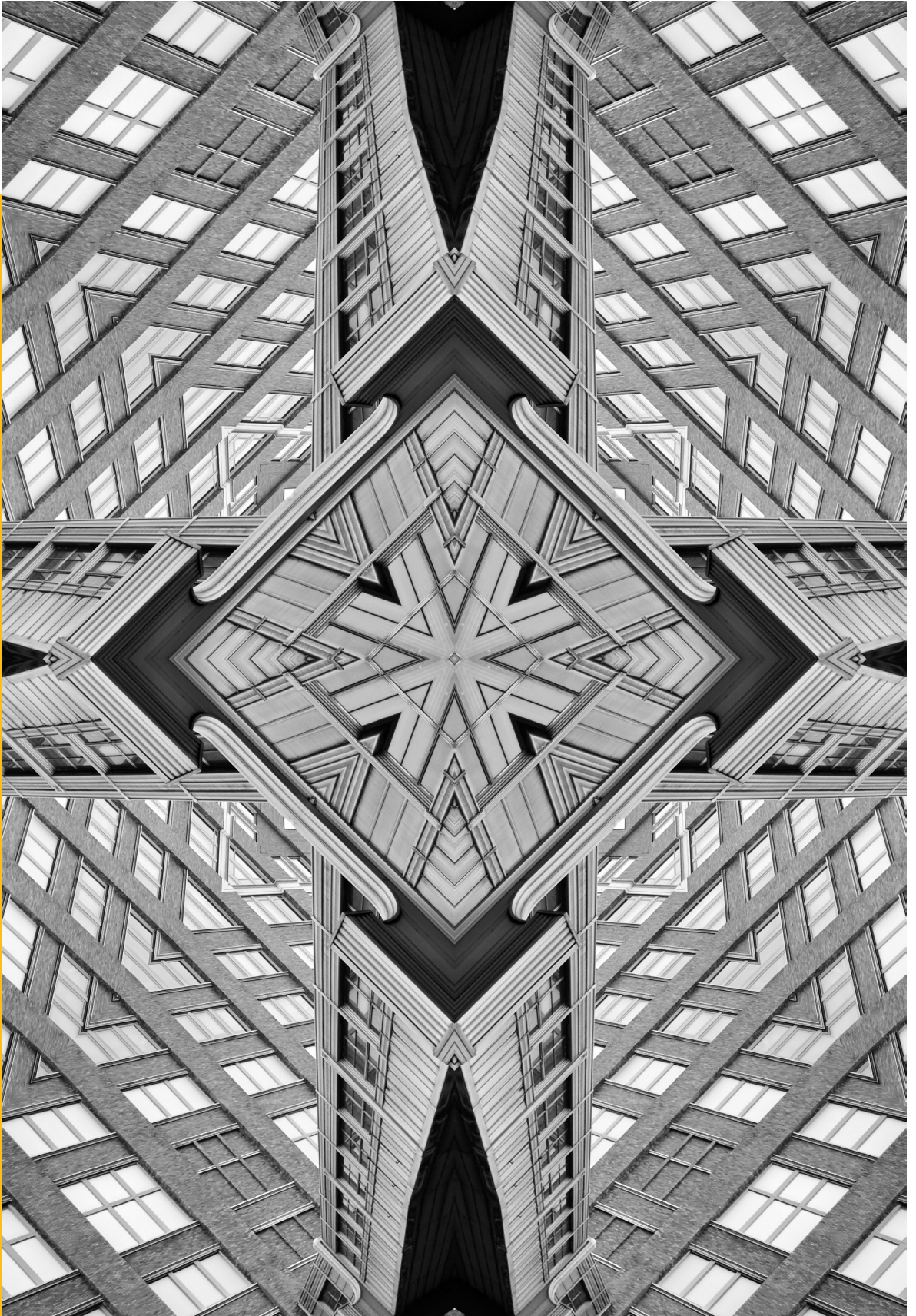


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India and the UK in 2025: A Primer

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Abstract

This primer offers a comprehensive overview of the current state of the India-United Kingdom (UK) bilateral relationship. It describes India-UK cooperation in the key policy areas of trade and investment, security and defence, technology and innovation, and migration and people-to-people ties. The paper also explores the divergences and tensions in this multifaceted partnership while forecasting a bright future for the bilateral.

For decades, India-United Kingdom (UK) ties were underwhelming.¹ Despite interest on both sides to deepen the partnership, India’s ties with the UK have continued to lag behind those with other Western partners such as France and the United States (US). Since the Brexit referendum of 2016, a long drawn out and complex Brexit process preoccupied the UK, sidelining other priorities. In recent years though, despite intense political turmoil within the UK, ties with India have been on an upward trajectory.

The Conservative Party has been resolute in its outreach to India, with high-level bilateral interactions taking place including former Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s visit to India as Republic Day chief guest in 2021. The visit resulted in *Roadmap 2030*,² which laid out a vision to deepen cooperation and an upgrade of ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In the same year, the UK released its *Integrated Review*,³ a blueprint for the country’s “national security and international policy”; the document mentioned India approximately 12 times, referring to it as “an international actor of growing importance”. This momentum was carried forward with the Labour Party following its landslide victory in the UK general elections of July 2024.

Table 1: Key Documents Guiding India-UK Ties

Document	Date Issued	Online Access
India-UK: Towards a New and Dynamic Partnership	September 2004	https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmfaff/55/7012306.htm
India and the UK: An Enhanced Partnership for the Future	July 2010	https://www.gov.uk/government/news/india-and-the-uk-an-enhanced-partnership-for-the-future
India-UK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership supported by the 2030 Roadmap for India-UK Relations	May 2021	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/india-uk-virtual-summit-may-2021-roadmap-2030-for-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/2030-roadmap-for-india-uk-future-relations

Document	Date Issued	Online Access
Migration and Mobility Partnership (MMPA)	May 2021	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-mobility-partnership/mou-on-migration-and-mobility-partnership-between-india-and-the-united-kingdom
The UK-India Technology Security Initiative	July 2024	https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37995/The_UKIndia_Technology_Security_Initiative

Source: Author's own, using various open sources.

Even though the Conservatives may have been a more comfortable ideological fit for India's ruling nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the lack of domestic political stability in the UK impeded progress in India-UK bilateral ties. After years of political turmoil, Labour's landslide victory, securing 411 out of 650 seats in the British Parliament, has delivered some degree of stability despite domestic challenges such as violent riots against Prime Minister Keir Starmer's leadership.

After a deterioration of ties under the previous Labour leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, Starmer had promised to rectify ties with India if elected. In February 2024, just before the UK elections, then Shadow Secretary David Lammy, Shadow Business Secretary Johnathan Reynolds, and Shadow Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner visited India.⁴ Despite Starmer's focus on reviving the UK's ailing economy and his decisive response to the riots⁵ that erupted following the murder of three schoolgirls, his government has so far devoted equal attention to its global partnerships. Laying out his vision for British foreign policy following a doctrine of "progressive realism", Lammy alluded to "Europe, climate and the Global South" as the new government's top policy priorities.⁶ He visited India just two weeks after taking on his new role, with the two sides signing a landmark Technology Security Initiative.⁷

Introduction

In India, a third renewed term for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, despite national elections delivering a weaker mandate for the BJP, augurs well for the continuity of its foreign policy and bilateral partnerships.

Strengthening ties with India has been a cornerstone of the UK's 'Global Britain' aspirations and post-Brexit foreign policy outlook. Britain also supports India's quest for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, as advocated in its Integrated Review Refresh strategy released in 2023.⁸ Against a backdrop of multiple conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars, political crises in Bangladesh, a retrenchment of American power, and an assertive China, cooperation between middle powers is shaping global security and development in positive ways. In this context, India and the UK have chosen to deepen their bilateral partnership against a wide scope of global challenges and broader strategic convergences beyond colonial legacies.

Both countries are aspiring to carve identities for themselves in an evolving geopolitical order, supplemented by greater bilateral security and economic cooperation. India's great-power aspirations and the UK's post-Brexit strategic Global Britain approach, originally laid out by the Tories but seemingly continued by Labour's ambitions to enhance ties with countries in the Global South, seem like a natural fit.

As Walter Ladwig of the Royal United Services Institute asserts, the UK is a "solid all-rounder"⁹ for India given its competence in a range of domains. The following sections assess India-UK bilateral relations based on an expansive cooperative agenda in trade and investment, security and defence, technology and innovation, and diaspora and migration. The final sections evaluate the divergences and tensions plaguing the partnership while forecasting a bright future for the bilateral.

Trade and Investment

A third Modi government, even with its diminished mandate, signals stability and continuity for Indian industry and businesses. Flagship policies such as Make in India that aim to transform India into a global manufacturing hub are poised to continue. Additionally, India's fresh approach to trade deals, as evident in pacts signed with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) bloc, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates, align with India's ambitions of increasing its exports to US\$2 trillion by 2030.¹⁰

While India-European Union (EU) ties have strengthened in recent years, following Brexit, Britain no longer serves as the gateway to the EU for Indian companies. A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India has been a focus of post-Brexit Britain's policy of diversifying trade outside the alleged constraints of the EU. In the aftermath of Brexit and the loss of the European Single Market, India's vast market and status as the world's fastest growing economy in the G20 was an attractive choice for the UK's economic woes, further compounded by the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. For Starmer, reviving the British economy amidst inflation, high energy prices, and slow growth is a priority, and restarting the Indian FTA is a key to this goal. In New Delhi as well, the FTA was a priority in the Indian commerce ministry's 100-days post-elections agenda.¹¹

India was the UK's 11th largest trading partner in the four quarters up to the end of Q2 2024, while the UK was India's 14th largest trading partner. Currently, bilateral trade stands at GBP 42 billion, and the balance is in India's favour with Britain's trade deficit with India amounting to GBP 8.3 billion in 2023.¹² Even so, the UK's trade with India accounts for only 2.4 percent of its total trade,¹³ highlighting the potential to scale up these figures.

**Table 2.1: UK-India Trade Figures
(in the four quarters to the end of Q2
2024)**

Total India-UK trade in goods and services	£42 billion
Total UK exports to India	£16.6 billion
Total UK imports from India	£25.4 billion
Ranking out of all the UK's trading partners	11 th

Source: Author's own, using data from the UK Department for Business and Trade¹⁴

The proposed FTA, negotiations for which began in January 2022 under the Johnson-led Conservative government and holds bipartisan support, aims to double the overall bilateral trade figure of GBP 40 billion by 2030. It covers 26 chapters in goods, services, and investments relating to tariff reductions, market access, intellectual property rights, and rules of origin, of which 24 chapters have been mutually agreed upon at the time of writing.¹⁵ Despite several informal deadlines¹⁶ set for its conclusion, political turmoil in the UK and subsequent elections scheduled in both India and the UK kept pushing ahead the finish line.

With elections concluded in both countries and the 14th round of negotiations scheduled for March 2025, the time is ripe to settle the remaining chapters. The deal would benefit India's exports of textiles, apparel, and gems—labour-intensive sectors currently subject to 10 percent tariff rates in the UK, besides competition from countries like Bangladesh, which receive concessions due to their Least Developed Country status. Yet, contentious demands on both sides still await resolution.

For India, these include greater mobility and a liberalised visa regime for its skilled professionals in the IT, healthcare, and other sectors as well as for Indians wishing to study in the UK. This politically contentious issue, if accepted by the Conservatives, would have signalled the antithesis of

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what Brexit stood for. On the other hand, Starmer's determination to bring down the UK's net migration figures by upskilling British workers to reduce reliance on overseas workers¹⁷ dents the presumption that a Labour government that is less attached to anti-immigration rhetoric would be more amenable to arriving at a compromise.

On the other hand, Britain wants a reduction in tariffs on its exports of automobiles and alcohol, particularly scotch whiskies. India levies tariffs as high as 100-150 percent in these sectors due to fears of competition hampering local industry. Through the FTA, the UK aims to double its yearly exports to India to GBP 28 by 2035, with wages across the UK expected to increase by GBP 3 billion.¹⁸

The UK also wants greater access to the Indian market for its services sector, which accounts for 80 percent of its economy. India is resistant to open up its services sector, which contributes over 50 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for fear of foreign competition. India's restrictive Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) regulations pose an additional impediment, alongside a complex business environment. However, tax reforms and India's rapid rise up the ease of doing business index¹⁹ are promising developments.

Moreover, similar to the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the UK's proposed emissions-based tax on carbon-intensive imports such as iron, steel, and fertilisers is set to come into effect in 2027,²⁰ with potentially adverse consequences for Indian exports in these sectors. This may pose another challenge to the FTA, especially under Labour's more resolute commitments to climate action compared to the Tories.

As both India and the UK seek trade diversification and supply-chain resilience while reducing dependencies on China, an India-UK FTA would boost prospects for the much larger EU-India FTA and burnish India's credentials as an open trading partner given that at least some of the contentions, including high tariffs and questions around migration, are common to both FTAs. Even though the UK in December 2024 joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), an FTA with India is the only plausible bilateral one at this

juncture; trade talks with Canada remain suspended,²¹ while both the US and China are increasingly leaning towards protectionism in their trade approach.

Alongside negotiations for an FTA, a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) that would deepen financial ties and resolve disputes more easily is also in the works. As the former gateway of Indian businesses into the EU, India has traditionally had greater investments in the UK than the entire EU. Indian FDI in the UK amounted to GBP 9.3 billion in 2021, while British FDI in India was valued at GBP 19.1 billion.²² India is the second largest FDI contributor in the UK, which includes high-profile investments like the Tata Group’s acquisition of Jaguar Land Rover. The following tables highlight the impact of Indian companies in the UK, and of British companies in India.

Table 2.2: Indian Companies in the UK

Year	No. of Indian Companies in the UK	Combined Revenue	Total People Employed
2023	954	£50.5 billion	105,931
2022	900	£52.3 billion	116,046
2021	850	£50.8 billion	141,005

Source: Author’s own, using data from Grant Thornton’s India Meets Britain reports²³

Table 2.3: British Companies in India

Year	No. of British Companies in India	Combined Revenue	Total People Employed
2023	635	£51 billion	666,992
2022	618	£36 billion	466,640
2021	572	£34 billion	416,121

Source: Author’s own, using data from Grant Thornton’s Britain Meets India reports²⁴

Key Areas of Cooperation

In addition to the proposed FTA, trade and investment ties are being guided by initiatives such as the Economic and Financial Dialogue (EFD), India-UK CEOs Forum, Global India Forum, India-UK Joint Economic and Trade Committee (JETCO), and UK-India Business Council (UKIBC). *Roadmap 2030* contains a detailed section on investment²⁵ that encourages British companies to take advantage of Indian Productive Linked Incentives and invest in the country's burgeoning manufacturing sector.

The results of the British election have changed the faces at the negotiation table, but with the deal holding bipartisan support, the substance of the discussions remain the same, with Labour's absolute majority boding well for the conclusion of the deal.²⁶ Even though bilateral ties are progressing in a number of policy areas, it is the FTA's potential to stimulate trade, create jobs, and increase investment that would deliver the biggest boost to the India-UK partnership.

Security and Defence

The Indo-Pacific region's rapidly evolving, economically dynamic, yet increasingly contested strategic landscape has necessitated a British pivot to the region.

The IR Refresh,²⁷ an updated version of the original 2021 Integrated Review document ideated to factor in developments since the Russia-Ukraine war, reinforces Britain's Indo-Pacific tilt and highlights cooperation with like-minded partners such as India, which is mentioned around 10 times in the document. This tilt has been evident through a number of British actions, including becoming a dialogue partner of ASEAN, joining the CPTPP, participating in the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with Italy and Japan, signing the AUKUS submarine partnership with Australia and the US, and deploying the *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and carrier strike group to the region. The UK's increased attention towards the Indo-Pacific has also brought with it a more hawkish perspective on China, which resonates with India.

For India, stability and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, currently under strain as a consequence of China's increasing military and economic

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clout, is a key foreign policy focus; a means to achieve this is collaboration with global partners. In particular, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is of prime importance given its role as a conduit for trade, energy, and other resources.²⁸ Even while the Pacific remains paramount for the rest of the QUAD countries, both India and the UK have substantial influence and strategic interests in the IOR. For instance, the UK has a diplomatic presence in every western IOR country except Comoros.²⁹

India and the UK's respective memberships in the QUAD and AUKUS have overlapping goals of balancing Chinese influence. Both countries are ramping up their maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific through joint exercises, naval interoperability, collaboration in counter-terrorism and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) activities, and wider capacity building aimed at boosting growth, connectivity, and security in the region. There are additional opportunities for partnership with the goal of maintaining the region's freedom of navigation and tackling illegal activities such as piracy and illegal fishing. The UK's decision to deploy its Littoral Response Group in the Indian Ocean has advanced the window of India-UK maritime cooperation.³⁰ The UK has also joined the Indian Navy's IOR Information Fusion Center (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram to deepen maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific.³¹ The UK can prioritise engagement with regional maritime governance architectures in the IOR, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)—where India is a member and the UK is a dialogue partner—the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) where both India and the UK are members, and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) where the UK and India jointly lead the Maritime Security pillar. A key area where cooperation is taking place between the two navies is in developing propulsion to power Indian warships.

There are certain caveats, however. The IR Refresh aims to position Britain as the European power with the biggest footprint in the Indo-Pacific by the year 2030. Yet, with limited financial and military resources and a preoccupation with the Euro-Atlantic, questions persist around the UK's capacity to become a security provider in two key theatres—the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific—despite pledges to increase defence budgets to 2.5 percent of GDP³² and the IR Refresh's linking of the two theatres

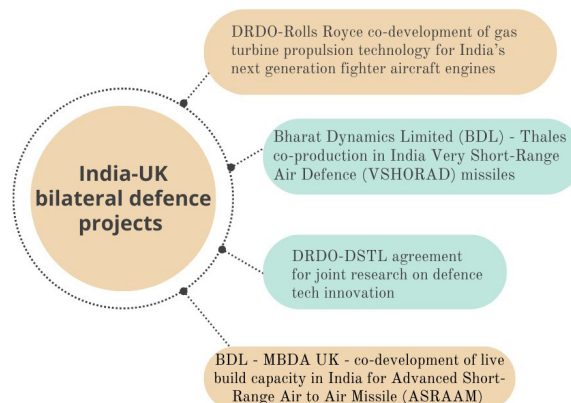
Key Areas of Cooperation

through its “Atlantic-Pacific” network concept. Even while prioritising the Indo-Pacific, the IR focuses on Russia as Britain’s primary threat and NATO as its most important commitment. Indeed, since the Russia-Ukraine war began, Britain has committed a total of GBP 12.8 billion in aid to Ukraine,³³ playing a key leading role in supporting Ukrainian defence.

Finally, it is unclear to what extent Britain’s Indo-Pacific tilt, first ideated by the Tories, will be pursued under the new Labour government. There have been mixed signals. While Labour has refocused Britain’s attention to Europe, it has also reiterated the country’s commitments to the AUKUS and GCAP arrangements and announced that Britain would deploy the Carrier Strike Group in 2025 for joint training to the Indian Ocean in 2025.³⁴ Simultaneously, it has acknowledged Britain’s limited resources to manage two theatres, indicating that the Indo-Pacific may be subordinated.

For India, despite clarity on the need to remain engaged in the region, more immediate security challenges on its border areas constrain capabilities elsewhere. However, such factors though make cooperation with partners like the UK more central to achieving stability and prosperity in the IOR and managing challenges arising from China’s destabilising activities. The UK’s Indo-Pacific pivot has been a central feature of its wider outreach to India. A cooperative and targeted approach is the way forward.

Figure 1.1: Key India-UK Bilateral Defence Projects



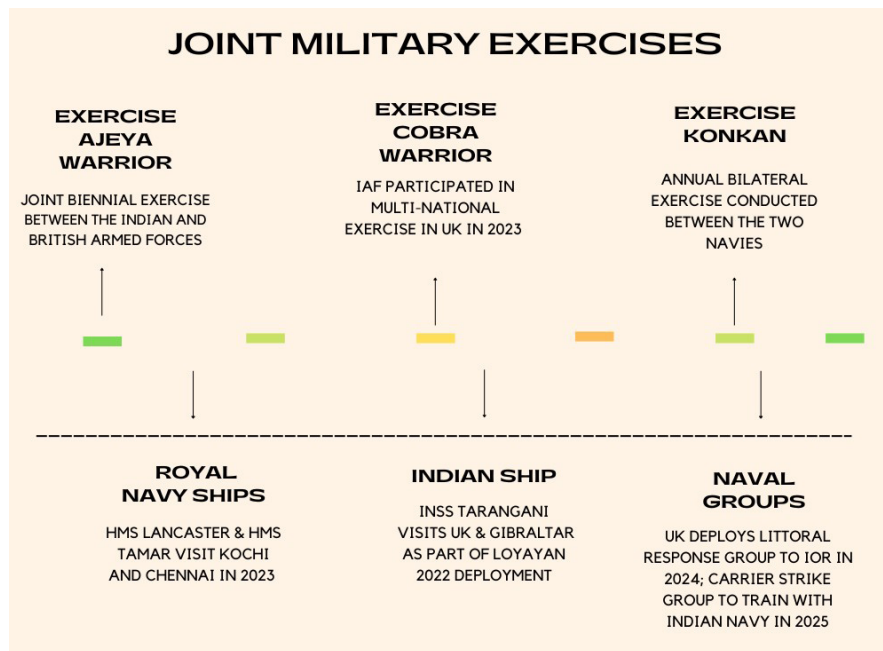
Source: Author's own, using data from various sources.

Key Areas of Cooperation

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh’s visit to the UK in January 2024, the first such visit in 22 years, provided fresh impetus to the defence pillar of the relationship. In 2023, ties were elevated to a 2+2 mechanism, along with an intent to integrate the defence industries of both countries.

Over the past decade, only 3 percent of India’s defence acquisitions came from the UK.³⁵ Yet, as India seeks to advance its indigenous defence industry and diversify defence partners away from Russia, the British defence sector could emerge as a key collaborator in technology transfers, the development of advanced capabilities and supporting the Make in India effort. In 2022, Britain granted India an Open General Export Licence (OGEL)—its first to a country in the Indo-Pacific—to permit the export of military technology and dual-use goods.³⁶ Moving forward, it would serve India well to simplify its procurement landscape to attract more British FDI into its defence sector.

Figure 1.2: Key India-UK Joint Military Exercises



Source: Author’s own, using data from the High Commission of India, London, United Kingdom³⁷

Tech and Innovation

Tech collaboration between India and the UK extends to several sectors, including financial services as well as innovation in health, climate, renewables, and startups. As far back as 2010, the countries launched a Science and Innovation Council to encourage joint scientific research.³⁸

Both countries are global hubs of innovation, science, technology, and research and are increasingly focusing on these areas even in their global partnerships and their Indo-Pacific outlooks. They have an ongoing Emerging Tech Exchange Programme³⁹ to facilitate cooperation in cutting-edge tech. In 2023, the UK announced the position of a new Tech Envoy to the Indo-Pacific,⁴⁰ given how tech has emerged as a focal point of geostrategic competition. India, on the other hand, has the world's largest number of startups and over 108 unicorn companies.⁴¹

Building on the guidelines in Roadmap 2030, the highlight of Lammy's visit to India was the announcement of a new UK-India Technology Security Initiative (TSI)⁴² aimed at catalysing collaboration in tech and digital areas. The initiative, similar to the EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) and the India-US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), will be led by the National Security Advisors of both nations. It prioritises cooperation in seven key areas: critical minerals, semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), telecommunications, quantum computing, biotechnology, and advanced materials.

The joint readout⁴³ highlights specific sub-initiatives and frameworks to take forward the partnership in each of these domains. For instance, on critical minerals, the two countries aim to explore research and tech partnerships that would include "exploration, processing and manufacturing along the complete critical minerals value chain." On semiconductors, the goal is to facilitate industrial and academic R&D collaboration and knowledge exchange and build closer ties between semiconductor firms in both countries. The UK already has official strategies on critical minerals⁴⁴ and semiconductors,⁴⁵ and British firms such as SRAM & MRAM Group are investing INR 30,000 crore in India's

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semiconductor industry.⁴⁶ On AI, the initiative will engage in developing “safe, responsible, human-centric and trustworthy AI” and, to this end, promote cooperation between AI institutions in both countries. The TSI’s objectives will be furthered by collaboration and policy exchanges between governments, research institutions, universities, academia, and tech companies from both countries. Unlike iCET, the TSI does not involve innovation in defence technologies such as missiles and drones.⁴⁷

On climate action, both India and the UK have committed to ambitious goals: India hopes to generate 65 percent of its electricity through renewable sources by the year 2030,⁴⁸ while the UK has legally committed to achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.⁴⁹ Bilateral cooperation already exists through various formats such as the India-UK Green Hydrogen Hub,⁵⁰ which aims to enhance the use of hydrogen in decarbonisation, and the Climate Finance Leadership Initiative⁵¹ aimed at supporting green projects in India. The Labour Party’s greater emphasis on climate commitments⁵² may pave the way for deeper cooperation in the area of green tech and achieving their respective nationally determined contributions (NDCs).

On the financial front, India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and RuPay cards are already operational in the UK.⁵³ Under former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s government, there were talks of creating a new financial market in Gujarat and establishing a FinTech Bridge⁵⁴ between Mumbai and London to promote greater links between the financial ecosystems of both countries. The UK-India Sustainable Finance Forum⁵⁵ also encourages private investments in green sectors.

On cybersecurity, India and the UK have had an Enhanced Cyber Security Partnership⁵⁶ since 2021 that focuses on cyber governance, deterrence, resilience, and capacity building. The UK and US are the only two countries with whom India has an annual Cyber Dialogue. In the health domain, their combined strengths were instrumental in co-producing the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, which was developed at Oxford University and produced at Serum Institute in India.

In an era in which critical and emerging technologies have become a frontier of geopolitical competition and national security, an institutionalised and structured partnership in these domains augurs well for the advancement of the India-UK bilateral relationship.

Diaspora, Migration, and People-to-People Ties

Roadmap 2030's section on "Connecting our countries and people"⁵⁷ stresses the importance of people-to-people ties in the relationship and lays out ways to strengthen this.

The long-intertwined histories of the two nations has resulted in a strong British Indian community, numbering over 1.6 million, comprising around 2.5 percent of the UK's population, and contributing over 6 percent to the British economy.⁵⁸ Britain's Indian diaspora, considered to be the country's most successful and largest ethnic community, comprises the country's highest numbers of working professionals, with over 50 percent of the community holding degree-level qualifications and over 40 percent working in professional sectors.⁵⁹ Indians are the largest homeowners in the UK, with 71 percent of the community owing homes compared to 68 percent of the local British white community.⁶⁰ There are an estimated 65,000 Indian-owned businesses in Britain, mainly in the healthcare, pharmaceuticals, technology, financial services, hospitality and real estate, and food and beverage sectors, that grant employment to 180,000 people.⁶¹ Moreover, Britain's National Health Service (NHS) is staffed by over 50,000 Indian-origin medical personnel.⁶² The Indian diaspora in the country also sends significant remittances to India, amounting to GBP 3 billion in 2018.⁶³

With higher per-capita income levels and socioeconomic success than other immigrant groups in the UK, Britain's Indian community is considered a "model minority".⁶⁴ The community, often referred to as a "living bridge" between both countries, influences multiple sectors, from politics, technology, academia, and business, to medicine, science, and research. The success of the British Indian diaspora becomes more pronounced in the midst of inter-racial tensions and problems around the successful integration and assimilation of immigrants in Europe.

Key Areas of Cooperation

The diaspora's influence in British politics is evident in the rise of Indian-origin politicians such as Sunak and former Home Secretary Suella Braverman. The outgoing British Parliament comprised 15 Indian-origin Members of Parliament (MPs) out of 650; the current, newly elected Parliament has 26 Indian-origin MPs.⁶⁵ The Modi government's active engagement of the Indian diaspora and Indian-origin associations to lobby for Indian interests abroad has further increased the community's salience for India-UK ties. Besides these, the influence of Indian culture, including culinary traditions, entertainment, and yoga, pervades British society.

In British politics, the Indian diaspora has historically leaned towards the Labour Party based on its traditional anti-racist and social policies. With greater socioeconomic success, the community, known for its entrepreneurial instinct, began identifying with the Conservatives and their more pro-business image. Yet, the Indian diaspora is itself diverse, and the current picture on political preferences presents a mixed bag. British Hindus, who comprise 44 percent of the Indian diaspora based on the census before 2019, tend to support the Tories, while Sikhs (22 percent) and other religions (12 percent) in the UK favour Labour.⁶⁶

Indians have historically been amongst the largest benefactors of Labour's 2002 Highly Skilled Migrant Programme.⁶⁷ Under the Conservatives as well, the country has seen significant Indian migration despite the party's anti-immigration rhetoric; 253,000 Indians emigrated to the UK in 2023—the largest non-EU ethnicity to do so.⁶⁸

Currently, Britain, while cracking down on illegal migration, aims to streamline pathways for skilled and legal migration, particularly for students and professionals. This relaxation is especially important in the wake of post-Brexit labour shortages in the UK, where Indian workers could help fill the vacuum, creating a mutually beneficial situation for both countries. In this context, the India-UK Migration and Mobility Partnership (MMPA)⁶⁹ is under implementation to facilitate such movement. More recently, the two countries have attempted to map gaps and match jobs based on demand and skill by synchronising India's National Career portal with the UK's official job portal.⁷⁰ The partnership also includes a UK-India Young Professionals Scheme, launched in 2023, that allows 3,000

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Indian professionals every year to work in the UK for a two-year period; India is the first visa-national nation to have such a programme with the UK.⁷¹

Indian students already comprise the largest numbers of international students in the UK, accounting for roughly 25 percent of all British study visas.⁷² During his term, Sunak called for a more two-way partnership,⁷³ where British nationals could also easily study and work in Indian universities and start-ups.

Tensions and Divergences

Despite keen interest on both sides to develop closer ties, efforts have often been mired in colonial legacies and other tensions. Even though the UK has de-hyphenated its outlook towards India and Pakistan, Khalistani and Pakistan extremism continue to cloud the partnership's progress; in March 2023, the Indian High Commission in London was vandalised in one such incident.⁷⁴

A 2023 BBC documentary that portrayed Modi in a negative light was condemned as “anti-India” propaganda, despite Sunak’s emphasis that he did not “agree at all with the characterisation”.⁷⁵ India’s tensions with the UK’s Five Eyes partner Canada, which alleged Indian government links to the murder of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar,⁷⁶ may hinder the progress in India-UK security and intelligence cooperation amidst issues of trust. In October 2024, the UK urged India to cooperate with Canada’s investigation into the allegations while alluding to “full confidence” in Canada’s judicial system.⁷⁷ Moreover, a number of Indian fugitives and other absconding individuals have been granted refuge in Britain, with the latter rejecting extradition requests made by India.⁷⁸

Under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, the Labour Party was critical of India’s decision to revoke Article 370 in Kashmir and even passed an emergency motion on the situation. A revamped Labour under Starmer has repeatedly spoken of resetting Labour’s ties with India and rectifying previous mistakes.⁷⁹ In addition, moves such as Britain’s effort at the United Nations (UN) to designate extremist group Jaish-e-Mohammed’s leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist⁸⁰ were received positively by India.

Despite Britain’s staunch support of Ukraine, India’s diplomatic position on the Russia-Ukraine war did not create much friction in India-UK ties. Here, instead of divergent positions serving as a source of tension, the UK respected India’s strategic autonomy and expressed an understanding⁸¹ of India’s security compulsions with regard to Pakistan and China as well as its ties with Russia in managing this challenging context.

Tensions and Divergences

On China, the UK under Conservative rule struggled to formulate a coherent policy, ranging from “the golden era of UK-China relations” during David Cameron’s tenure to the more hawkish approach adopted by Boris Johnson that placed greater scrutiny on Chinese investment in strategic sectors. Sunak went so far as to refer to China as “the greatest threat” to British economy security.⁸² The UK’s IR Refresh, which labels China as “an epoch-defining and systemic challenge”, along with decisions to ban Huawei from the country’s 5G networks⁸³ helped bridge some differences between the Beijing outlooks of London and New Delhi. China’s crackdown in Hong Kong since 2020, and more recently Chinese hacking and espionage on British soil coupled with its support for Russia’s war effort has further exacerbated British security concerns regarding China.

Labour’s election manifesto adopted a three-pronged approach to China, stating, “We will co-operate where we can, compete where we need to, and challenge where we must.”⁸⁴ Yet, the UK’s China policy could be constrained by its “special relationship” with the US and the latter’s geopolitical rivalry with China. Pressure from Washington prohibited the sale of British semiconductor firm Nexperia to a Chinese entity,⁸⁵ and Britain could be further pressured to tow the American line under a potential Trump administration. So far, the UK has not followed the European and American line of imposing tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), given that this would risk retaliation against its own industries from the UK’s sixth largest export market. The need for Chinese green technologies to achieve Labour’s ambitious climate and clean energy goals also complicates an autonomous China policy. As the UK’s foremost priority is reviving its ailing economy, balancing economic imperatives and security concerns with the continuing allure of Chinese markets and investments will remain a challenge. Bilateral trade between the UK and China was valued at GBP 87.7 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q2 2024.⁸⁶

So far, the Labour Party has provided incoherent signals when it comes to China. Its proposed “audit” of the London-Beijing relationship⁸⁷ has been delayed. On the other hand, Lammy’s visit to China in October 2024⁸⁸ followed by the visit of Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves in January 2025 demonstrate Labour’s interest in adopting a friendlier, more pragmatic approach towards China.

Tensions and Divergences

India will be paying close attention to the trajectory of UK-China ties; as with its other Western allies, where shared anxieties around China's behaviour have expanded cooperation, the India-UK partnership may prove to be instrumental in managing risks related to China. This is part of the rationale for the advancement of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and the creation of the new TSI.

Looking Ahead: A More Intentional Relationship

As it increasingly adapts to contemporary global dynamics and challenges, the India-UK partnership appears poised for growth, driven by both shared values and interests. The year 2025 would be a good moment to review progress with respect to the ambitions set out in Roadmap 2030 and evaluate gaps.

The TSI will be at the heart of the relationship's future. With its focus on turn-of-the-century challenges such as AI, semiconductors, critical minerals, and quantum computing, the initiative can create a wider, open, and reliable technological landscape globally. The conclusion of FTA negotiations and Britain's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific could reshape the relationship in the coming years.

The development of India-UK ties will hinge on the ability of both countries to insulate the relationship from diaspora and legacy issues that are likely to emerge. Their management of differences over the Russia-Ukraine war can serve as a good template for the future. The way forward necessitates a focus on fundamentals over divergences, while remaining cognisant of each other's compulsions and nuances.

India is the world's fastest growing economy, and the UK is a G7 and P5 member. As nuclear powers, technological hubs, and the world's fifth and sixth largest economies, respectively, both India and the UK will benefit from consistent and targeted cooperation between equals. [ORF](#)

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