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## Balancing China: Indo-US relations and convergence of their interests in the Indo-Pacific

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### ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as an important region in international politics where the major powers are deeply engaged in reshaping the security architecture. Over the last few years, India and China have drawn their policies by employing competitive strategies that strengthen as well as neutralise their respective power positions in the Indian Ocean Region, particularly in South Asia and the South China Sea. China's "String of Pearls" strategy and the "Belt and Road Initiative" undermine India's influence in the Indian Ocean Region, where the changing geo-economic and geostrategic imperatives pose threat to its interests. This mounts pressure on New Delhi to respond by pursuing counter-strategies to secure its interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The article further explains how India and the United States' interests are converging against an assertive China in the Indo-Pacific and how the two states' security and maritime collaborations are balancing their common rival by maintaining a favourable status quo in the region.

### KEYWORDS

India; China; the US; balance of power; Indo-Pacific; maritime security; Quad

## Introduction

Over the last decade-and-a-half, bilateral relations between India and the United States (US) have witnessed an unprecedented growth, which eventually led the latter to recognise the former as a "Major Defence Partner".<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, India's ties with the US were strained, largely due to their divergent policies and the latter's alliance politics that favoured Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> The end of the Cold War, coupled with India's economic reforms, and the gradual ascendance of Asia in international politics have brought India and the US closer, particularly in the post-9/11 period. In real terms, India and the US' relations began to transform at the dawn of the twenty-first century when the Asian power balance began to witness a significant change with China and India's collective rise, which pressured the US policymakers to pay closer attention to India's growing profile in the region. Based on these observations and convergence of interests, the George W. Bush administration considered India as a major player which has potential to consolidate the US position in the Asian region – an understanding congruent to the realist scholarship that posits how changing power structure often leads to systemic and sub-systemic realignment among states.<sup>3</sup>

With India and the US strengthening their relations in the light of the changing power balance in Asia, the maritime domain has emerged as an important arena of cooperation against China's naval modernisation and assertiveness in the South China Sea and in parts of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In recent years, India and China's competitive activities have aggravated their contestation for power and influence in the IOR. This has compelled India's leadership to rethink and restructure its strategies in the face of rising security challenges. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has not only posed a serious challenge to the US dominance in the Western Pacific but has also upped its security ante against American allies in the Indo-Pacific. This has led Washington to reconfigure its strategy and shift its maritime focus from the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans to the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans, now collectively dubbed as the "Indo-Pacific" region.<sup>4</sup> With such fundamental changes, the Indo-Pacific is attracting much global attention and might gradually consolidate India-US cooperation in the maritime domain and emerge as a centre stage in the world politics.

The following section provides a brief outline about the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. The next section examines India and China's increasing influence and competition in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The section that follows explains India and the US' converging interests against the rise of their collective rival, China. Against this setting, the article discusses how the US and India's larger economic and security interests are converging in the Indo-Pacific region, which in turn makes the region a vital springboard to neutralise assertive China by drawing strategies along with other Asian states having disputes with Beijing. The penultimate section assesses India and the US' cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region where security equations are fast changing and reshaping the Asian balance of power. The last section concludes with the key findings of the article.

### **The Indo-Pacific region and its emerging importance**

A brief description of the "Indo-Pacific" and its key qualifiers are important to understand its growing importance for the regional littoral states and international politics. Speaking from the standpoint of policy orientation of key regional stakeholders – India, the US, Japan and Australia – and the growing convergence of major states' geostrategic and geo-economic interests, the Indo-Pacific can be described as a vast stretch of water from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas that facilitates the confluence of the two oceans.<sup>5</sup> India's security concerns have transcended its otherwise limited sphere of influence to a larger one, with the Maritime Security Strategy of 2015 clearly stating that India's "secondary areas of interest" extend up to the Western Pacific Ocean and include the East and South China Seas.<sup>6</sup> Major players in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean – mainly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India, China, the US, Japan and Australia – are playing a vital role in shaping the Indo-Pacific as a key region, particularly by framing their foreign and security policies around it. With a rising China threatening the US allies in the South China Sea and simultaneously posing a challenge to the US dominance in Asia and beyond, Washington has acknowledged India's rise and role in the Indo-Pacific's strategic and maritime domain. Thus, by building on the idea first mooted by Japanese Premier Abe

Shinzo, the US has unravelled the Indo-Pacific vision by conjoining the Pacific and the Indian Oceans which are linked by sea routes.

The Indian Ocean is an important maritime through-route from the Persian Gulf to East Asia with crucial maritime choke points – the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca – that play a vital role for the IOR's growing economies to access raw materials, energy resources, and engage in international trade. Some analysts maintain that the Indian Ocean is a crucial geographic area where the growing security concerns – mainly the security of the vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) as they are vulnerable to pirates and terrorist attacks – might play a pivotal role in shaping the regional and global affairs in the foreseeable future.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the Pacific Ocean is also gaining importance for its untapped natural resources, the SLOCs between Asia and the Americas, and its strategic importance in maintaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. Since a large number of the West Pacific-bound ships have to pass through the Indian Ocean, this establishes a vital linkage between the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans, thereby making the Indo-Pacific region important for the economic and strategic stability of several states.<sup>8</sup> As Mohan Malik notes, “the Indian Ocean is now inextricably linked to the Western Pacific via deep linkages and interdependencies, whether in energy security, nuclear proliferation, trade and markets, or through economic growth and maritime security.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in an article, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region: “This region has become a key driver of global politics. Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian – that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy.”<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the security of sea lanes and commercial interests, the Indo-Pacific is gaining importance due to the fast-changing regional and global security equations and increasing power competition between major powers. For instance, the two major Asian powers, India and China, are competing to maximise their power and influence by drawing and employing strategies to forge partnerships in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the South China Sea is marred by maritime disputes, involving the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, due to overlapping maritime claims by China and the regional states – mainly Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. Due to China's assertive behaviour and increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea, these disputes have virtually aggravated tensions between China and the states bordering South China Sea. Also, the US–China rivalry – along with that between the US and Iran, and Russia's strengthening ties with China – has intensified the security competition and the gravity of threat in the Indo-Pacific.

In the past few years, the Indo-Pacific has almost replaced the widely accepted terminology “Asia-Pacific”, which facilitates the promotion of India in the Asian region as it has the potential to restrain China's emergence in the global sphere. The Indo-Pacific attained primacy as a new security region under the Barack Obama administration's new-found regional strategy, the “Asia Pivot”, which viewed India as a major Asian player having potential to balance China. In May 2018, the US Defense Secretary James Mattis renamed the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command, precisely “in recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans”.<sup>11</sup> Of late, the US has strongly articulated the importance of the region in its Indo-Pacific

Strategy Report, which underlines that “The Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future.”<sup>12</sup>

## China and India in the Indo-Pacific

Given the scale of trade and energy resources that transit through the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, the importance of the Indian Ocean is increasing for India and China’s steady economic growth as it provides them an affordable and secure access to raw materials and oil imports. With its growing economy, China’s increasing oil consumption has assisted it to surpass the US and emerge as the world’s largest net importer of oil in 2017 and the processor of crude oil in 2020<sup>13</sup> According to a Pentagon report, China imports at least 51% of its oil from the Middle East, with almost half of it passing through the Strait of Hormuz; and 82% of its total maritime oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, India’s dependence on oil imports and other energy resources has substantially increased in the last two decades, with nearly 80% of its crude oil imports passing through the sea lanes across the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup>

Against this background, it is clear that the maritime waters stretching from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea are important for both India and China in order to fulfil their energy requirements and advance their vital interests – for instance, in 2013, India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Videsh entered into a joint venture with PetroVietnam to explore a Vietnamese oil block in the South China Sea. Additionally, the possibility of increase in the demand of energy resources is likely to double in the coming decades. This obviously compels both Asian states to make efforts to secure these waterways.

Apart from energy resources, the IOR is central to India and China’s economic and strategic calculus as a substantial part of their trade transits through it. It is thus important for them to protect the Indian Ocean’s waterways from external threats, such as piracy and terrorism. By maintaining strategic ambiguity at the border, China is maintaining rivalry with India so that it can be kept under strategic pressure for a long period – the May 2020 armed escalations along the border in eastern Ladakh is a case in point.<sup>16</sup> India’s closer relations with the US, termed as “enduring relations”, by acquiring the status of Major Defence Partner along with the annual Malabar naval exercises in the region (which also includes Japan and Australia) has further increased China’s apprehensions about India.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the emerging competitive security equations among major powers have given rise to concerns regarding the security of sea lanes and naval modernisation.<sup>18</sup>

China’s security concerns about the sea lanes are not limited to the non-traditional maritime security threats; it is also concerned about unfriendly powers controlling crucial maritime choke points which would hurt its long-term interests, particularly in the time of crises. Against this backdrop, China is concerned about the US – the dominant maritime power – which has major force projection in the Asian region and the capability to occupy the “first island chain” parallel to China’s coastline.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Beijing is apprehensive about India’s advantageous geographical position that gives it a strategic edge against China as well as a natural predominance in the northern IOR.<sup>20</sup> However, it is important to note that China has never accepted India’s unique advantage in the region; indeed, China clearly showed its intentions to challenge India when, in

1993, Zhao Nanqi, former director of the General Logistics Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), proclaimed: "We [China] can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as an ocean only of the Indian."<sup>21</sup>

In comparison to India and the US, China is at disadvantageous position in the Indo-Pacific. Due to its larger distance from the Indian Ocean waters and the "Malacca Dilemma", China fears that the US might block the Malacca choke point in the eventuality of a future crisis between them.<sup>22</sup> In order to overcome such vulnerabilities, Beijing has a strategic plan to maximise its naval capabilities by acquiring bases for access in the Indian Ocean.<sup>23</sup> Against this backdrop, Beijing has adopted a strategy of encirclement – popularly known as the "String of Pearls" – to protect its political-economic and strategic interests, under which it is deeply involved in increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean littoral states by investing in commercial and military port facilities and building infrastructural projects. From India's standpoint, once this materialises, each "pearl" in the "string" will certainly be China's geopolitical nexus in the region, which includes the Gwadar Port in Pakistan; the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh; the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka; naval bases in Myanmar; electronic intelligence-gathering facilities in the Bay of Bengal; funding for the construction of a canal across the Kra Isthmus in Thailand; the military agreement with Cambodia; and strategic build-up in the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup> Apart from this, Beijing is using both "soft" and "hard" power, through trade, economic and humanitarian aid and arms sales, to attract the Seychelles, Mauritius and Djibouti – in the latter African state, it even succeeded in operationalising its first foreign military base in July 2017.<sup>25</sup>

In pursuit of China's long-term strategy to evolve into a global power, President Xi Jinping has initiated an ambitious project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that involves several infrastructural projects across South Asia, Central Asia and Europe to connect China with these regions for trade. In order to operationalise the BRI project properly, particularly its maritime domain popularised as "the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)", Beijing has made substantial investments to develop port facilities and infrastructural build-up in the states surrounding India – Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives – which further strengthen China's encirclement policy and cement its strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean by counterbalancing India's influence in its periphery.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, China has invested over \$62 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, formally taken over the strategic port of Hambantota on a 99 year lease from Sri Lanka, strengthened its strategic presence in the Maldives – an island state close to India – and successfully signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Myanmar to build the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), almost on similar lines to the CPEC.<sup>27</sup>

In order to safeguard the CPEC project, China has deployed a large number of security personnel in Pakistan, which further raises India's security concerns as the India-Pakistan dyad is already engaged in a prolonged rivalry over Kashmir.<sup>28</sup> Since Beijing has invested a huge sum in these projects, it can pressurise the small states and use their bases in future crises by trapping them in debt servitude, which is often dubbed as "debt-trap diplomacy". One of the best examples is China's acquisition of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port in a US\$ 1.1 billion debt swap deal. The Maldives, which owes nearly US\$ 1.5 billion to China, is also concerned that it might be victim of a similar debt trap in the near future.<sup>29</sup> Myanmar and Pakistan, the crucial states in India's security

and strategic thinking, too are important for China's overland pathways to connect its underdeveloped western province with the Indian Ocean. The growing Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean littoral are aggravating India's long-held suspicion (since the Sino-Indian War of 1962) about China's intentions. It is for this reason that India lodged its protest by declining the Chinese invitation for the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 over its differences on the CPEC project that breaches India's sovereignty by running through the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>30</sup>

China's official stand is that its outreach to these ports is merely for commercial purposes, to overcome its disadvantage in the Indian Ocean and connect China's landlocked western provinces – Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan – to the Indian Ocean under its “Go West” strategy.<sup>31</sup> However, Indian policymakers point towards Beijing's long-term strategic interests and emphasise that China's objective is to aggravate the security situation in South Asia and challenge India's dominant regional position. Given India's geostrategic location in the IOR, where a huge chunk of its land forms a peninsula, the ocean is vital for its security. It is difficult for New Delhi to believe that these sea ports are only for trade and securing energy resources for China as Beijing's actual intentions cannot be deciphered. Beijing's past record of policy revisions to secure or promote its interests gives strength to India's viewpoint and it is felt that these facilities could be used for military purpose in future when the need arises.<sup>32</sup> India's troubled experiences with China, especially the outbreak of the 1962 war and, most recently, the protracted military stand-off in eastern Ladakh since May 2020, have already deepened the trust deficit and suspicion between the two states, further fuelling New Delhi's apprehensions about China's presence in its neighbourhood.<sup>33</sup> In recent years, Sino-Indian rivalry has extended from the traditional to the maritime domain, with both now competing to increase their strategic presence in the littoral states so that they can effectively expand their power and influence.<sup>34</sup>

In order to counter China's increasing foothold in the Indian Ocean, India is creating a defensive sphere of influence by strengthening its naval capabilities and outreach by building extension bases which will help it to gain control and secure the waters in its periphery.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the country is also strengthening its existing naval bases on either side of its coast in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea and with the littoral states. For instance, to strengthen its naval power projection capabilities, India has taken capability enhancing measures that include upgradation of the Far Eastern Naval Command in the Andaman Islands in the eastern side and the expansion of the naval base at Karwar on its western coast, where the Phase II of the Project Seabird is in progress, so as to accommodate an aircraft carrier, destroyers, stealth frigates and submarines.

To counter China's presence in Gwadar Port, India assisted Iran in building Chabahar Port, which helps India to bypass Pakistan to reach Afghanistan and the landlocked states of Central Asia. Also, to counter China's growing influence in Myanmar, India has given aid to Myanmar to develop the Sittwe Port as a trade route to open up its own landlocked north-east region and as an alternative route to transport goods to this region.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, to strengthen its presence in key strategic points of the IOR, New Delhi has increased its involvement with Mauritius and the Seychelles by assuring them assistance in the construction and upgradation of an airstrip and jetty for surveillance purpose in their strategic islands, primarily in Agalega of Mauritius and Assumption Island in the

Seychelles.<sup>37</sup> India has also strengthened its position in the African littorals, mainly in Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa, by setting up a radar surveillance monitoring station in northern Madagascar and establishing its naval presence in Mozambique.<sup>38</sup> With the conclusion of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between India and Japan, the two states can now access each other's bases – where India can use Japan's overseas base in Djibouti and the latter can use the former's naval base in Andaman and Nicobar Islands – for logistic support.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from the West and Southwest, India has stretched its strategic presence beyond South Asia to the Southeastern neighbourhood that includes China's contested waters, that is, the South China Sea, and the intervening water stretch between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean.<sup>40</sup> For instance, India has signed the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" with Vietnam, the "India–Singapore Bilateral Agreement for Navy Cooperation" that facilitates the Indian Navy's ships access to Singapore's Changi Naval Base near South China Sea and the "India–Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" that shares a vision of India–Indonesia maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Through these moves, New Delhi is intervening in Beijing's sphere of influence and maritime backyard, thereby signalling its opposition to China's growing activities in the Indian Ocean littoral. Scholars maintain that "India's interest in the South China Sea appears to be primarily motivated by the expansion of China's interest in the Indian Ocean."<sup>41</sup> To consolidate its position, though with no direct intentions to undercut China's influence in Southeast Asia, India has also begun friendly port calls to the Philippines and Vietnam. Further, India continues to conduct its annual bilateral naval exercise, SIMBEX, with the Singapore Navy in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea.

Thus, India and China's growing rivalry in the oceans, coupled with historical baggage and their interference into the other's domain, has triggered intensive economic and security competition between the two and, by extension, in the entire Indo-Pacific littoral. Since India has capability limitations to get fully involved in the Indo-Pacific to neutralise China's growing influence, it is compelled to forge a comprehensive collaboration with the US in order to strengthen its position in the region.

### **Convergence of the Indo-US interests in the region**

China, as a rising power – next only to the US in the global power hierarchy – has to not only secure the sea routes for its economic interest but also has to expand its strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, the Xi Jinping-led Communist Party of China (CPC) is striving hard to build a blue-water navy and expand China's offshore capabilities by shifting its focus from "offshore waters defence" to a combination of "offshore waters defence" and "open seas protection" in order to enhance the country's naval power and expand its presence in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.<sup>43</sup> Alternately, India and the US have common maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific as China is expanding its presence in the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans, where it is carving a parallel status for itself against the US-led order.<sup>44</sup> Though India and the US' geostrategic and geo-economic approaches differ in the Indo-Pacific, they are concerned about the changing power structure in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain and the challenges it poses to their economic–security interests.

In recent years, the maritime domain has emerged as an important field of balance of power, particularly with China's increasing presence in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Given its geostrategic location, India has a dominant presence in the Indian Ocean, which makes the region crucial for its economic growth and security. Concurrently, though a non-resident power, the US also has a dominant maritime presence in the Indian Ocean due to its many bases. It has a major naval base at Diego Garcia, located almost in the centre of the Indian Ocean, that plays a crucial role in its maritime operations and initiatives to guard the SLOCs. Apart from Diego Garcia, the US has substantial presence in other states of the region: for example, its Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain to protect the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz; and the Seventh Fleet is based in Yokosuka, Japan, to safeguard the Southeast and East Asian shipping lanes.<sup>45</sup> However, despite having such a dominant presence in the Indian Ocean, the US is largely a Pacific power with extended influence in East Asia.<sup>46</sup>

India's interest in the maritime domain converges with that of the US as China is acquiring key ports and bases in the Indian Ocean, and simultaneously making all possible efforts to increase its military presence in the region to alter the existing power balance. For instance, Beijing has taken over Gwadar Port for 40 years, Djibouti Port for 10 years, Sri Lanka's Hambantota deep-water port for 99 years and the Maldivian island of Feydhoo Finolhu for 50 years; also, it is trying to acquire Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port, which has potential to undermine India's naval dominance in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>47</sup> This shows how China is effectively weaving its strategic ties with the regional states to challenge India's regional dominance.

Likewise, China is expanding its presence in the Pacific Ocean. Already it has a military presence in the first island chain that stretches from the Japanese archipelago to parts of the Philippines and Malaysia and encompasses the South China Sea. China's presence beyond the first island chain, into the second island chain, challenges American naval presence in the region – the second island chain has the US-held Northern Marianas, Guam, Palau and the Carolinas.<sup>48</sup> In fact, China's military build-up and assertiveness has upset the power balance in the South China Sea<sup>49</sup> as it undercuts the US dominance in Asia and challenges its efforts to maintain regional stability favourable to its interests and protection of its regional allies.<sup>50</sup> The US fears about China replacing its hegemony in the Asian region are visible in its 2018 National Defense Strategy: "As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States ...".<sup>51</sup> In other words, American policymakers believe that China's expansion of maritime consolidation and growing assertive behaviour in the South China Sea is expanding its sphere of influence from Asia to Africa to Europe; this inter-regional project has potential to undermine the US' global power projection in the near future.

India and the US have common interest in the free flow of trade and security of the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific region, but China's increasing presence and assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea is posing challenges to this. The major concern for the US in the South China Sea is freedom of navigation as billions of dollars of commerce flows through this region. Near about 50% of the global maritime commerce and 90% of East Asian energy imports pass through it annually, making it a key artery for sustaining global economy.<sup>52</sup> Hence, any disturbance to the sea lanes will drastically impact the

global economy and Asian stability and, by extension, the US economic security and maritime capability, which is vital for its global power projection.<sup>53</sup> The importance of this region has been clearly stated: “U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region ...”<sup>54</sup> Being the world’s largest economy, the US is concerned about the security of its key trading partners and allies’ ships, which use the sea lanes of IOR from the Persian Gulf to East Asia for oil imports and international trade.<sup>55</sup>

For India, the increasing presence of the People’s Liberation Army Navy in its extended neighbourhood has the potential to curtail its freedom of sea in the adjoining waters, especially after China docked its submarine, *Changzheng 2*, and warship, *Chang Xing Dao*, in Colombo in 2014 and its Yuan-class 335 submarine showed up at Karachi Port in May 2015.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the naval facilities supported by China on the Great Coco Islands are located at the crucial point in the shipping lanes between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca, which factor in a big way in India’s strategic calculus.<sup>57</sup> China’s dominance over the near seas also challenges the US freedom of access in the international waters that is essential to meet its commitments to the Asian allies.<sup>58</sup> Beijing, however, views it differently and believes that “the US is constricting its access to open seas by controlling the choke points in the island chains”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, China has adopted an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy that prevents opponent’s armed forces from entering into and operating within the areas under its control or theatre of operation. This threatens to restrict the US forces’ entry into its maritime theatre in the contested territories – particularly around Taiwan and the South China Sea – which might help Beijing undermine the US and its allies’ power and interests in the vital East Asian region and by extension, in the Western Pacific.<sup>60</sup>

China lays claim over most of the South China Sea. Since 2009, it has unilaterally put forth its claim over the nine-dash line that encompasses almost whole of the South China Sea. Beijing’s refusal to accept the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling of 2016 shows that it is reluctant to abide by international rules despite being a member of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>61</sup> To prevent the adversary from using force in these disputed waters, China’s 2015 white paper reiterates “active defence” to “safeguard national territory sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and maintain security stability along China’s periphery.”<sup>62</sup> The country’s increasing involvement in the disputed Paracel, Spratly and Woody islands and their militarisation has increased the risk of navigating in these waters for trade and naval forces. Beijing has expanded its presence by constructing artificial islands on top of submerged reefs in the Spratly Islands and militarised the disputed South China Sea with key facilities, including radar facilities and military airstrips. It has also deployed anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles that compromise other states’ security in the disputed region.<sup>63</sup> This military build-up in the disputed waters has increased the threat perception among states sharing the South China Sea waters. The US too considers these unilateral activities as “inconsistent with the principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific”.<sup>64</sup> India and the US’ growing strategic partnership, which is guided by the shared values of freedom, justice, human rights and commitment to the rule of law, converges on their support for freedom of navigation and flight in the South China Sea on the basis of the international law.

India has often considered any inimical presence in the Indian Ocean littoral, mainly in the South Asian neighbourhood, as a concern to its security.<sup>65</sup> In this respect, Chinese growing presence in the neighbourhood, with access to military bases and strategic ports to advance its economic and strategic interests, is largely viewed by the policymakers in New Delhi as China's strategic encirclement to restrict India within South Asia. Given its geographical proximity to the regional states, China's presence in South Asia complicates India's security and therefore, New Delhi believes that China's involvement in the region comprises strategic options beyond defensive build-up and security of trade and energy resources. It is for this reason that the ports of Gwadar, Chittagong and Hambantota are largely viewed by the Indian policymakers as equipped with dual-use capabilities: for instance, the Gwadar Port is likely to be used for military purpose to dock Chinese vessels. India has also shown concern over Chinese naval forays in the Indian Ocean, such as Sri Lanka hosting a Chinese submarine and warship at the Colombo Port in 2014. China has given loans worth billions of dollars to these small littoral states. With these states being unable to service their loans, the Chinese are getting "military access to strategic infrastructure such as ports and airstrips near international waterways".<sup>66</sup> After China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, India is sceptical that Beijing might upgrade the commercial ports of Gwadar and Hambantota into permanent naval bases. Zhou Chenming, a Beijing-based military analyst, has speculated that China is likely to have its second military base at Gwadar.<sup>67</sup> From the Indian policymakers' perspective, China's strategic build-up in the ports that are in close proximity to India and its waters has increased security risk and threat perception for the country.

At present, the South China Sea has emerged as a major conflictual flashpoint, which has intensified geopolitical rivalry between the US and China by pushing them to step up their engagement in the disputed waters. In order to challenge China's many-islands claim in the South China Sea, the US has started freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) since 2015, which, rather than deterring China, has further intensified the contention between the two states in the region. China considers FONOPs as provocation and flexing of muscles by the US and a violation of the international law that threatens the peace and stability of the region.<sup>68</sup> In recent years, Beijing has increased both military deployment and aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea. The US too has increased its military and naval activities in the region after introducing FONOPs. In an incident in 2020, China responded to the presence of the US' U-2 spy plane by firing, for the first time, an "aircraft-carrier killer" missile into the South China Sea.<sup>69</sup> The US and China's respective moves and counter-moves have raised concerns regarding the likelihood of military conflict between the two states in the near future. Though India is not directly involved in the South China Sea conflicts, its interests do converge with the US in the region, albeit in varied ways, thus it desires that the regional states should resolve the disputes amicably by adhering to international norms.

### **India-US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**

With the growing convergence of their interests in the Indo-Pacific, India and the US are building upon their security cooperation in the region to secure and promote their long-term collective interests. Though India enjoys a dominant and central position in the vast geographical landscape of the Indian Ocean, China's growing naval capabilities will

undermine its position in the region in the near future. A rising China has substantial resources to enhance its naval capabilities and build overseas bases to overcome its comparative disadvantages vis-à-vis India's central position in the Indian Ocean. In this respect, David Brewster rightly notes that "India will need to enhance its capabilities considerably if it [has] to meet its strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean."<sup>70</sup> With growing challenges in the region, New Delhi has to opt for collaboration with Washington to maintain major force projection in the waters close to its territorial border and crucial sea lanes stretching from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea and beyond. Given India's rivalry with China and its advantageous location in the Indian Ocean, the US finds a prospective partner in India to maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific. A 2010 US report stated: "As India's military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond."<sup>71</sup> In the past, India was apprehensive about the influence of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean, but now it is willing to cooperate with them and has shown interest to engage in multilateral maritime security initiatives.

India's policy conjoins with the US interests in the Indo-Pacific as the latter has large presence in the Western Pacific and the capability to secure its Asian allies' interests in the South China Sea. In the backdrop of reshaping security equations in the Indo-Pacific, coupled with its long-term interests, India would like to come close to the US which has major force projection and vast network of alliance system in the region. Since India has a natural edge in the Indian Ocean, it can provide security for the movement of ships along the SLOCs in the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca through which, each year, billions of dollars worth of oil shipments pass. In 2002, India did show its ability by providing naval escorts for high-value commercial traffic for the US-led global operation against terrorism, "Enduring Freedom".

Of late, India has also strengthened its naval power in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea by upgrading naval facilities and having a tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command. Apart from this, India is also engaged in strengthening its naval presence in the Indian Ocean littorals in Iran, the Seychelles, Mauritius and Mozambique, which will certainly enhance its position to play a key role as a major security provider in the region. C. Raja Mohan, notes: "the rapid expansion of [the] Indian and [the] Chinese naval capabilities and United States' own search for maritime partners have lent a special significance of the expanding cooperation between New Delhi and Washington in the Indian and Pacific Oceans."<sup>72</sup> The US duly recognises India's role in the Indo-Pacific, as emphasised by the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: "we are expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce."<sup>73</sup> While supporting India's role in the Indo-Pacific region, Chuck Hagel, former US Secretary of Defense, said: "The world's largest democracy, India's role as a stabilising power is of growing importance with the increase of trade and transit between Indian and Pacific Oceans."<sup>74</sup>

During President Obama's India visit in January 2015, India and the US showed their willingness to work towards their common interests and challenges in the Indo-Pacific. With a vision of cooperation, the two sides signed a "Joint Strategic Vision" for the Indo-Pacific region that underlines the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, including the South China Sea.<sup>75</sup> To enhance its leadership role in the Indo-Pacific region, the US

has passed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) in December 2018 that lays down a long-term strategic vision and comprehensive policy for the Indo-Pacific region. Through the ARIA, the US “recognises the vital role of the strategic partnership between the United States and India in promoting peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region”.<sup>76</sup> Post the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, which commenced between India and the US in 2018, the two states have reiterated their commitment to free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Ahead of the third 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in October 2020, the US Defense Secretary Mark Esper stated that “India will be the most consequential partner for the US in the Indo-Pacific this century.”<sup>77</sup> Taking their cooperation to the next level, both sides have shown their willingness to enhance cooperation between the Indian Navy and the US Navy fleets under US Indo-Pacific Command, Central Command and African Command; and a similar expansion to their respective armies and air forces is also possible in the near future.<sup>78</sup>

The US defence cooperation, which facilitates defence trade and technology cooperation with allies, has designated India as a Major Defence Partner, giving it a unique status that the US specifically gives to its allies. Indeed, India–US defence relations have witnessed major developments, starting with the “Defence Technology and Trade Initiative” (DTTI) in 2012. Later, India also signed foundational agreements with the US that have strengthened the defence ties between the two countries: the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which facilitates the sale and transfer of major cutting-edge technology between the two states, as well as access to each other’s military bases respectively; the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which facilitates military intelligence sharing, including advanced drones and communication platforms; and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for geospatial cooperation.<sup>79</sup>

Apart from working bilaterally, India and the US are also involved in multilateral initiatives in the region, like the Malabar exercises and the Quad.<sup>80</sup> In the naval sphere, both states have been regularly holding the Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean since 1992, except for a short period after India’s nuclear tests in 1998, when these exercises were briefly discontinued. With the growing presence of China in the region, the scope and intensity of these exercises has grown in recent years with the participation of other Quad members, Japan and Australia. The 2019 Malabar exercise was conducted off the coast of Japan, with a focus on anti-submarine warfare – clearly set against China’s increasing submarine threat and naval presence in the IOR. The 2020 Malabar exercise saw Australia’s participation for the first time. The exercise was conducted in two phases: first, in the Bay of Bengal; and second, in the Arabian Sea. Phase II saw the participation of Indian Navy’s *Vikramaditya* carrier battle group and the US Navy’s *Nimitz* strike group, along with other ships, submarines and aircraft, involving high-intensity naval operations that showed coordination and interoperability between the four navies in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>81</sup> These exercises demonstrated the participating states’ collective strength and resolve in the Indo-Pacific in the face of China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and activities in the IOR through the maritime BRI project.

In the backdrop of China’s aggressive behaviour on the border dispute along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, India has sent strong signals to China by strengthening its maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, New Delhi invited

Australia for Exercise Malabar 2020, which is seen as a response to China's aggression in Ladakh. India's defence relations with Australia and Japan are being strengthened through the "mutual logistics support agreement", which allows them to use each other's military bases for logistic support. Having signed military logistics pacts with all three Quad states, India can now enhance its naval cooperation, with greater interoperability with the Quad partners, to deal with common security challenges in the maritime sphere. To expand its maritime cooperation with other like-minded allies, India also held "Milan 2018" multilateral naval exercises with 16 countries, off the coast of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In addition, in 2016 and 2018, India participated in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise, along with Australia, Japan and the US naval forces.

## Conclusion

With the increasing presence and power projection of major states, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as an important region. China's increasingly assertive behaviour and expansionary actions against India and the US' mutual interests in the security and economic sphere have gravitated them to forge a long-term strategic partnership. Having a natural geostrategic advantage in the Indian Ocean theatre, India not only has the capability to consolidate the US naval presence in the region but also the potential to expand its strategic reach to emerge as a net security provider. After signing the foundational military agreements, which facilitate the Indo-US cooperation in the maritime domain, the two states have shown commitment to work in collaboration with Japan and Australia so that China's increasing power – along with other security challenges having potential to disturb the regional status quo<sup>82</sup> and rule-based maritime order – can be neutralised. The 2020 Malabar exercises and the revival of the Quad are such targeted steps in this direction.

It is also important to note that the growing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region provide a window of opportunity for India to explore possibilities of forging mutually beneficial ties with major powers. Against this backdrop, India has adopted a pragmatic approach by restructuring its foreign policy in a way that allows it to be a partner of any state facing similar security challenges or threats and simultaneously, extends it sufficient space to remain open and work with states not interested to be part of any or emerging security engagements. In other words, though India is cautious about entering into any alliance system, it is not hesitant about joining those mechanisms that offer an equal partnership and security to its vital interests. By resorting to border confrontations in Ladakh, for instance, China's security provocations have compelled the Indian leadership to work closely with major powers to keep the opponent at bay, particularly by concluding security agreements with the US and Japan and employing soft balancing strategies, like trilateral and multilateral exercises in the naval domain. These strategies have helped India to partially restrain China's aggressive security moves – though the military standoff along the LAC in Ladakh is still inconclusive – and signalled the regional states fearing an assertive China to not hesitate and take steps to form mutually beneficial ties.

Of late, China's aggressive behaviour towards Taiwan, continuous building of military facilities in the South China Sea and increasing border confrontations with India

have made the neighbouring states sceptical of China's conduct. Therefore, these states have upped their security posture and collaboration in the region to counter China's aggressive behaviour. The quick inclusion of Australia in the 2020 Malabar exercise, in the backdrop of the Sino-Indian border clashes in Ladakh, underscores India's interest in working with like-minded states of the Indo-Pacific region. The signing of the mutual logistics support agreement with the members of the Quad has further strengthened this security arrangement, which emphasises how India and the US' security and maritime arrangements are balancing their common rival by maintaining a favourable status quo in the region. In short, the bilateral efforts of India and the US, through defence ties, 2+2 ministerial meetings, the quadrilateral initiative and the Malabar naval exercises, have enhanced their understanding and prospects to work closely with each other and neutralise the emerging security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

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