

A NEW CHAPTER IN DEFENCE AND TECH THROUGH ICET

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Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and his U.S. counterpart Jake Sullivan formally launch the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies in Washington, DC. | Photo Credit: ANI

Earlier this month, the U.S. and India inaugurated their initiative on critical and emerging technologies (ICET). The promise of this initiative, if fulfilled, could have a transformative impact on India-U.S. relations.

Since the 1960s, India has made many attempts to jump on the U.S. technology bandwagon. But all of them have failed, primarily because of the mismatch between the two countries on the purposes for which they collaborated. The ICET is perhaps better positioned. Unlike the earlier iterations, it comes at a time when India, too, has developed technological and managerial capacities and is emerging as a major economic power. Under ICET, the two sides have identified six focus areas of co-development and co-production: strengthening innovation ecosystems, defence innovation and technology cooperation, resilient semiconductor supply chains, space, STEM talent, and next generation telecom.

On the eve of the dialogue, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval said that the big need was to convert intentions and ideas into deliverables. This is where there has usually been a slip.

Since the 1950s, the U.S. has played a significant role in India's development efforts and quest for technological capability. A major driver of the process was the Cold War which persuaded the U.S. to provide sweeping assistance in a range of areas to India. While the Soviet Union emerged as a major player in areas like steel, heavy electricals, petroleum and mining, the U.S. focused on modernising engineering and management education, science and technology (S&T), and agriculture.

Among the more consequential areas of cooperation was in nuclear energy where the U.S. helped build India's first reactors for research and power. An entire generation of Indian nuclear scientists were trained in the U.S., including some who subsequently helped in making nuclear weapons. But this cooperation was abruptly ended after India's first nuclear test in 1974. The same could be said, though in a somewhat different manner, for India's space programme.

The massive aid provided by the U.S. to modernise Indian education, especially engineering and management, should have led to a growing industrial sector, but the Indian economy stalled in the 1960s and India ended up with a system where IIT and IIM graduates ended up benefiting the U.S. economy. The one area in which India did get lasting and important benefits was agriculture where American S&T helped trigger the Green Revolution and end an era of food shortages.

The Bangladesh War of 1971 and the 1974 nuclear tests led to a three-decade estrangement and a draconian American technology denial regime whose prime target was India, all in the name of non-proliferation.

There was a brief respite when, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Gandhi-Reagan Science and Technology Initiative led to the 1984 India-U.S. MoU on sensitive technologies, commodities and information. This was the outcome of a new American willingness to promote Indian S&T and the arms industry. In 1987, the U.S. agreed to assist India's Light Combat Aircraft (Tejas) programme and allowed the sale of front line GE 404 engine to India. However, broader cooperation stalled because the U.S. was unwilling to let go of its non-proliferation agenda.

After the Soviet collapse, the U.S. pushed for the unconditional extension of the non-proliferation treaty and began to arm-twist countries to sign a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. At this stage, India realised that there was no option but to come out as a declared nuclear weapons power.

There was another round of sanctions after the 1998 nuclear tests, but by this time the U.S. had begun to get a measure of the challenge it was facing from China. It now decided to play the India card, but to do this, there was need to spit out the nuclear proliferation pill stuck in our joint throats. This is what was done with the India-U.S. nuclear deal of 2008, which is the basis of our current engagement with the U.S.

But despite India's growing proximity to the U.S. since then, there has not been significant movement in actual deliverables by way of technology development and co-production. The much-touted Defence Technology and Trade Initiative has little to show for it.

India has steadily advanced in status as a friend of the U.S. and has purchased U.S. weapons and systems worth billions of dollars. It is now deemed to be a Major Defence Partner, though not a Major Non-Nato Ally, a much more useful designation that Pakistan still retains. The course has not been problem-free — witness the pressure India faced under CAATSA and on account of its oil trade with Russia.

The ICET has set up a range of ambitious goals which mean a great deal for India. Some of them are aspirational, others political. A few are over the top, such as the belief that the U.S. will help India to develop advanced jet engines. As of now, all that is on the table is the possible licence manufacture of GE-404/414 engines for the LCA. This is not new. But cutting edge jet engines are the crown jewels of the U.S., which the country will not part with. A similar approach will be taken in other areas where the U.S. jealously guards its technological prowess, knowing that it is a major component of its global power status.

After presenting the Union Budget, the Finance Minister said in an interview, "This is a golden opportunity for India. We should really not miss the bus this time." The remark is truer of the technology and industrialisation bus that the ICET could be.

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