



From “Bridges” to “United” – Measuring Indo–US Interest Contiguity in Strategic Outreaches

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The relationship between India and the United States has transformed significantly since the Cold War, notwithstanding the denial regime imposed after the 1998 nuclear tests. In the complex 21st-century environment, both countries have articulated their strategic outreaches spanning the new geographical construct of a maritime configured Indo-Pacific. This article examines the coherence, correspondence and divergence in the approaches and the institutions of relevance in India’s “Act East” and the US “Strategic Rebalance” through the “interest contiguity” paradigm. The salient aspects examined are the politico-diplomatic, economic and military security dimensions, by using a combinational of realist and rational choice theoretical prisms. The paper concludes that while there is a virtual coincidence of “interests” between India and the US, their approaches and institutional frameworks are different in certain cases, driven by respective geopolitical, geoeconomic and geostrategic imperatives. The emerging positivity in the Indo–US relationship, like many other important engagements across the Indo-

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Pacific, will continue to contain a mix of cooperation and competition, which is not unusual and offers avenues for further strengthening of coordinated endeavours.

Introduction

The Indian Navy is preparing to host its second international fleet review (IFR) at Visakhapatnam, off its eastern seaboard, in February 2016. The theme chosen for the event is “United through Oceans”, and 50 navies are expected to take part in this grand maritime spectacle.¹ The last IFR, in 2001, was held off India’s western coast at Mumbai on the theme of “Bridges of Friendship”. In the ensuing 15-odd years, the maritime relationship between India and other nations has undergone significant changes. In 2001, the Indo–US relationship could be defined as the beginnings of a second rapprochement between the world’s oldest and the world’s largest democracies after yet another period of “estrangement”² following the 1998 nuclear tests by India. Barring some minor issues of disagreement, the bilateral relationship has become “strategic”, both in its “content” and in “intent”, when viewed through a multisectoral and multidimensional prism. Both countries have also articulated their strategic outreaches, with India recasting its “Look East” to “Act East” and the US defining its hitherto balanced global posture as the “Rebalance” or the pivot to the Asia-Pacific. It is, therefore, not surprising that the fleet review is being held on India’s East coast but also that the US is one of the first countries to confirm its participation.

Overview of Strategic Environment

The 21st century is variously predicted to be the “Asian”, “Asia-Pacific” or even “Pacific” Century depending on the theoretical framework used and the issues considered for analysis.³ It is also obvious that the post-Cold War period has seen a marked shift to Asia. This shift has both positive and negative connotations. On one hand, a majority of rapidly developing economies; increasing societal affluence; and improving informational, knowledge and technological quotients are located in this region. On the other hand, there is poverty; disparate economic, political and governance structures; transnational challenges of a traditional and non-military nature; and a rising trend of ethnocentric violence with fundamentalist/extremist overtones. The region has also seen the renewal and emergence of strategic rivalries with virtual

securitisation of strategic discourse across the complete spectrum. All of this is happening in an uncertain economic and geopolitical environment, which is increasingly globalised and intermeshed. Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that contemporary Asia is in fact an appropriate reflection of the “good” and “not so good” of the existing world architecture. Therefore, the tags “arc of instability” and “continuum of prosperity” extending from the Middle East–North Africa to East Asia are valid in equal measure for this geographic space.

This recast to *the Orient* has invited larger-than-usual focus by the existing and rising powers who have constructed respective strategic outreaches to maintain and, in some cases, enhance their larger national interests in this specific geography. The “US Rebalance” and “India’s Act East” policies are examples of this trend. This paper proposes to undertake a comparative analysis of these two policies through the framework of “interest contiguity” and “approaches” in order to derive congruence (exact sameness), correspondences (parallel similarities) and divergences (differences). The dimensions examined are the politico-diplomatic, economic and military-strategic issues through the prism of geography–geopolitics– geostrategy.

Theoretical Framework

Geography

While Asia-Pacific remains the dominant geospatial framework for analysis, other constructs like the “Expanded” or “Greater Asia-Pacific”, “Indo-Pacific” and “Indo-Asia-Pacific” have also emerged. Using Spykman’s “centrality of perception”⁴ and for reasons of strategic coherence, the least common geography that finds mention among the Indian and the US discourse extends from the India–Pakistan boundary in the Western Indian Ocean up to the Central Pacific (see common shaded area in [Figure 1](#)). This geography, in large measure, corresponds to the Pacific Command (PACOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR) for the US. This geographical space encompasses a large portion of the “primary” as well as the “secondary areas of interests” described in India’s Maritime Military Doctrine/Strategy publications.⁵ The geography of Asia-Pacific has been defined as a mix of “maritimity” with “continentality”, thus lending “littoral” connotations.⁶ In other words, land and maritime issues of Asia-Pacific are inseparable, albeit with a predominantly oceanic orientation.

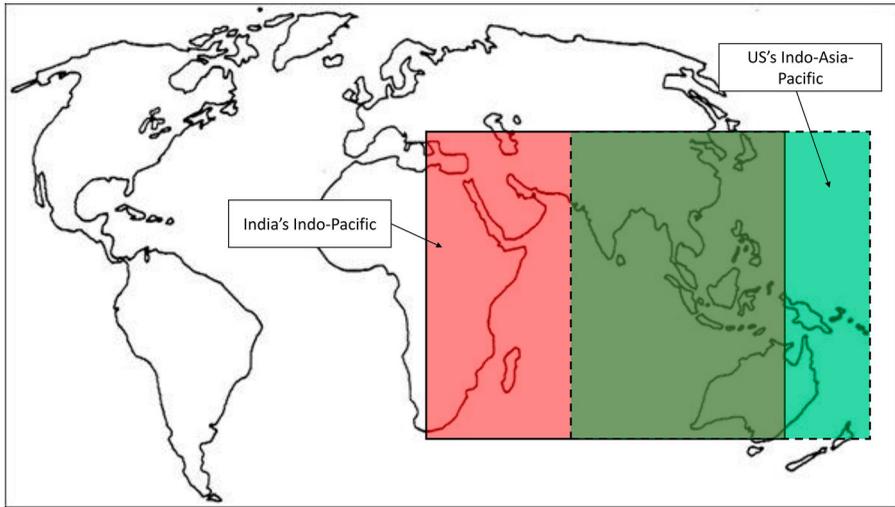


Fig. 1. The Common Asia-Pacific. Author's interpretation of the Indo-Pacific based on Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan* (2012) and US Maritime Strategy (2015).

Interest Contiguity

For this paper, the traditional “interest contiguity” logic comprising interstate relations through a realist perspective, and the Kantian trinity of international peace, is used.⁷

Approaches and Strategic Dimensions

It is pertinent to mention that in a globalised context and more importantly in an open international system, pure convergences and divergence, even among the best of allies and adversaries, is a rarity. In reality, most international relations, be they among states or among institutions, carry a mix of cooperative–competitive narratives. While divergence being differing interests as well as approaches on a particular issue is self-explanatory, congruence can be defined as virtually the exact same interests (end states) and approaches (intent and actions). Correspondences or similarities could be termed same interests but differing approaches to arrive at a similar (but not the same) end-state.

The geography–geopolitics–geostrategy realm is based on the “alignment” of three elements for maintaining the status quo in strategic differential terms for dominant power(s), or for attaining greater strategic space for emerging powers in a continuously evolving international system. This “alignment” is achieved by focussing on the

national economic, military-strategic and politico-diplomatic potentials to the geography of contemporary salience, which in this case happens to be Asia-Pacific-centric.⁸

Comparative Analysis

Before undertaking a comparative analysis, a brief mention of the two strategic policies is considered essential. India’s “Act East” policy is a natural progression of its erstwhile “Look East” policy announced in the early 1990s. The two main occurrences that prompted this policy initiatives were: (1) the end of the Cold War ushering in a new era of open and permissive international relations; and (2) the balance-of-payment crisis, both of which coincided in time and space. India’s economic liberalisation policy had both internal and external loci. India adopted the open and liberal economic order with capitalist tinges, a departure from its earlier state-governed public enterprise-driven socialist model. This policy was aimed at enhancing the coupling with the economically flourishing east comprising China and the then-Asian Tigers. It is also relevant that India’s west was in a geopolitical turmoil due to the First Gulf War, and in its aftermath, there was relatively less economic space available in this region considering its energy dependency, diasporic concerns and few avenues for market penetration. Despite these constraints, a host of economic partnerships, as Free Trade Agreements (FTA), were formed, the majority of these being bilateral with the multilateral India Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) FTA that was agreed to in 2003, and finalised in 2009 being the centrepiece of such engagements.⁹ As part of this process, economics drove politics and diplomacy with the renewal of some old traditional linkages and the forging of new bonds. These developments gave a fillip to India’s military-strategic engagements in the region and beyond, some examples being the military relationship with the US that started with the 1991 Kicklighter proposals and was later formalised through the 2005 India–US defence framework agreement, further extended by 10 years in 2015. The most visible sign of this relationship in the maritime domain is the Malabar series of annual naval exercises. Some of the other notable countries with whom India has developed strong maritime links are Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan and, more recently, Myanmar and Australia. Since 2011, India has been proactively involved in most of the humanitarian assistance (HA) and disaster relief (DR) exercises under the aegis of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers Forum Plus (ADMM Plus).¹⁰ In 2014, India for the first time participated in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise

and also became a party to the August 2014 Code of Conduct on Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)¹¹ initiative during the Western Pacific Naval Symposium at Qingdao. These are examples of India's increasing engagements to the east, much beyond the strict confines of the traditional "Suez to Malacca" sphere of interest statements, which date back to the Curzonian era.

The evolution of strategic rebalance articulated in 2009 with its roots stretching as far back as 2000 is also a growing acknowledgement of the importance that the US attaches to the Asia-Pacific. The emphasis on this region is quite evident in the recently released tri-service US maritime strategy and the first ever dedicated and Asia-Pacific specific security strategy by the Department of Defense (DoD).¹² However, the drivers for the US policy have been largely military-strategic and politico-diplomatic given its alliance commitments, especially so in the face of a rising China.¹³ As part of this strategic recast, an enhanced economic integration with the region through the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) was initiated much later in 2008, in large measure compelled by then-looming economic crisis.

The military-strategic dimension of these two policies has garnered much debate, but it is evident that both policies are tripolar, with equally important economic and politico-diplomatic aspects. While India's outreach can be encapsulated through the logic of economic liberalisation, political pragmatism and administrative decentralisation, the drivers of the US Rebalance carry different nuances, with the two policies having different evolution trajectories and areas of emphasis. Of these, the geoeconomic and military-strategic dimensions with a maritime contextualisation are addressed in the paper since politics and diplomatic initiatives are an integral part of such strategic policies, and are evident by the intensive bilateral and multilateral engagements by the political leadership and diplomatic community from both countries.

Geoeconomics

It is an accepted axiom that Asia-Pacific is a key region for India and the US given the value and volume of international trade, as it accounts for about half of the international commerce for both countries.¹⁴ In terms of economic interest contiguity, both India and the US seek an open, liberal and equitable economic order. There are some areas of divergences like the issue of government subsidies in the agricultural sector, and on intellectual property rights, especially in the pharmaceutical sector. Although India and the US are both part of larger global economic institutions such

as the World Trade Organization (WTO), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), their approaches in terms of participation in the emerging regional economic architecture are different. While the US has put TPP as the economic pillar of its “Rebalance Strategy”, India has not evinced much interest in this grouping, though some recent writings indicate nascent interest in the topic.¹⁵ The recent conclusion of TPP, despite widespread scepticism, is an indication that the “pivot to Asia” is likely to be an enduring policy. India has chosen to be part of the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) also known as the ASEAN+6. India has also decided to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) while being reticent about the 21st Century New Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, as part of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy mooted by China.¹⁶

India has also professed the policy “Make in India” which is aimed at increasing the share of the manufacturing sector to the national gross domestic product (GDP), which lags significantly behind the services sector.¹⁷ This policy also aims to address long-term socioeconomic needs of job creation to optimally harness the demographic dividend and improve the national infrastructure. In a similar vein, the internal debate on macro-economic issues in the US has revolved around sustained job creation by incentivising the manufacturing and industrial base.

To summarise, while there is large interest contiguity on the geoeconomics dimension at the strategic plane between India and the US, their approaches are different.

Military-Strategic Dimension

India and the US have a congruent approach as both countries seek an equitable regional and global balance, adherence to international law and dispute resolution through conciliation, negotiations and, if required, recourse to international legal framework. This is very much evident in the strategic vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean after President Obama’s visit to India.¹⁸ The same intent was also emphasised in the joint statement issued after the Indian Prime Ministerial visit in September 2014.¹⁹

Indo-US defence engagements can be considered amongst the more robust in the region in terms of their strategic content, operational complexities and technological dimension, except for those that the US shares with its formal alliance partners, especially Japan and Australia. For example, the recently concluded Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) exemplifies the large strides made by India and the US

on military-security aspects from the era of Cold War “estrangement”, when relations between the world’s oldest and the world’s largest democracies were adversarial.

There is also a large degree of correspondence in terms of the security challenges identified by both countries. These are:

1. To prevent the rise of a regional hegemon – an oblique but obvious reference to China;
2. Transnational terror; and
3. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The China factor, though common, is perceived through different lenses. For the US, it is the management of a near-peer but geographically distant strategic competitor not only as a bilateral issue but, equally importantly, from the point of view of the security of alliance partners. In India, this aspect is perceived as an existential and contiguous security challenge given the longstanding territorial dispute and through the perspective of the oft-quoted Sino–Pak “strategic nexus” that is aimed at keeping keep India hemmed in its periphery. An important factor that needs reiteration is the differential in the strategic quotients and plane at which this rivalry plays out. For the US, it is a question of the global sphere and the quest for maintaining the status quo where the US remains a predominant regional security provider. For India, the question is more relevant in a regional context where the competition is between a rising (India) and a major (China) power.

On the aspect of terrorism, India and the US stand congruent with both countries proclaiming terrorism and extremism as *hostis humani generis* (enemy of mankind). Beyond these strategic endeavours, both countries have addressed the terrorist threat through state-centric “realist national interest” paradigms. India and the US have developed interstate linkages with other countries of interest for responding cooperatively to this challenge. While the US has fought two long and costly wars beyond its shores post-9/11, in Afghanistan and Iraq, India has generally tried to address this issue within its boundaries and immediate periphery, exemplified by the recent special operation in Myanmar’s territory. Despite recent dehyphenation, a vexed issue, which continues to bedevil the Indo–US relationship, is that of Pakistan – particularly so considering its track record of being a fount of transnational terror, extremist ideology and using proxy war as an instrument of state policy. The US interlocutors have also questioned the gap between India’s words and deeds on this count, where it is

argued that India has made little if any concrete and visible contribution in international anti-terror mechanism in terms of providing capacity or capabilities.

As far as WMD are concerned, although the larger policy converges, India and the US belong to different groupings. While the US is a P-5 nuclear weapon state (NWS), India is a *de facto* and not a *de jure* nuclear-capable nation. The nuclear dimension is seen from a global perspective in the US with challenges coming from North Korea, from an unstable Middle East and from the dangers of a failing or failed but nuclear-capable Pakistan. India’s nuclear concerns are about its complex and difficult security relationships with its two largest neighbours, namely Pakistan and China, through the conventional and strategic perspectives. However, there is a widespread acknowledgement of the positive efforts made by the US to facilitate India’s acceptance into various nuclear power groupings, such as also the exception made by it on the Indo–US civil nuclear deal.

The major difference in the respective approaches emerges from the “strategical orientation”. The US approach is predicated on maintaining the *status quo* and favourable balance of power as “the dominant military power” in the Asia-Pacific through a network of formal alliances and partnerships. Therefore, the US strategy is a mix of hard (internal) and soft (cooperative) balancing. India on the other hand as a “rising power” seeks “more space” for itself. The term “alliance” is still considered an anathema and “sovereignty and territoriality” issues exert strong pulls on its strategic outlook. Further, given its territorial vexations, India has largely relied on internal (hard) balancing. The soft balancing part is mostly aimed at shaping the politico-diplomatic discourse among the key regional stakeholders. In sum, the key difference between the two approaches is that India seeks an equitable balance without alliances including close compacts.²⁰

Navigating the Regional Strategy Noodle Soup

Another observation while analysing the implications of the US “Rebalance” and India’s “Act East” policy is that they have to function within a complex mix of similar outreaches by regional stakeholders. Some examples are:

1. *China*. The “March West” and OBOR initiatives, which are perceived to offset the constraining effects of US Rebalance, ameliorate the adversarial fallouts of the South/East China Sea (SCS/ECS) disputes while seeking favourable access and terrestrial/

maritime connectively with Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe and into the Indian Ocean.²¹ Its emphasis on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) economic initiative indicates the criticality of these links to the overall success of OBOR. The recent turmoil in Chinese currency markets and stock markets, which are indicative of some systemic weaknesses in the Chinese economy, lends uncertainty to these initiatives in the near to medium term.

2. *Australia*. The “Two-Ocean” outlook to the north (Pacific) and north west (Indian Ocean) articulated in its recent strategy and security policies through the Indo-Pacific construct.²²
3. *Indonesia*. President Jokowi’s doctrine of “Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF)”, and the emphasis on Pacific-Indian Ocean (PACINDO) as the geospatial driver for its internal–external strategic interactions.²³
4. *Japan*. Its “dual hedge” strategy of an enhanced security relationship with the US as evinced in the April 2015 guidelines, and simultaneously seeking enhanced strategic relationships in South and Southeast Asia.²⁴
5. *ASEAN*. Its adoption of Indo-Pacific as the geography for geostrategic interactions for this regional grouping as it moves towards the goal of establishing an ASEAN Community.²⁵

Table 1. India’s “Act East” and the US “Rebalance” – Mapping Interest Contiguities and Approaches.

Element	Interest contiguity	Approaches	Remarks
Geoeconomics	Yes, open liberal and equitable economic order	Divergent	US – Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) India – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) Visible through more robust engagements
Politico-diplomatic	Yes, adherence to international norms	Congruent	
Military-strategic	Yes, a favourable and stable balance of power	Correspondent with differing emphasis	US – status quo as the dominant regional security provider through a system of alliances and compact partnerships, a mix of hard (internal) and soft (balancing and bandwagoning) power India – greater strategic space as a rising power, emphasis on internal (hard) balancing supported by politic-diplomatic soft component

All these policies will intersect and impinge on India’s and the US strategic outlooks to the Asia-Pacific, thus requiring nuanced transmutation by all the stakeholders.

Conclusion

It is obvious that there is a large coincidence between India’s “Act East” and the US’s “Rebalance” in terms of geography. To map bilateral congruence, correspondence and divergence across the strategic continuum, a synoptic chart to synthesise the key issues highlighted in the paper can be summarised as shown in [Table 1](#).

It would appear that while there is unanimous interest contiguity, the approaches by India and the US are a mix of cooperation and competition. It is for emphasis here that interest contiguity is the guiding “first principle”, and convergence on this account is more important. As noted earlier, pure cooperation, competition or conflictual tendencies are an unrealistic proposition. Further, “competition” in a globalised context is as much about what “binds” the protagonists as about what “divides” them.²⁶ Some opportunities that could be explored in the strategic domains are:

1. **Goeconomics.** Both economies are an integral part of intermeshed economic architecture and are not immune to global trends, but the recent green shoots indicate a revitalisation is underway in both countries. Considering the emerging signs of a slowdown in China despite currency devaluation, government intervention in the stock markets, and interest rate cuts, the next “big shock” could well come from there. Beyond the immediate effects, there is a long-term opportunity for India (with cheap labour and robust low/intermediate industry infrastructure) and the US (with its high-end/niche technology sector) to collaborate in the manufacturing sector. This would also be in sync with the “Make in India” statement and the US policy of revitalising jobs and the manufacturing sector.
2. **Military-strategic.** India’s emphasis on “internal” balancing is not likely to change in the near to medium term. Therefore, the US and India should continue on the current trajectory for increasing mutual interoperability. One area for consideration is enhancing India’s military-industrial capacity and capabilities through a mix of technology transfer, licensed production, and co-development and joint production. This could well transform the bilateral relationship in the military-strategic sphere. While the recently announced “pathfinder” technology initiatives for collaboration are indeed welcome, the ambit needs to be expanded beyond these

“easy” projects. The real test and lessons would only emerge if capabilities that are more “complex” were to be attempted. This would also need some realignment of national legislations, and defence and trade policies.

3. Politico-diplomatic. On the politico-diplomatic front, the interest contiguity could be leveraged by lending support to and strengthening the existing regional mechanisms like ASEAN and other groupings such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

It would be apt to describe the contemporary environment as what Mahan had predicted, as one of prodigious intercoupling, about 100 years ago:

Logically separable, in practice, the political, commercial, and military needs are so intertwined that their mutual interaction constitutes one problem. The vast increase in rapidity of communication has multiplied and strengthened the bonds knitting the interests of nations to one another, till the whole now forms an articulated system, not only of prodigious size and activity, but of an excessive sensitiveness, unequalled in former ages.²⁷

While the words may have been written during the second imperial age, they remain as relevant in the present geopolitical context. India’s “Act East”, the US’s “Rebalance” and strengthening of bilateral mechanism, be they multisectoral and cross-domain in nature, offer unique opportunities for cooperative endeavours for both sides. Concentrating on the positive aspects while trying to bridge the existing differences is likely to yield more results for the success of these strategic outreaches.

Notes

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to be considered as one strategic arc ... driven by the increased economic interaction between South, Northeast and Southeast Asia and the importance of the lines of energy supply to Asia from the Middle East” (p. 74). In January 2013, the national security strategy of Australia drew a distinction and established complementarity between the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific concepts. See Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia’s National Security* pp. 17, 30. The term “Indo-Pacific” finds repeated mention in the 2013 defence white paper, where it is averred that “China’s continued rise as a global power, the increasing economic and strategic weight of East Asia and the emergence over time of India as a global power are key trends influencing the Indian Ocean’s development as an area of increasing strategic significance. In aggregate, these trends are shaping the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic arc.” Department of Defence, Commonwealth of Australia, *Defending Australia and Its National Interests* (2013), p. 2.

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