



## India-US maritime cooperation: Crossing the rubicon

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### ABSTRACT

India and the US have crossed the proverbial Rubicon in their bilateral ties, with maritime cooperation being the mainstay. The US-India navy-to-navy cooperation has emerged as the “best performing area of bilateral relationship”. The maritime domain including the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific area has emerged as the domain for the identification of commonly perceptible threats and goals in the larger Asian maritime expanse. A series of developments, agreements and understandings has gradually been cementing the rubric of US-India maritime cooperation. This paper proposes to justify the hypothesis that maritime cooperation between the US and India is one of the primary mainstays of their bilateral cooperation, and that the proposition will only get stronger going forward. By analysing various steps in maritime cooperation between the two countries, the paper seeks to highlight the rationales for such cooperation; growing Chinese presence in the region, non-traditional threats, HA/DR cooperation, domain awareness, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, regional stability, and balance of power.

### Introduction

The importance of the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific region in future Asian geopolitics is the driving force behind the US-India partnership in these regions. The entry of China in the Indian Ocean in a major way has restructured regional balance and altered stakes for both India and the US. For the US, preserving the Asian balance or status quo concerns its present credibility and future sustainability. For India, an expanded role in these regions amounts to a justification of its capabilities as a potent force, besides preserving order in the Indian Ocean region; a region that India has long considered its strategic backyard. These stakes have brought convergences between the two sides to the fore in an unprecedented manner, and are being acted upon through various components of their strategic partnership, especially their extensive coordination in the maritime domain in Asia. This paper delves into the various rationales which have brought about these maritime convergences between India and the US.

## Rationales for deepening Indo-US maritime cooperation

Amidst increasing strategic convergence between India and the US, the Asian maritime arena has emerged as a common playfield for both these countries. In its latest strategy, the US has developed a three-pronged approach to developing maritime cooperation with India. A Pentagon report categorically stated, “Given our broad shared interests in maritime security, the Department (of Defence) has developed a three-pronged approach to maritime cooperation with India”.<sup>1</sup> The three broad legs of bilateral maritime cooperation enunciated in the report outline the broad rationales for the two countries to cooperate in the maritime domain (from the US perspective).

### *Shared vision*

The first tenet on which the rationale for bilateral maritime cooperation between India and the US rests is a shared maritime vision between the two countries. The importance of a shared vision cannot be overstated when countries are facing great difficulties to go it alone, especially in the present era of trans-regional connectivity. The set of challenges that faces navies across the world, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, have raised the bar for enhancement of capabilities even for blue water navies such as that of the US, whose resources are stretched thin in the absence of regional cooperation, coordination, and reliable partnerships. In the aftermath of the former secretary of state Rex Tillerson describing India and the US as the “two bookends of stability”, the vision of the Asian maritime expanse as a combined geostrategic arena along with the need to combine the resources of both countries has been underscored.

The US and India signed the Joint Strategic Vision Statement for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region in 2015 during the visit of then US President Barack Obama.<sup>2</sup> Although countable steps in the aftermath of this vision agreement have been sporadic, a grand vision towards the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean has certainly been concretised. The Vision Statement created substantial rationale for looking at the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean as one strategic continuum, reflecting the promise to cooperate for prosperity and stability of the combined regions. Outlining “Africa to East Asia” as common ground to “support sustainable, inclusive development, and increased regional connectivity” geographically marked out the theatre of joint action between the two States. This geographical specificity had a great impact in subsequent years on the term “Indo-Pacific”. The bilateral joint vision evoked, through the agreement links, twin agendas of regional economic integration through connectivity and, “safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over-flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.” Further, the combined vision between the two countries also harps on preserving the recognised principles of international law or the rule of law including the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) in the maritime expanse. The two countries have also pledged to oppose terrorism, piracy, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction within the State or from the region, each of which carries maritime dimensions. As such, the vision carried the promise of a roadmap by leveraging India’s potential to expand its regional role and strengthen regional dialogues with various third countries in the region. The common vision of the larger Indo-Pacific region for India and the US has been given broader

purpose and recognition by the recent renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.<sup>3</sup>

## **Security**

The second leg pertains to the bolstering of India-US maritime security cooperation with concrete actions, dialogues, and engagements involving military personnel and exercises. The rationale for maritime security between India and the US exists at two prominent levels; first, at the level of a strong regional security architecture with common interests in the areas of security and regional stability; at the second level, it concerns the maritime implications of broad defence agreements signed between India and the US. Apropos the first level, forming regional partnerships in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific regions to create a stable and strong security architecture has been at the centre of the American regional design. With over 7000 km coastline and the Indian peninsula jutting in the Indian Ocean, the importance of India as a pivot in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be overemphasised. India's convergence with the US on issues of regional security agenda is broadly two-pronged – the first caters to China as an expansive country which both India, and the US, assess as a norm-breaker and therefore factor the need for counter regional consolidation of capabilities to preserve the current rules-based order. The second approach looks at the India-US partnership as the centrepiece of a regional multilateral alignment that includes/could include quite a few other like-minded countries. The Malabar exercises between the US, India, and Japan, and its extension with the inclusion of Australia and the Quad, are examples of emerging security oriented multilateral partnerships with security in the Indo-Pacific as their core rationale.

Generally speaking, Indo-US security cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain, has been buttressed by various agreements and understandings between the two sides in the last decade carrying significant maritime security implications especially for India. The aforementioned countable strides have redefined bilateral defence ties and have taken the relationship to a new level. These developments have been at the very top of a substantial defence partnership between these two countries, led by the US-India defence framework agreement<sup>4</sup> and, more recently, the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI). The declaration of India as a Major Defence Partner (MDP) of the US in May 2018 was a significant move to mark a noteworthy elevation in the ties between the two States.<sup>5</sup> Taking this defence relationship further, the U.S. also issued a federal notification via which India became the third nation to secure the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 (STA-1) status, thus paving the way for high-technology product sales to New Delhi, particularly in the civil space and defence sectors.<sup>6</sup> Each of these agreements has far reaching implications for the maritime domain in Asia by way of greater access to technology and cooperation.

India and the US have made significant advancements at the level of bilateral agreements, which have direct or oblique implications for maritime security between the two countries.. The US seems to be providing India with a host of technologies impacting maritime security in Asia, including crucial aircraft carrier technology. The cooperation between the US and India in building aircraft carrier technology sits at the heart of creating an emergent maritime edge, (vis-à-vis free sea lanes, combined operations, and the China-threat), through joint operations in future that combine similar technologies

and bolster interoperability. A Joint Working Group on Aircraft Carrier Technology Cooperation (JWGACTC) has been constructed under the Indo-US Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) for discussing various aspects of cooperation in the field of aircraft carrier technology. One of the leading technologies in this domain has been the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) for the Indian Navy's future aircraft carrier. "EMALS can launch a wide variety of aircraft weights and can be used on a variety of platforms with differing catapult configurations".<sup>7</sup> Besides this, both India and the US have combined resources in the areas of maritime reconnaissance with their Boeing P-8Is and P-8As functioning alongside. India also intends to enhance its maritime surveillance through drone technology provided by the US. The US has approved the sale of Predator-B drones to India that will help the latter with protecting its maritime assets in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, one of the most convincing aspects of India-US maritime cooperation in recent times has been in the area of anti-submarine warfare.

The US Department of Defence and Indian Ministry of Defence have prioritised engagements through visits. In the recent past there have been several high-level visits from either side including by the then-Commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Harris, and Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, that underscored the importance of naval cooperation in the overall defence relationship. In March 2018, the Indian Navy chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba, visited the US for a period of 5 days during which he held talks with the top military brass of the Trump administration to consolidate bilateral naval cooperation, including in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>9</sup> Among other significant steps, India participated in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise – the largest international maritime exercise in the world, hosted by the US, and this year, conducted with 26 countries including India. India's participation stood out as it created many firsts for the Indian Navy; It was the first time that an Indian Naval aircraft had travelled so far east into the Pacific, besides being the first Indian Naval aircraft to have crossed the International Date Line, undertaking the longest distance of nearly 3,300 nautical miles from Guam to Hawaii, and the first Indian Naval aircraft to participate in RIMPAC altogether.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri and P8I Long Range Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii in June to participate in the 26th edition of RIMPAC exercise marked a rare yet concrete consonance between India's "Act East" policy, and the US' "Pacific rebalance". India's participation in the latest RIMPAC exercises also counted for the honing of the interoperability capabilities for the Indian Navy. The trilateral Malabar exercise involving the US, Indian and Japanese navies preceded the RIMPAC exercise and was held from June 07 to June 10. Among other things, this year's Malabar exercises included live aircraft carrier operations, air defence, anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare, visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS), joint manoeuvres and tactical procedures.<sup>11</sup> The Malabar exercises also saw many first for the Indian Navy. The stationing of "sea riders" on warships of all three navies was an exercise undertaken for the first time. Personnel from the Indian Navy were presented with the opportunity of operating the US Navy's Los Angeles-class nuclear attack submarine and Soryu-class submarines of the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF). It was a rare opportunity of interoperability for all the three navies to operate the Indian Navy's Boeing P-8I, the US Navy's Boeing P-8A and the JMSDF's Kawasaki P-1 alongside each other.<sup>12</sup>

### **Maritime domain awareness**

The third structure around which the US-India maritime partnership is pivoted is regional capacity building in the areas of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) including white shipping, besides building capacities in tackling non-traditional threats such as maritime piracy and, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR). Coordination and cooperation by both the navies in these areas will help form a comprehensive shared vision in the maritime domain and has proven to be an indispensable element.

MDA has emerged not just as a potent area of cooperation between India and the US, but also as an independent area of regional responsibility for India. Although India's need for a robust MDA in the Indian Ocean centres around tackling non-traditional threats, smooth commerce and other maritime security threats, increasing the presence of China in the Indian Ocean has gradually climbed to its top agenda. This has expanded the scope of technological and physical assistance from the US to India in the area of MDA. It is the asymmetric threat posed by terrorism that is the single biggest challenge to MDA. Cooperation on newer security threats in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific has become a priority since maritime terrorism became a real and present danger in the aftermath of the USS Cole bombing in Yemen in 2000<sup>13</sup> and various other attempts thereafter. For India, the sneaking of 26/11 Mumbai attacks through the western Indian Ocean was one of the biggest setbacks. India's MDA strategy is gradually expanding to include its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and beyond and therefore needs partners like the US to effectively carry out MDA missions.<sup>14</sup> The US intent on partnering with India in MDA has been laid out specifically by Philip Davidson, who currently serves as the 25th commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. He recently said, "US-India defence ties are strong and growing stronger; the United States and India have a range of common security interests that include maritime domain awareness, counterpiracy, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief".<sup>15</sup>

### **Balance of power**

Balance of power in the Asia-Pacific which has gradually moved westward, has been a long quest for the US and has become a rationale for Indo-US cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, even as Chinese entry in these parts threatens to destabilise the erstwhile tilt of regional nations. India, with its largest regional navy and a rather peacefully functional democracy, has emerged as a strong option for the US for partnering. The erstwhile rebalance to the Asia-Pacific by the US and the recent renaming of US Indo-Pacific Command sent strong signals about the importance of India as a balancer in the Indo-Pacific. The balance of power theory in international relations implies that whenever power distribution in the international system is rejigged in a manner that one State or a group of States threatens to dominate the order, there is another State or a group of States that rises to protect itself against the powers first set of countries. In Asia, China's assertive behaviour, favouritism and ability to provide loans could divide countries into opposite camps. Its strategic choices led by its unlawful activities in parts of South China Sea and, most recently by its "Belt and Road" initiative have raised questions about the future stability of the Asian order. The US' Indo-Pacific strategy, India's Act East policy, Indo-Japanese, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), and Australia's quest

for increasing its role to the west in the Indian Ocean are plans that cut across the Chinese twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road, rendering a likely “great game” between two given sets of countries in the Indo-Pacific a distinct possibility.

### **Countering China’s growing nautical assertiveness**

Countering China’s naval strides in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific is a direct derivative of the disagreement by both India, and the US, with the Chinese maritime behaviour in the South China Sea. Over the past decade, China’s naval activities in the Indian Ocean have shrunk the strategic space for New Delhi. China’s anti-piracy missions to the Indian Ocean have invariably been accompanied by submarines to the Indian Ocean. With the entry of China into the Indian Ocean Region, the geostrategic realities of this region are changing in a major way. Chinese BRI has crated three major access points to the Indian Ocean. The connections between China’s Yunnan province and the Indian Ocean through Myanmar opening in the Bay of Bengal; The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that links Xinjiang province with the Indian Ocean opening through the Gwadar port; and the Oceanic twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road linking the Indian Ocean with China’s Pacific coast.<sup>16</sup> There are 18 choke points around the Indian Ocean where China is establishing or could establish presence in the near future.<sup>17</sup> The US has not just shown willingness, but has also taken certain concrete steps in partnering with India to help maintain free lanes of global commerce and deliver aid in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief regionally. As the largest regional navy, the Indian Navy is expected to share this burden with the US as a partner, especially as validation for expectations from its regional “net security provider” role. Amidst rising regional expectations from India, the US has sometimes been blunt in underscoring the need for India to come on board in preventing China’s disruptive capabilities in the region, and that China should follow a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Highlighting such sentiments, the former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said,

In this period of uncertainty and angst, India needs a reliable partner on the world stage. I want to make clear: with our shared values and vision for global stability, peace and prosperity, the United States is that Partner ... We need to collaborate with India to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is increasingly a place for peace, stability and growing stability - so that it does not become a region of disorder, conflict and predatory economics.<sup>18</sup>

The withdrawal of the invitation to China for participating RIMPAC 2018 further underscored the growing difference between these two sets of nations in the Indo-Pacific.

In recent times, the two countries have taken quite a few steps to bring out newer ways of cooperating for a definitive rationale which pertains to the projection of hard power capabilities – often stacked up against Chinese intent and presence in the Indo-Pacific region. India has partnered with the US and Japan on a trilateral basis and is currently weighing its options on the four nations Quadrilateral Initiative. The recent clearance of the sale of Predator drones from the US to India during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the US in June 2017 is likely to bolster MDA in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. During the same visit, the two sides also agreed on a “White Shipping” data sharing arrangement, which promises to enhance collaboration between the two sides

on MDA.<sup>19</sup> Besides, the first foundational agreements – Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), signed in August 2016 has been critical in enhancing its regional and extra-regional naval and strategic outreach. LEMOA allows India and the US to use their facilities for supplies and services formally and on a more regular basis. This is likely to make joint military exercises, training, port calls and humanitarian missions between the navies of two countries much easier. As such, LEMOA allows for the possibility of US regional bases in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific to be used by India in the future. With the designation of points of contact between the two navies, the LEMOA has recently been declared fully operational.<sup>20</sup> The second among the foundational agreements signed recently between India and the US, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) is expected to assist the Indian military to get a better surveillance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially vis-a-vis increasing Chinese movements.<sup>21</sup> COMCASA will allow India access to procure high-end technologies from the US that will prove to be a force multiplier. The P8-Is used by India are currently being used in limited capability, and could be significantly enhanced with compatible and technologically high-end equipment from the US. In the aftermath of COMCASA, India will also get access to Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System, or CENTRIXS for short, which is the secure communication system network of the US and will allow Indian Navy ships to communicate securely with the US Navy ships for domain awareness, threat perception, etc.<sup>22</sup> The expected capability enhancement post-COMCASA is often measured for its relative edge over growing secrecy and subsurface presence of the Chinese Navy, PLAN.

### **Operationalising the concept of burden-sharing and the challenges**

The change of government in India in 2014 and subsequently in the US, followed by an early visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US, strongly signalled that India was ready to take on a larger role vis-a-vis burden sharing. The US' narrative to coax India to come out of its regional role-reluctance has grown since the Obama administration; from calling India the defining partner for the US in the twenty-first century, to presently expecting India to play the net-security-provider role in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo-Pacific area. The US has also expected to increase its extra-regional roles, particularly through joint patrols in the South China Sea. India has purposefully kept away from this and has hitherto politely declined the US' offer for joint patrols because of the obvious purpose of such exercises and a total absence of such military culture in the country's past. However, recent alterations in the regional security matrix have convinced India to partner with other countries, led by the US, to shape regional responses to these strategic changes. For the US, India's larger role in the Indian Ocean is one of the top maritime security agendas. Among other bilateral goals that the two countries seek in the Indo-Pacific region are interoperability, coordination, joint exercises and eventually patrols.

In the area of enhancing India's net security provider role in the region, the US seeks India to increase its security cover in the Indian Ocean on either side of its peninsula. On the eastern seaboard, India's own Act East policy has complemented the US' vision of the Indo-Pacific and has formed the rationale for developing maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Maritime Corridor. Some of the recent steps taken by India in the Indian

Ocean region such as complementing US expectations on patrolling the Strait of Malacca, counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and HA/DR activities such as evacuation in Yemen and post-disaster assistance to Bangladesh have been critically important to the formation of the US-India burden sharing vision in the region.<sup>23</sup>

### **The way ahead for Indo-US maritime cooperation Indo-Pacific**

Building a strong partnership with India is at the heart of the US' Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific region is at the centre of the joint India-US vision which advocates for a free, open, and rules-based maritime region in Asia. The Indo-Pacific is the region where the visions of both nations converge, only to extend beyond. Highlighting this sentiment the former US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said,

In particular, India and the United States must foster greater prosperity and security with the aim of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific, including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them, will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st century ... The U.S. and India, with our shared goals of peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture, must serve as the Eastern and Western beacons of the Indo-Pacific, as the port and starboard lights between which the region can reach its greatest and best potential.<sup>24</sup>

For India to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific, it is expected to enhance its security role in the region through a stronger navy and an unwavering intent for security partnership in the region. With current capabilities, the Indian Navy will certainly require the US' assistance in quantitative and qualitative areas concerning technology, ships, personnel and US bases in the region. In the coming years, co-production and co-development between the US and India under the DTTI is likely to have positive implications for maritime cooperation between the sides. Once completed, the aircraft carrier, which is currently being built at Kochi by cooperation between US and India, is expected to enhance interoperability between the two navies by leaps and bounds. India's recent imports from the US include military transport aeroplanes, maritime surveillance aircraft, artillery pieces, and is likely to involve sophisticated technological platforms and ancillaries as well in the future. Most of these newly acquired technologies by India from the US are expected to play a significant role in enhancing extant capabilities. For instance, the fully operational LEMOA and greater technology access in the aftermath of COMCASA will boost the Indian navy's role and actions in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Navy is also cognisant of its asymmetrical focus in the southern and the western Indian Ocean. With the help of its acquired Boeing P8-I maritime reconnaissance aircraft, the Indian Navy wishes to enhance MDA in the larger Indo-Pacific region through increased frequency in sorties across the region and improved platforms for better navigation and intelligence gathering, particularly in the aftermath of COMCASA. The Indian navy's Indo-Pacific vision has begun to identify the region from the Gulf, to the Pacific waters as one strategic continuum – a view that coincides with the US' regional vision and design. Such convictions have been validated through quite a few steps by India in the recent past. In one such recent step, the Indian government decided that India will have a military attaché in the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) in Bahrain. In furtherance to this sentiment, the US recently also agreed to have an Indian military representative at the Defence Innovation

Unit Experimental (DIUx), a US government unit that funds private companies working on cutting-edge defence technologies.<sup>25</sup>

Consolidating on the larger regional vision of the Indo-Pacific, the two countries have to partner on various multilateral engagements with regional maritime visions in the Indo-Pacific region. For instance, India has recently shown strong support for the US to join as an Observer in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. In the inaugural 2 + 2 Dialogue held in New Delhi between the US and India in September 2018, the two sides reportedly “reviewed the recent growth of bilateral engagements in support of maritime security and maritime domain awareness, and committed to expand cooperation”. More importantly, India and the US agreed to “start exchanges between the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Indian Navy, underscoring the importance of deepening their maritime cooperation in the western Indian Ocean”.<sup>26</sup> Remarks by President Trump at the APEC CEO Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in September 2017, are often held to be the decisive “Indo-Pacific” speech. Ever since, both India, and the US, have agreed to work “toward advancing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, based on recognition of ASEAN centrality and on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, rule of law, good governance, free and fair trade, and freedom of navigation and overflight”.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the India-US joint vision of the Indo-Pacific now extends from the Gulf to the Asia-Pacific, and would require massive mobilisation of resources from both sides. In such a vast region, it is expected that both India and the US will face strategic difficulties in the future. As the two countries look to cooperating in newer areas like Afghanistan, the Indian Ocean ASEAN region, and possibly the South China Sea in the future, the need for creating a combined pool of resources, finances, facilities, technologies and manpower is sure to be felt. This consolidation will only be possible when the navies of the two countries take the lead in conjoining various factors. There is a need to leverage the combined capabilities of both these countries in the Indo-Pacific by taking lead in security matters in this region and beyond, increasing soft-power delivery mechanisms through HA/DR routes to rim and littoral countries, and to expand the scope of their information sharing, interoperability, and technology transfer capabilities.

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  27. See 26.

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