



## Indo–US Security Cooperation: Implications for the Indian Ocean

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### ABSTRACT

There has been a clear growing maritime intent in India–US cooperation in the past few years and bilateral interests have come to converge, due to both the individual countries' interests and regional common goals. As an economically and militarily developing country, India seeks to expand its strategic influence the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It also comes across as the most stable and powerful country in the region that could support the long-term interests of the US in the region. The US sees India as a significant balancer of China in the region, and the Indian Ocean as a maritime opponent to the South China Sea. As the US–China rivalry continues in the Asia-Pacific, the Indian Ocean remains the stable pivot from where the Asian power balance will be string-held. More importantly, going forward the Indian Ocean could be divided into maritime sub-regions of influence based on two emerging opposite power axes.

Since the Cold War the US has been the most dominant naval power globally, including in the Indian Ocean. In the post-Cold War period, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as an important maritime domain in which the US has expanded its maritime pursuits. The pivotal difference in the post-Cold War approach of the US towards the Indian Ocean has been, in some sense, its policy enlargement to cover the larger Indian Ocean, as opposed to its Cold War concentration in the Persian Gulf. The other major difference has been the transition that the US has made from hostility to embrace the principles of cooperation vis-à-vis a few countries. India now figures prominently in that US reassessment. In 1991, the US and India began their cooperation in the maritime domain by forming the Indo–US naval steering committee,<sup>1</sup> riding on the back of the diplomatic push by the Kicklighter Proposals of 1991. The following year saw the start of the Malabar series of naval exercises between their navies, exhibiting increasing areas of convergences.

Even as the areas of commonality between the US and India have increased, the maritime domain has attracted the greatest attention. The Indian Ocean, in particular, has garnered importance for both its waters as well as its littorals. Brought together by the vicissitudes of geopolitics and its compulsions, the US' desire to sustain its global dominance in the Indian Ocean has come to coincide with the Indian Navy's regional aspirations to bolster its security capabilities and role in the region. These convergences witnessed growing defence ties between the two countries.

In the past few years, India has complemented its desire to have a more outgoing maritime policy with actions. The country moved to retool its Look East policy into making the Act East policy,<sup>2</sup> thereby emphasising the importance of the Indo-Pacific maritime region in its regional foreign policy outlook. This move, albeit inadvertently, conjoined with the extant conception floated by the US of looking at the Indian Ocean as the south-western leg of its Rebalance Strategy. In 2015, both countries announced<sup>3</sup> the US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions, and this was the proverbial crossing of the Rubicon for India. It was India’s message to the US that the former was ready to accept larger maritime responsibilities and could even transcend the Indian Ocean maritime region. Although India stopped short of committing joint patrols along with the US in the South China Sea and other maritime areas of Asia, it did not shy away from invoking the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. This assertion, coming on the back of India’s improved relations with the US, cannot ignore the dynamics of the balance of power in Asian waters.

### **Asian Maritime Balance of Power**

More than three decades of unfettered growth and concomitant military rise have turned the Asian maritime balance of power in China’s favour, prompting the US to look for power balancers. The US has stumbled upon India, a power that is not only a leading developing country with growing might but one that challenges China in the areas of demographics, economic growth, military power and, most subtly, in claims to a rich civilisational lineage. India also has a border dispute with China, besides a historical loss in combat. China’s maritime assertiveness in Asia, on the other hand, has only risen in the past decade, further tilting the maritime balance of power in Asia in its favour. This unfavourable tilt has necessitated the need for balancers not just for the US but for India too.

Since the first decade of the 21st century, the Indian Ocean has emerged as the most potent region for the aforementioned power dynamics. Its growing seamless connectivity with the Indo-Pacific and the larger Asia-Pacific has thrown the gauntlet, most prominently, in preventing the IOR countries from getting fractured along varied allied groupings. India’s growing proximity with the US has drawn other US allies in the Asia-Pacific towards it, especially Japan and Australia, to varying degrees.

This has in turn prompted China to embrace Pakistan. Russia, too, is showing immense bonhomie with Pakistan and China, compelling thought on a possible China–Pakistan–Russia axis in future, with maritime implications. If such cooperation does indeed shape up in Asia, it will be structurally and functionally the diametrically opposite counterpart of the supposed US–India–Japan (–Australia) axis, leaving the Asian domain more divided than ever before. The incipient rivalry that would characterise any such future realignment would have immense implications for the Indian Ocean. In the event of a polarisation of power based on the two power-axes, the Indian Ocean waters could also witness separate pockets of responsibility and sub-regional dominance emerge. As China consolidates more access and power in the strategic Pakistani port of Gwadar, primarily through submarine presence and financial assistance, the possibility of the Arabian Sea emerging as a distinct maritime region of the China–Pakistan–Russia power triad could strongly be expected. Quite a few recent developments support such conjectures. There is only very limited influence that India can wield in the Arabian Sea part of the Indian

Ocean. India's reach in the north-western Indian Ocean has been scuttled by historical maritime conservatism and growing Chinese influence in Pakistan's Exclusive Economic Zone, especially the Gwadar port; in particular its increasing submarine presence<sup>4</sup> in the Indian Ocean and development of security structures to the exclusion of India. For instance, in February 2017, Pakistan conducted<sup>5</sup> the AMAN-17 series of multinational exercises in which 37 countries participated. Quite contrary to its "collective resolve" to comprehensively fight maritime security challenges, it has traditionally kept the largest regional navy, India, out of the maritime security calculus. This conundrum has been compounded by a growing Russia-Pakistan nexus subverting conventions apropos partnerships between countries in Asia. Recently, both Russia and Pakistan, two Cold War foes, came together to conduct joint war games,<sup>6</sup> upending conventional assumptions about security partnerships in Asia. In many ways, the Russia-Pakistan bonhomie has been fueled by India's own growing proximity with the US. As the US-India relationship gathers more influence in the Asian maritime domain, the counter axis is likely to show similar retaliatory moves. However, India would have to be aware of the US' double-edged strategy of increasing proximity with it while still keeping Pakistan on the its strategic hook.

The two other possible sub-regional maritime areas that could be formulated as future maritime distinctions inside the Indian Ocean could be the Southern Indian Ocean, largely dominated by India, and the Indo-Pacific region wherein external as well as regional powers are involved in the Indo-Pacific economic corridor. If maritime sub-regions are indeed formed based on emerging geopolitical alliances in the IOR, the Indo-Pacific Maritime Corridor (IPMC) could have the potential to counter-balance the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the long run. Although the former appears to be a travesty of comparison with the latter, given the CPEC's whopping investment of more than US\$46 billion,<sup>7</sup> it cannot be completely ruled out as a future possibility. However, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as an important region for the security and safety of sea-lanes. In its document of 2007, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, the US emphasised the future presence of a credible force posture to guarantee safety and security of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) as well as for providing reassurance to its regional allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup> Trade concerns in the larger Indian Ocean have been inherently tied to security in the Asia-Pacific for both India and the US, even as security at high seas has become an overarching concept covering all inter-connected waters in Asia. As India seeks to bolster its security profile in the Indian Ocean, the US has an opportunity to link Asia-Pacific security with the security concerns in the Indian Ocean. As the much touted Asian Rebalance has waned both in spirit and effectiveness under the Trump administration, the focus in the Pentagon has shifted to propping up India as an important regional security player, as opposed to looking at India's security role in the maritime domain as a peripheral support system to Washington's core security architecture in the Asia-Pacific. To that extent, the US sees India as a security partner that has come of age in the IOR.

### **US-India Maritime Cooperation: Growing Intent**

There also has been an obvious enhancement of intent and political will in India-US cooperation in the past few years, particularly in the maritime domain. Many bilateral maritime interests of the two nations have come to converge, due to both the individual countries' interests and to regionally common goals. As a fast-developing country,

economically and militarily, India seeks to expand its strategic ambit in the regional waters of the IOR. It also comes across as the most stable and powerful country in the region that could support the long-term interests of the US in the region. Although the US has been present in the Indian Ocean ever since Britain's "East of Suez" withdrawal, with the changing balance of power in the region, the US sees India as the most potent balancer of China in the region. The rather rule-based Indian Ocean is also seen as a maritime opponent of the South China Sea, even as the US–China rivalry that is on brazen display in the South China Sea is likely to play out in the IOR in the long run. The Indo-Pacific region in its constricted understanding has been understood as a buffer maritime zone.<sup>9</sup>

In the recent past, India has made certain recalibrations in the Indian Ocean which seek to alter its power potential in the IOR. Since the change of government in 2014, India has focused on the Indian Ocean as a strategic arena. The port-connectivity initiative Sagar-mala and the leasing of Assumption Island from Seychelles for building a communications post have been particularly strategic. India's reoriented approach in the Indian Ocean has come to involve a twin focus, on either side of its peninsular stretch. However, its increasing partnership in the maritime domain is the most strategic development. The US–India maritime partnership is the most potent subset of the US–India defence relationship, which in turn is the result of years of cajoling and persuading narrative that was directed from Washington to Delhi. In the past, India has been referred to as the 'lynchpin'<sup>10</sup> of Asian security and the regional 'Net Security Provider'.<sup>11</sup> India's security cooperation with the US is a critical component not just for enhancing its own role regionally, but for redacting a fast-changing power balance in Asia due to rising Chinese assertiveness outside its traditional nine-dotted maritime boundary. The Andaman Sea, the Arabian Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific, all critical parts of the larger Indian Ocean, have become indispensably crucial towards reshaping India's maritime security, tackling both traditional and non-traditional maritime threats, and above all towards the formation of a joint India–US regional grand strategy.

India–US maritime cooperation in the larger Indian Ocean has come to acquire two prominent goals: first, that the Indo–US relationship proves the strategic opponent to the growing regional maritime power of Beijing, and, second, to further India's own regional ambitions. The India–US cooperation has made other countries like Japan more forthcoming, and also may have opened up the possibility of resurrecting the Quadrilateral Initiative in the Asian Waters.

### **Military Engagement: Navy Taking the Lead**

The Indian side has repeatedly emphasised that the US now conducts more military exercises with India than any other country (India conducts military exercises with 22 other nations), one of the largest of which happen in the maritime domain. This has helped to establish a broad understanding of each other's military capabilities. Indian naval officials over the years have become strong votaries for expanding this engagement, as they have repeatedly emphasised the exposure that naval personnel get by participating in such bilateral and multilateral exercises with militaries that have the technological upper hand.

The India–US Malabar naval exercise has the potential to attain quadrilateral proportions involving Japan and Australia (also called the Quadrilateral Initiative in the past). The

grouping currently faces some resistance and ambiguity from Australia, but India remains the only potent answer to Asia's power disequilibrium due to China's rising bellicosity in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the South China Sea. Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean and the encirclement of India through a string of Chinese ports built around India in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Pakistan have caused real security concerns in India. Further, India's concerns have also been overlooked by China in building the CPEC through parts of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. India's combined concerns emanating from all these issues vis-à-vis China has created the necessary security rationale for partnering with the US in areas of maritime security and the larger defence sector.

By signing the US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region in 2015, India gave a clear signal to China that it was prepared for a larger role in Asia going forward. For the first time, India also emphasised that the freedom of navigation and overflight must be guaranteed in the South China Sea.

### Recent Uptick

The Indo–US strategic partnership has grown to newer heights on the back of frequent mutual visits from both the countries, at least since the Obama Administration. Ever since the two countries signed the New Framework for Defense Cooperation in 2005, the United States and India have made tremendous progress in their defence partnership which, to a large extent, drives the bilateral strategic partnership. One of the hallmarks of India–US relations is the increasing number of deals that both countries have signed in sectors such as defence, energy, clean energy and areas concerning security in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. At least two recent broad sectoral developments concerning India–US relations have taken place in recent times which carry the potential to transform Indo–US strategic partnership in the years going forward. The two countries signed the US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region which is expected to serve as a template for maritime cooperation between the two countries. The strategic vision in the document lies in its potential to link the Asia-Pacific security to the Indian Ocean security. In another important move, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA) has been reached<sup>12</sup> between the two countries, allowing for greater cooperation between the militaries in future. However, the most important move came when the Obama Administration conferred Major Defense Partner (MDP) status to India,<sup>13</sup> sealing it with a Congressional mandate (the US Senate passed a bill on 8 December 2016). This new status directs the US government to prioritise defence trade with India, even as it has placed India in the zone of “more than a friend but less than an ally”.<sup>14</sup> These steps are unprecedented in that they have almost institutionalised the crucial components of the India–US strategic partnership, with the defence sector leading from the front.

Both the US and India have moved forward on the LEMOA agreement to concretise further steps. Under the agreement, the US Navy has selected an Indian shipyard to repair its vessels operating in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. In doing so the US would stand to benefit a great deal in both repair and alteration services for warships from both its Fifth and Seventh Fleets that have areas of responsibilities strategically divided between them cutting across different parts of the larger Indian Ocean. Particularly for the US Navy's Seventh Fleet vessels operating in the region, the US Navy chose Reliance Shipyard of India to carry out complex repair and alternation services. As the

Seventh Fleet of the US Navy operating in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific has more than 5000 ships and submarines along with 20,000 sailors, opportunity lies ahead for both countries to collaborate in a measured manner.<sup>15</sup> India has shown some unwillingness regarding the extent to which the tenets of the LEMOA agreement will drag it under US compulsions. However, to the extent that the LEMOA is only a reciprocal logistics agreement and not an encroaching one, India has much to gain from such partnerships in the IOR and the general upkeep and sustenance of its naval infrastructure. Two other military agreements are anticipated to eventually see the light:<sup>16</sup> the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). While CISMOA would secure the supply of proprietary encrypted communications equipment and systems from the US, thereby allowing both countries to securely communicate during war and peace times, BECA would allow the sharing of sensitive data which will help in targeting and navigation.<sup>17</sup> Most of these cooperative activities will take place in the Indian Ocean. Some heart can be taken from the fact that India has resisted two other military agreements in their current form which, although they would have significant implications for India's maritime security, are believed to impinge on its strategic autonomy. As India seeks to expand its security architecture in the Indian Ocean, palatable versions of both CISMOA and BECA could be helpful in managing Indian Ocean security, particularly in navigation, targeting and reconnaissance. For instance, India has insisted on the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) instead of CISMOA and the LEMOA instead of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA). As increasing Chinese submarine presence is fast becoming a constant feature of the Indian Ocean, India and the US have shown a desire to share such information on a regular basis now. Such collaborations were recently reaffirmed<sup>18</sup> by Admiral Harry B. Harris, Commander of the United States Pacific Command, who said that the US and Indian navies have been sharing information on the movement of Chinese submarines and ships in the Indian Ocean.

### **China: Lingering Issue in the Indian Ocean**

The most recent instance of a Chinese submarine being sighted in the Indian Ocean was near the Pakistani port of Gwadar, which sent security feelers among Indian strategic thinkers that China could have spied on India's warships.<sup>19</sup> China's repeated forays, especially with its nuclear-powered submarines, have prompted New Delhi to up its ante in the Indian Ocean, where cooperation with a strong extra-regional power like the US remains as crucial as its own augmented security role in the region. India has ambitiously set<sup>20</sup> 2020 as the prospective benchmark for enhancing its abilities to dominate the Indian Ocean. This is likely to be achieved by India's twin focus on procurement of new warships, copters, radar, surveillance planes and drones along with its increasing area-specific focus in the Indian Ocean. In the domain of increasing area-specific focus, the Arabian Sea (traditionally an area of low-key focus) and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (an area of increasing strategic attention) are likely to figure prominently. In the future, the LEMOA agreement with the US is also likely to have collaborative implications for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

India is keen to play a major role in the emerging Asian security architecture, by engaging like-minded powers, and the US stands at the forefront in that assessment. This was

evident through its 2015 US–India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region. More recently, the same can be seen through India’s bolstered maritime approach to regional waters such as the Theatre-level Readiness and Operational Exercises (TROPEX) and Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) maritime exercises. The CORPAT exercises, which have been underway since 2005, take place biannually to guarantee the safety of international trade and shipping lines. India’s recent CORPAT exercises have focused on improving maritime links with countries to India’s east like Thailand and Indonesia. India recently held the TROPEX 2017 which included major strategic assets such as nuclear-powered submarine and aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya*, Su-30 and Jaguar fighter jets.<sup>21</sup> That the sole aim of the month-long exercise was to test combat-readiness speaks volumes about India’s changing security intent and focus on readiness in the Indian Ocean. Some policymakers have emphasised that this rests on India being the net security provider in the region.

While it is certainly too early to expect joint India–US patrols in the South China Sea, India is taking one step at a time in the maritime domain. However, India’s desire for a higher security profile in the IOR has also to do with the balance of power in Asia – which concerns both Washington and New Delhi. In the Malabar exercises, for instance, a key component has been anti-submarine warfare, clearly aimed at Chinese PLA Navy since it relies on the submarine fleet to maintain its presence in the IOR. The P8-Is that India has procured from the US are among the finest anti-submarine and reconnaissance aircraft, helping India extend its security umbrella well beyond regional waters. Some of the on-going submarine data-sharing activities between the US and India along with the COMCASA and BECA agreements are certain to increase the capacity of both the Indian and US navies in joint operations in the region.

Since coming to power, the Modi government has shown remarkable candidness when it comes to China and the perceived threat or apprehension. The repeated references to the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the strengthening of relations with Vietnam are part of this strategy. In recent times, India has cranked up its military relations with Vietnam. India is believed to be discussing the sale of the indigenously developed Akash surface-to-air missile systems to Vietnam, which many see as India’s attempt to stave off increasing Chinese influence in the Asian waters towards its east. By becoming a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), India can now take its missile sale to Vietnam forward. This will likely impart a balance to the power imbalance in the Indo-Pacific region. However, such efforts by India are not limited to the anti-China sentiment but also serve to re-assert its presence in the IOR. Both India and the US want to preserve the freedom of navigation of people and freight in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. In this direction, following the Nepal government’s request, the Indian government recently removed 4.5% service tax imposed on ocean freight.<sup>22</sup>

## Going Forward

The strategic consonance between India and the US in the maritime domain is likely to be camouflaged by riding commercial concerns in the Asian maritime domain, a new administration in Washington, and the lack of clarity of intent from either side. As the US–India bilateral relationship transitioned from the Obama presidency to the Trump presidency, there was a lot of strategic ambiguity regarding President Trump’s attitude towards the

relationship with India. Some reassurance could be taken from the US Defence Secretary James Mattis' call to his Indian counterpart Manohar Parrikar to "sustain the momentum on key bilateral defence efforts".<sup>23</sup> More importantly, the US under Trump showed its commitment to underscore the importance of US–India partnership in furthering global peace and security. Given President Trump's transactional foreign policy, India could be expected by the US to take bigger steps in enhancing the bilateral relationship. In the Indian Ocean, such expectations from the US could push India towards embracing an anti-China position more openly. Whether India would take such steps remains to be seen. However, power polarisation in the Indian Ocean remains a distant possibility with the strengthened involvement of China and India, together with the US presence.

There has been a further noticeable shift in India's role in the Indian Ocean, one that has come to focus on India becoming a regional leader in the ocean-based Blue Economy. This approach has led India to gradually bring issues such as marine fisheries, ecology and maritime sustainable development up to par with its security concerns in the IOR. Through these efforts, India seeks to enhance its partnership with the countries of the IOR and eventually bring a balance to the weight of its security partnerships in the IOR, particularly with the US. As India seeks to broaden the spectrum of relationships with countries in the IOR such as Seychelles, Mauritius, Africa, and Sri Lanka, in areas of cooperation beyond security, the lack of immediacy by the Trump administration has proven to be the right opportunity. However, it will not be too long before India and the US will move rapidly in finalising other deals in defence and security having ramifications for the IOR.

## Notes on contributor

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## Notes

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