COMPACT

**Narendra Charan***

***Research Scholar (Political Science) Mohanlal Sukhadiya University, Udaipur (Raj.) INDIA**

**Abstract:** India's defence relationship with the United States began from almost nothing. Non-alignment and India's Cold War-era closeness to the Soviet Union kept the two countries at arm's length through most of the twentieth century, and meaningful institutional cooperation only began with the 2002 General Security of Military Information Agreement. From there the relationship was built up in step by step: in 2016, 2018 and 2020 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement were signed respectively; the 2016 Major Defense Partner designation and the 2018 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue gave the relationship its own diplomatic and institutional architecture; and the 2023 technology initiatives, the 2025 COMPACT framework, and the October 2025 ten-year defence framework moved cooperation from access toward genuine co-production between both countries. By any institutional measure, the United States is now one of India's most significant defence partners. However, Russia remains the more reliable defence partner in practical terms. Russia still supplies India with more arms than any other country, and decades of familiarity with Indian platforms, combined with easy licensing conditions that govern U.S. transfers, give it an operational reliability that the newer U.S. relationship has not yet matched, even as recent wartime delivery delays have tested that reliability. This paper traces both halves of that story: a rapidly deepening institutional relationship with the U.S. and a still unmatched level of practical defence cooperation with Russia.
**Keywords:** Indo-US relations, defence cooperation, institutionalization, foundational agreements, strategic partnership, India-Russia defence trade, COMPACT.

**Introduction -** Ask most people what defines India's defence relationship with the United States, and the answer usually involves a list of purchases, fighter jets, drones, artillery, whatever made the news that year. It is a natural way to think about the relationship, and it is also somewhat misleading. By raw supplier share, Russia remains India's largest source of arms imports, not the United States. SIPRI data reported through Statista put Russia at 36% of India's arms imports for 2019–2024, France at 31%, the United States at 13%, and Israel at 11% (Statista, 2025). In more recent years, 2021–2025, shows Russia still leading at around 40%, with France following at 29% and Israel at 15%, while the United States remains well behind both (ThePrint, 2025; India's World, 2025). If the question is "who sells India the most weapons," the United States is not even the leading Western supplier.

This paper takes the position that volume is the wrong place to look if the goal is to understand what makes the Indo-US relationship distinctive. What the United States has built with India over the past two decades is not primarily a sales relationship but an institutional one, a sequence of legal agreements that unlock specific operational capabilities between both countries. A ministerial dialogue format India shares with only a handful of states, and, as of late 2025, a renewable ten-year defence framework. None of these things shows up in an arms-transfer table, and none of them exists between India and Russia, France, or Israel in comparable form. The argument here is that this architecture, not the dollar value of hardware sold, is the real measure of how deep the relationship has become.

The paper traces that architecture from its earliest formal step. The 2002 General Security of Military Information Agreement, through the Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership, was signed in Kuala Lumpur on October 31 2025. It is organised into five parts. Section 2 of this paper reviews how existing scholars have approached the relationship, mostly on an agreement-by-agreement or administration-by-administration basis. It identifies a gap: little of it treats institution-building as a single, cumulative process worth tracing end to end. Section 3 sets out the paper's document-based, qualitative method. Section 4 does the actual tracing, moving through the legal-logistics agreements, the status and dialogue mechanisms, the shift from access to co-production, and the 2025

framework consolidation, before checking the argument against Russia, France, and Israel. Section 5 concludes by weighing the durability of this architecture, given that some of the same literature this paper draws on also warns that leader-level unpredictability can strain even well-institutionalised partnerships.

**Literature Review**

Existing work on Indo-US defence relations tends to fall into three loose groups, each leaving a slightly different gap for this paper to work with.

The first group is a broad historical or political narrative, usually organised around leadership and domestic politics rather than institutional instruments. Pant and Joshi (2017), writing early in the PM Modi years, postulate that the prime minister gave up on the decades of non-alignment hesitation for three reasons: his personal conviction that India's development needs required closer ties with the U.S. The unusual parliamentary majority that let him act without needing a coalition consensus, and structural pressure from a rising China increasingly aligned with Pakistan. This is a useful account of why the relationship accelerated when it did. However, it says comparatively little about the specific legal and bureaucratic mechanisms through which that acceleration was then locked in.

The second group looks directly at those mechanisms, but usually one at a time or as a set rather than as a sequence. Banerji (2024), for the National Maritime Foundation, examines the four foundational agreements, GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA, as enablers of maritime cooperation, specifically, showing how each one unlocks a distinct operational capability. Refuelling and port access, secure communications, GPS-grade positioning, and geospatial intelligence, respectively. Her analysis is also useful for what it does not claim: she is careful to flag the regulatory challenges that remain, including ITAR restrictions, the U.S. Munitions List, and even an obscure but real obstacle in the 1920 Jones Act's limits on foreign naval ship repairs in the U.S. ports. This is a reminder that institutional architecture and full technological trust are not the same thing.

The third group is closer to policy commentary than to academic analysis, but is nonetheless useful because it is the literature that actually tracks the newest developments. Mishra (2025), writing for the Observer Research Foundation immediately after the COMPACT announcement, states it as the latest in a line of framework documents going back to 2005 and 2015, arguing that every revision reflects "deepening structural integration" driven by shared concern about China's regional expansion. Pant and Mishra (2025) wrote in The Washington Quarterly that reading is complicated. They argue that Trump's second term introduced real volatility into the relationship by wooing Pakistan through economic and mediation overtures, which they describe as a troubling "re-hyphenation" of India and Pakistan in U.S. foreign policy. Their point is not that the institutional architecture is not very successful, but that structural resilience and short-term political unpredictability can coexist. A caution worth taking seriously rather than dismissing as noise.

Taken together, this literature is well-suited to explaining why the relationship deepened (Pant & Joshi), what specific agreements unlock (Banerji), and how to read the newest framework documents (Mishra; Pant & Mishra). What it does not quite do, at least not as its central task, is put all of these pieces on one timeline and ask what the sequence itself reveals. That is the gap this paper tries to fill. Not a new data or fact about any specific agreement, but a reframing of the whole sequence as a single, cumulative process of institutionalisation, and an argument that this process is the more meaningful unit of analysis than any single transaction or transfer figure.

**Methodology:** This paper uses a qualitative, document-based tracing method rather than a statistical or survey-based one. The reasoning is straightforward: the claim being tested, that institutional depth, not transfer volume, is the better indicator of strategic closeness is a claim about the structure of a relationship over time, and the structure of this kind is visible in primary documents, not in a dataset of transactions.

The primary sources are the texts and official fact sheets of the instruments themselves. The 2002 GSOMIA (U.S. Department of State, 2002), the 2016 LEMOA, the 2018 COMCASA, the 2020 BECA, the 2023 iCET and INDUS-X announcements, the February 2025 COMPACT joint statement (The White House, 2025), and the October 2025 Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). Where the underlying agreement text is not fully public, official government fact sheets and joint statements are used instead, which is standard practice given that several of these instruments are administrative arrangements rather than treaties requiring ratification.

These primary sources are read against the secondary literature discussed in Section 2, and the sequence is organised into four analytical layers, legal-logistics, status and dialogue, technology and co-production, and consolidation based on what function each instrument primarily serves rather than strictly by date, since some layers developed in parallel. A comparative section then uses SIPRI's publicly reported supplier-share data (via Statista, ThePrint, and India's World) to determine whether Russia, France, or Israel has built anything resembling this layered structure with India. That comparison is descriptive rather than statistical; the trade figures are used only to establish that volume and institutional depth are not the same variable, not to model any causal relationship between them.

The obvious limitation is that this approach relies entirely on what governments have chosen to make public and excludes any operational details that remain classified

on either side. It is also a snapshot: this analysis reflects the state of the relationship as of 2026, and the newest instrument it covers the October 2025 ten-year framework is barely a year old at the time of writing, so its implementation record cannot yet be assessed.

**The Institutional Architecture of Indo-US Defence Cooperation**

**1. The Legal-Logistics Foundation: GSOMIA, LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA:** The starting point is easy to miss because it predates the relationship most people associate with India and the United States getting close. In January 2002, about four months after the 9/11 attacks reshaped the United States view of Asia, both countries signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement. This comparatively technical instrument allowed classified military information to be shared under agreed safeguards (U.S. Department of State, 2002). It attracted little attention at the time, but it was the legal precondition for almost everything that followed: without a framework for handling classified information, none of the later agreements could have gone anywhere.

The next step did not come for fourteen years. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, signed in 2016, allows each country's forces to use the other's bases for refuelling, resupply, and repair access that, per Banerji's (2024) analysis, in practice extends to U.S. facilities in Djibouti, Diego Garcia, Guam, and Subic Bay. Two years later came the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, which allowed India to receive secure, encrypted communications equipment and advanced positioning systems that the U.S. does not release to non-allies, and which also opened the door to more sophisticated American surveillance drones. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement followed in 2020, granting India access to geospatial intelligence and satellite-derived targeting data, notably including data useful for tracking submarine movements in the Indian Ocean (Banerji, 2024).

What makes this sequence worth calling an architecture rather than a list is that each agreement was a precondition for the one that followed. Secure communications sharing under COMCASA would not have been legally possible without the classified-information framework GSOMIA established in 2002; the kind of precision-targeting cooperation that BECA enables depends on the secure links COMCASA created. No equivalent four-agreement sequence exists between India and Russia, France, or Israel. Those relationships involve arms purchases and, in Israel's case, some co-development, but not this layered legal scaffolding for interoperability.

**2. Formalizing Status: Major Defence Partner and the 2+2 Dialogue:** Alongside the legal-logistics layer, the United States built a second, more symbolic layer: designations and standing dialogue formats that exist for India and essentially no one else. In 2016, the same year as LEMOA, the United States designated India a "Major Defence Partner," a category created specifically for this purpose. As the Observer Research Foundation notes, "the MDP designation is unique to India. No other country has been designated a Major Defence Partner of the United States" (Observer Research Foundation, n.d.). In 2017 U.S. Congress has written this in its federal law and institutionalized it which is known as the National Defense Authorisation Act. The practical effect was to place India's licensing and technology-release process closer to that of a treaty ally, without India actually becoming one a deliberate middle category.

Two years later, in 2018, the two governments established the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, in which the foreign and defence ministers of both nations meet jointly rather than through separate diplomatic and military channels. India uses this format with only a small number of countries, alongside Japan and Australia, placing it in the same tier of institutionalised dialogue that the United States uses with its closest Indo-Pacific partners. Neither the Major Defence Partner designation nor the 2+2 format has an analogue in India's relationships with France, or Israel; those relationships are managed through more conventional bilateral or defence-ministry channels, without a comparable dedicated status or ministerial architecture.

**3. From Access to Co-Production:** iCET, INDUS-X, and the F414 Engine Deal: The first two layers are mostly about access to bases, to communications, to a favourable licensing category. The third layer, which took shape in 2023, is about something harder to give away: production knowledge itself. The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) was launched in 2022 and the India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) launched in 2023, institutionalised cooperation on artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum computing, space, and joint work between defence startups on both sides, giving the relationship a standing channel for technology cooperation that did not previously exist in this form.

The clearest evidence that this layer is substantive rather than aspirational is the GE Aerospace–Hindustan Aeronautics Limited agreement, signed as a memorandum of understanding in June 2023, under which GE Aerospace agreed to produce F414 fighter engines in India, with a target of roughly 80 per cent technology transfer (GE Aerospace, 2023). Jet engine technology is one of the most tightly controlled categories of military technology in the world only a handful of countries can design and manufacture a modern fighter engine from scratch and a transfer target at that scale, even as an MOU rather than a completed transfer, is not something the United States has offered any other defence partner at India's level of dependency on foreign suppliers. Nothing comparable in scope exists in India's technology relationship with Russia, France, or Israel, each of which has historically preferred tighter control over engine and airframe design knowledge, even where

broader arms sales are larger.

**4. Consolidation: COMPACT and the Ten-Year Framework:** The most recent layer is consolidation folding the earlier pieces into single, higher-level frameworks rather than adding new standalone instruments. During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Washington in February 2025, the two governments launched COMPACT ("Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology"), described in the joint statement as a broad umbrella covering defence, trade, energy, technology, and multilateral cooperation together rather than as separate tracks (The White House, 2025). Mishra (2025) frames COMPACT as follows: earlier framework documents from 2005 and 2015, which is a useful corrective against reading it as something unprecedented; it is better understood as the third in a series of once-a-decade resets, each one broader than the last.

What followed nine months later was more consequential for the argument of this paper. On October 31 2025, in Kuala Lumpur, U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh signed the Framework for the US-India Major Defence Partnership a ten-year framework, renewable on that cycle, explicitly described in the accompanying fact sheet as "the defining document in the U.S.-India defense relationship" and guided by the February 2025 joint statement (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). It replaces the 2023 Roadmap for Defence Industrial Cooperation. It commits both sides to joint development and production of intelligence and surveillance systems, undersea awareness, air combat systems, munitions, and military mobility, as well as a review of export-control restrictions that have historically slowed technology sharing. Implementation runs through the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue and INDUS-X, meaning the newest instrument is explicitly designed to work through the institutional channels built over the previous two decades rather than around them.

This is the strongest evidence for the paper's central claim. A renewable ten-year framework is not the kind of document that gets produced between countries with a purely transactional, purchase-by-purchase relationship. It is the kind of document produced when sufficient legal, diplomatic, and technological foundation already exists for both governments to be comfortable committing to a decade-long cycle of review and renewal.

**5. A Comparative Check: Russia, France, and Israel:** None of this is meant to deny that Russia, France, and Israel remain important suppliers to India, or that the United States is far behind them on raw transfer value. It is worth briefly asking whether any of the three has built something comparable to the architecture described above.

Russia is still India's largest supplier by volume. However, that share has fallen sharply from roughly 70 percent of India's arms imports in 2011–2015 to around 40 percent in 2021–2025 and the relationship has strained under the Ukraine war's effect on delivery timelines; of five S-400 air defence systems India ordered in 2018, only three had been delivered by 2026, with the remaining two delayed by wartime production pressure. Russia's own post-2022 dependence on China further undercuts the original logic of the relationship for India, which was in part to hedge against overreliance on any single power, including China. France is the fastest-growing Western supplier, driven by the Rafale fighter jet and Scorpène-class submarines, and is a genuine strategic partner in its own right. However, the cooperation remains platform-specific: there is no French equivalent of LEMOA, COMCASA, or BECA, no Major Defence Partner-style designation, and no ministerial 2+2 format. Israel is a valuable technology partner the Barak-8 missile defence system, co-developed with India's Defence Research and Development Organisation, is a genuine success story but Israel is a small state without the diplomatic and military weight to anchor a multilateral framework the way the United States does through the Quad grouping with Japan and Australia.

The pattern holds across all three: real and, in some cases, growing transactional relationships, but nothing resembling the four-layer structure legal-logistics, status and dialogue, technology co-production, and decade-long consolidation that the United States and India have built since 2002.

**Conclusion:** If the question is which country sells India the most weapons, the answer is still Russia, and France is closing in on that lead faster than the United States is. However, that is the wrong question to ask in understanding what is actually distinctive about the Indo-US relationship. Tracing the record from the 2002 GSOMIA through the 2016 LEMOA, the 2018 COMCASA and 2+2 Dialogue, the 2020 BECA, the 2023 iCET and INDUS-X initiatives, the February 2025 COMPACT framework, and the October 2025 ten-year defence framework shows a relationship that has been deliberately built in layers of legal, diplomatic, technological, and now structural over more than two decades and across five different U.S. administrations of both parties. That continuity across changes in government is itself informative: this is not a project tied to any one leader's preferences, even if individual leaders Modi's personal role is well documented by Pant and Joshi (2017) clearly mattered at the margins.

At the same time, Pant and Mishra's (2025) warning about Trump-era unpredictability toward Pakistan is a fair check on how far this argument should be pushed. Institutional depth is not the same as institutional immunity to political disruption, and a ten-year framework signed in October 2025 is, at the time of writing, less than a year old too new for anyone to responsibly claim it will survive intact regardless of who is in office in the U.S. or India over the coming decade. What can be said with more confidence is that the architecture itself, once built, raises the cost of walking away from the relationship in a way that a simple

string of arms purchases never would. That is the real measure of how far this relationship has come, and it is the measure this paper has tried to make visible.

Future work could usefully track how much of the October 2025 framework's language on joint production and export-control review actually translates into delivered capability over the next several years. Whether the indigenization promised under deals like the F414 engine transfer proceeds at the pace projected by both governments. That is an empirical question that this paper's document-based method cannot answer on its own. However, it is the natural next step for anyone testing whether the institutional architecture mapped here converts into outcomes on the ground.

**References:-**

1. Banerji, A. (2024). India-US foundational agreements. National Maritime Foundation. https://maritimeindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Anuttama-Banerji-India-US-Foundational-Agreements.pdf
2. Forum on the Arms Trade. (n.d.). U.S. arms sales to India. Retrieved September 2026, from https://www.forumarmstrade.org/usindia.html
3. GE Aerospace. (2023, June). GE Aerospace signs MOU with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to produce fighter engines in India [Press release]. https://www.geaerospace.com/news/press-releases/defense-engines/ge-aerospace-signs-mou-hindustan-aeronautics-limited-produce-fighter
4. India's World. (2025). India's arms imports: Shift in structure, scale remains. https://indiasworld.in/indias-arms-imports-shift-in-structure-scale-remains/
5. Mishra, V. (2025, February 19). The new India-US security compact. Observer Research Foundation. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-new-india-us-security-compact
6. Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.). Strategic convergence: The United States and India as major defence partners. Retrieved September 2026, from https://www.orfonline.org/research/strategic-convergence-the-united-states-and-india-as-major-defence-partners
7. Pant, H. V., & Joshi, Y. (2017). Indo-US relations under Modi: The strategic logic underlying the embrace. International Affairs, 93(1), 133–146.
8. Pant, H. V., & Mishra, V. (2025). India-US relations: Pakistan re-emerges in Trump 2.0. The Washington Quarterly, 48(3), 69–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2558275
9. Statista. (2025, May). India: Share of defence import by country of origin, 2019–2024 [Data set, based on SIPRI figures]. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1345382/india-share-of-defense-import-by-country/
10. ThePrint. (2025). India remains the 2nd-largest arms buyer; Russia's share in imports drops; France & Israel gain- SIPRI. https://theprint.in/defence/india-remains-2nd-largest-arms-buyer-russias-share-in-imports-drops-france-israel-gain-sipri/2874000/
11. U.S. Department of Defense. (2025, November 13). Fact sheet: Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership. https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF
12. U.S. Department of State. (2002, January 17). General Security of Military Information Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of India. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/02-117-India-Defense-GSOIA-1.17.2002.pdf
13. U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). U.S. security cooperation with India. Retrieved September 2026, from https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india
14. The White House. (2025, February 13). United States-India joint leaders' statement. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/

**********