The basic document guiding the Indo-US defence relationship is the 'Agreed Minute of Defence Relations of 1995'. However, the relationship has since acquired new dimensions and reached a progressively higher level. The initial steps were taken when India endorsed the National Missile Defence programme unveiled by US President Bush during his speech at the National Defence University in May 2001. India's swift and positive response to the 11 September 2001 attacks and its unconditional support to the war on terrorism galvanized a change in military relations. The announcement of the removal of sanctions against India in September 2001 helped identify mutually overlapping national security goals and gave a new impetus to military ties. But, how has the US viewed its growing military relations with India?

First, India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, astride the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) linking West Asia and East Asia, makes India attractive to the US military. The US also needs to develop alternative options in Asia, should its relations with other traditional allies (e.g. Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia) ever become more acrimonious or politically uncomfortable; or if its rights of access to their ports, which it takes for granted, become more restrictive; or if these traditional relationships collapse leading to a military withdrawal. By upgrading its relations with India, the US can also send a message to its partners in NATO that it can do without them, and find new geopolitical allies.

Second, the US Air Force (USAF) is seeking access to Indian bases and military infrastructure. It is significant that, during the 1991 Gulf War, India had provided refuelling facilities to US warplanes. And during Operation Enduring Freedom, several US warships used Indian port facilities for rest and recuperation. The USAF's closer access to areas of instability will also help it to respond rapidly to regional crises.

Third, it is in the sphere of naval cooperation that the US sees the immediate future of Indo-US military relations. The US Navy wants a relatively neutral territory on the other side of the world to provide ports and support for operations in West Asia. India possesses the necessary infrastructure, and the Indian Navy has proved that it can repair and fuel US ships. Over time, port visits will become a routine event. India is a viable player in supporting all its naval missions, including escorting and responding to regional crises. In fact, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, Indian naval ships escorted merchant vessels from the North Arabian Sea to the Straits of Malacca, representing the most active element of its cooperation with the US Navy.

Fourth, the US military hopes to gain access to not only Indian bases and ports, but also its training facilities. India has a variety of terrains, from ice-clad mountains to desert, and this would help the US as its military training facilities are shrinking and becoming increasingly controversial in the US.

Fifth, the US has a surplus of military weaponry and is capable of independently achieving its missions with its missiles, ships and aircraft. However, it is facing an acute shortage of military
manpower. The US needs India’s manpower to fight its wars. First, to overcome its inability to achieve recruitment targets at home, and, secondly, to obtain manpower from the peripheries that can be sacrificed without domestic political backlash. India is seen to have the young population to meet its growing global demands for military manpower.

For the US, the key word in the ever expanding lexicon of the US-India defence relationship is "inter-operability." It portrays a future wherein the two countries would share their strategic and operational doctrines to tackle the challenges of a new century. The US aim in promoting military ties is to develop joint capabilities and confidence, jointly confront multilateral security issues like protection of energy supplies and sea lanes, conduct peace-keeping exercises and combat terrorism. This is evident from the growing frequency of bilateral exercises, seminars, personnel exchanges, high level and unit visits and exchanges, as also military technology transfers and cooperation. The development of inter-operability procedures, communications and doctrines is only possible through familiarisation, understanding and confidence building, focusing on areas of mutual interest, and enhancing the professional development of personnel. In this perspective, the Indo-US defence agreement of July 2005 has been a win-win situation for both countries which provides a platform for future endeavours.