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Book Review

DEEPENING INDO-US MARITIME COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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In recent years, bilateral relations between Washington and New Delhi have soared to new heights. The most visible manifestation of this has been in the maritime sphere, which also holds the most promise, given the growing convergence between the two countries in the Indo-Pacific region. On March 31, 2021, the Indian Navy completed a two-day Passage Exercise (PASSEX) with the United States Navy in the eastern Indian Ocean. Unlike previous PASSEX exercises, this time Indian Air Force fighters were also included to practise “air interception and air defence with the U.S. Navy”.¹ According to officials, the latest PASSEX exercises were aimed at “consolidating the synergy and interoperability” achieved during the ‘non-contact, at sea only’ Malabar exercises held in November 2020.²

Malabar started off as an annual bilateral maritime exercise between the navies of the US and India in 1992, and over the years has expanded in scope, intensity and membership. In 2007—for the

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1. PTI, “India, U.S. Begin Two-Day Naval Exercise in Eastern Indian Ocean Region”, *The Hindu*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-us-begin-two-day-naval-exercise-in-eastern-indian-ocean-region/article34183341.ece>. Accessed on April 1, 2021.
2. Ibid.

first time—multilateral Malabar exercises, additionally including navies from Singapore, Australia and Japan, were conducted first in Bay of Bengal, and then in the Western Pacific.³ Since 2009, the maritime exercise has been conducted alternately in Indian and Pacific Oceans with Japan participating whenever it was conducted near its borders, until its formal inclusion in 2015.⁴ In 2017, India rejected Australia's request to join multilateral naval exercises on grounds that more naval engagement was necessary at the bilateral level before entering multilateral engagements.⁵ However, in 2020 India reversed its position and invited Australia to participate in this exercise⁶ amidst growing engagement with QUAD countries of which Canberra is a part.

India now conducts more military exercises—including a tri-service exercise since 2019—joint military drills, tabletop exercises, and defence dialogues with the US than with any other country.⁷ This reflects how, since the end of the Cold War three decades ago, both sides have overcome the hesitations of history to build robust defence relations. Naval relations have been a prominent aspect of US-India defence relations with many observers suggesting that US-India navy-to-navy relationship is “already the best performing area of bilateral partnership.”⁸ Indian navy's participation in Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)—the world's largest naval exercise hosted by the United States—as a participant in 2014 and 2018, after

3. Adarsha Verma, “The Malabar Exercises: An Appraisal”, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, July 18, 2017, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/the-malabar-exercises_averma_180717. Accessed on April 1, 2021.

4. Ibid.

5. Elizabeth Roche, “India Hasn't ‘Closed Door’ on Australia Joining Malabar Exercises”, *Mint*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/4Up1mGAcKI1OacZ9hF2jcP/India-hasnt-closed-door-on-Australia-joining-Malabar-exer.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

6. Ankit Panda, “Australia Returns to the Malabar Exercise”, *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/australia-returns-to-the-malabar-exercise/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

7. Jeff M. Smith, “Modi 2.0: Navigating Differences and Consolidating Gains in India-U.S. Relations”, The Heritage Foundation, August 5, 2019, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/BG3425_NEW.pdf. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

8. Abhijit Singh, “Searching for a High Note in the U.S.-India Maritime Partnership”, *War on the Rocks*, May 4, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/searching-for-a-high-note-in-the-u-s-india-maritime-partnership/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

being an observer in 2006, 2010, 2012⁹ is a welcome development in bilateral maritime relations. The burgeoning maritime ties between Washington and New Delhi come at a crucial geopolitical moment as the free and open rules-based Indo-Pacific order is under threat due to Beijing's increasingly aggressive actions motivated by its expansionist territorial and maritime ambitions. Given the shared democratic credentials of Washington and New Delhi—together with the growing convergence in strategic visions and the strong display of political will to work together with other likeminded democracies in the region—indicates that this partnership will only grow in the future.

EVOLUTION OF US-INDIA NAVAL-MILITARY RELATIONS

In the maritime sector, the US and India began cooperation by forming the Indo-US naval steering committee in 1991. One of the earliest steps in initiating bilateral defence contacts was through the Malabar exercise series beginning in 1992, which was suspended from 1998—in the wake of US opposition to India's nuclear tests—until its renewal in 2002 and has continued without a break since then. In 2002, Indian Navy also successfully completed anti-piracy 'Operation Sagittarius' to escort high value US cargo for operations in Afghanistan, passing through the Malacca Straits.¹⁰ In 2005, for the first time, India introduced aircraft carrier INS *Viraat* and the United States introduced aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* into the Malabar exercises, which focused on aviation interoperability, fleet air defence, advanced anti-submarine warfare, etc.¹¹

Bilateral cooperation has expanded beyond military exercises and today both navies conduct "naval staff talks, port visits, distinguished visitor visits and a wide array of personnel as well as subject matter

9. Ramananda Sengupta, "RIMPAC: India Takes Part in World's Largest Naval Exercise", *The New Indian Express*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/jun/30/rimpac-india-takes-part-in-worlds-largest-naval-exercise-1835852.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

10. Bureau, "'INS Sharda' Returns after 'Operation Sagittarius'", *Zee News*, July 14, 2002, https://zeenews.india.com/home/ins-sharda-returns-after-operation-sagittarius_49448.html. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

11. Rajat Pandit, "Biggest Indo-US Naval Exercise", *The Times of India*, September 24, 2005, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/biggest-indo-us-naval-exercise/articleshow/1241308.cms>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

exchanges through multilateral naval and security conferences.”¹² In this mutually beneficial partnership, India’s seasoned forces, who are especially adept in handling terror induced situations, offer a lot in training US forces for anti-piracy operations—while the US Navy’s possession of high-quality military technology is an advantage for defence technical cooperation as the Indian navy currently lags in the development of indigenous manufacturing technology.

Indo-US Security Cooperation in Indo-Pacific

In 2011, former US President Barack Obama announced a “pivot” to Asia-Pacific, which entailed a renewed military commitment to the region.¹³ In a little less than a year, the US Department of Defence declared that 60 per cent of its naval assets would be stationed under the US Pacific Command.¹⁴ Under the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, India has been accorded a key position—as revealed in the declassified US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific. The document defines India as the ‘net provider of security’ and asserts that a “strong India in cooperation with likeminded countries would act as a counterbalance to China.”¹⁵

US interest to preserve its predominant position in Indian Ocean is in sync with India’s efforts to bolster its regional influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood, into the Indo-Pacific. Both sides understand that, alone, the vast expanse of the ocean makes it impossible for any one country to cover the region in its entirety. This was reflected in the *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-*

12. S. Amer Latif, “U.S.-India Military Engagement Steady as They Go,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2012, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/121213_Latif_USIndiaMilEngage_Web.pdf. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

13. “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament”, White House, November 17, 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

14. PTL, “US Navy to Have 60% Surface Ships in Indo-Asia Pacific Region”, *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-navy-to-have-60-surface-ships-in-indo-asia-pacific-region/articleshow/51778769.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

15. Tara Kartha, “In Declassified US’ Secret Indo-Pacific Strategy, India Is Central, Pakistan Has Fallen Out”, *The Print*, January 18, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/a-lot-has-changed-in-us-strategic-outlook-india-at-centre-of-plan-pakistan-has-fallen-out/587342/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

Pacific and Indian Ocean Region announced in 2015. India embraced its maritime identity and began to look at the Indian Ocean as a strategic region in the 1990s within the ambit of the Look East policy. However, Look East was primarily an economically focused strategy which aimed at building trade and commercial ties with the South East Asian countries. Although commercial drivers remain important, military and security concerns as drivers of India's engagement with the region are gaining prominence due to China's increasing military capabilities and ambitions. India's Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) vision, recognises this and emphasises the need to protect the free, open, inclusive regional order from security threats. In 2016, New Delhi and Washington initiated the India-US Maritime Security Dialogue to "deliberate on maritime security issues in the region and explore future avenues for cooperation between the two countries in the maritime domain."¹⁶ Since 2017, India has initiated all year round patrols around key SLOCs throughout the Indian Ocean region via mission-based deployments.¹⁷ The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) have particular significance for maritime relations, as most of the cooperative activities falling within their ambit will take place in the Indian Ocean.¹⁸ The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—comprising the United States of America, Australia, Japan, and India—in 2017 is another attempt by the four major democracies in the region to address threats to the rules-based order in the region. New Delhi and Washington have ratcheted their anti-submarine warfare cooperation through military exercises and information sharing on the movement

16. Dinakar Peri, "India, U.S. Hold First Maritime Security Dialogue", *The Hindu*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-us-hold-first-maritime-security-dialogue/article8608442.ece>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

17. Tuneer Mukherjee, "Sino-Indian Maritime Competition: Shadow Fighting in the Indian Ocean", Stimson Center, June 19, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/sino-indian-maritime-competition-shadow-fighting-in-the-indian-ocean/>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

18. Vivek Mishra, "Indo-US Security Cooperation: Implications for the Indian Ocean", *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 13, no. 1 (May 9, 2017), pp. 73-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2017.1315890>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

of Chinese submarines and ships in the Indian Ocean.¹⁹ Last year, India acquired its ninth P8-I long-range maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare aircraft from Boeing—in addition to the eight P8-Is which are already in service with the Indian Navy.²⁰

CHALLENGES?

Contours of Indo-Pacific

While the expanding geographical focus of bilateral naval relationship has offered ample opportunities, it also comes with a handful of challenges. It remains unclear whether United States and India are on the same page over the geographical expanse of the Indo-Pacific. Historically, Washington has viewed itself as only a “Pacific power”—but the Indian Ocean has assumed greater importance in US strategic thinking with the Indo-Pacific concept gaining prominence, but still remains insufficient and incomplete. Washington officially defined the Indo-Pacific region in its 2017 National Security Strategy as stretching from “the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”²¹—effectively excluding the western part of the Indian Ocean and Africa. Whereas India’s vision, as highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his keynote speech at Shangri-La Dialogue in 2019, incorporates the entire Indian Ocean and includes Africa.²² A stable and secure environment in the Western Indian Ocean is crucial, especially for India, given its geographical proximity and the rich natural resources in the region, which if exploited by rogue countries can be detrimental to India’s economic

19. IANS, “Indian, US Navies Hold Anti-Submarine Warfare Exercise”, *The Hindu*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indian-us-navies-hold-anti-submarine-warfare-exercise/article26903138.ece>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

20. “Navy Gets US’ 9th P-8I Maritime Reconnaissance Plane: The Importance of Anti-Submarine Warfare in Indian Ocean”, *Times Now* (Digital), November 19, 2020, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/navy-gets-us-9th-p-8i-maritime-reconnaissance-plane-the-importance-of-anti-submarine-warfare-in-indian-ocean/683940>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

21. Donald Trump, “2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, The White House, December 19, 2017, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/2017-national-security-strategy-united-states-america-president/>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

22. “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”, Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F29943%2FPrime%2BMinisters%2BKeynote%2BAddress%2Bat%2BShangri%2BLa%2BDialogue%2BJune%2B01%2B>. Accessed on May 10, 2021.

and security interests. By wholly ignoring one half of the Indian Ocean, the US vision for the region lacks comprehensiveness and coherency. The explicit mention of “deepening of the US-India Major Defence Partnership and advancing cooperation between our countries for a free prosperous and open Indo-Pacific and *Western Indian Ocean Region*” (emphasis added) as the talking points of US Secretary Lloyd Austin’s²³ visit has however raised hopes that the Biden administration will take significant steps towards evolving a more cohesive Indo-Pacific framework, which will benefit India.

On the Indian side, despite this inclusive vision for the region, its foreign policy has tended to focus largely on the south and west coast of Indian Ocean, with the Pacific being only a secondary area of interest. Meanwhile, China has been growing its presence in the Pacific Ocean through underwater surveys—which can gather sensitive information necessary for submarine deployment—and engaging with the Pacific Island countries through high-level exchanges, public diplomatic visits, etc.²⁴ Economically, strategically, geopolitically the Pacific—especially the South Pacific region—is of immense importance to shaping the larger regional dynamics and if India continues to neglect the Pacific region, China will get to operate from a position of strategic advantage. India thus needs to expand its presence in the Pacific Islands, to match the United States geostrategic orientation and deny the Chinese any strategic advantage. Given the United States presence in the Pacific Ocean as a resident and sovereign power and India’s geographic advantage in the Indian Ocean, both countries must work steadily to achieve greater congruence with each other’s regional vision.

Operationalising Coordination in Western Indian Ocean

The artificial division of the Indian Ocean by the US military into eastern and western sections which comes under US Indo-Pacific Command and the latter under US Africa Command and US Central

23. Yashwant Raj, “The Western Indian Ocean Region Matters”, *Hindustan Times*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/the-western-indian-ocean-region-matters-101615569099783.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

24. Haylle Sok, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands”, *Global Trade*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.globaltrademag.com/chinas-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands/>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

Command respectively, poses challenges for bilateral cooperation.²⁵ Indian navy currently has close relations with only the US Indo-Pacific Command, creating operational and logistical challenges in coordinating activities in the region. The US National Defence Authorization Act for the year 2020 incorporates amendments to improve military coordination in the Western Indian Ocean Region. However, such a massive geostrategic revision is likely to take time and serious financial resources to materialise.

US Bases on Diego Garcia

The question of US presence in the Diego Garcia islands is another important factor in US-India relations. India has long opposed US bases on Diego Garcia, with former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi being the most vocal opponent of it, describing it as an attempt to 'militarize' the Indian Ocean.²⁶ India was among the 116 nations which voted in favour of a UNGA resolution demanding that the UK withdraw its "colonial administration" from the Chagos archipelago—where the US has a major base—unconditionally within six months.²⁷ India's constrained military cooperation with the United States in Western Indian Ocean is a major reason why New Delhi has not supported the US presence in Diego Garcia. Neither has New Delhi supported United States naval operations in the Persian Gulf intended to coerce Iran, as tensions soared throughout 2019 between Iran and the Western powers.²⁸ An Iran-US conflict, specifically any attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz, will have a devastating impact on the global economy—particularly India, as two-thirds of its oil and half the liquified natural gas imports come through this Strait. India's maritime interests in the Middle East are growing and New Delhi is expanding naval ties with all regional countries, including Tehran.

25. Abhijit Singh, n. 8.

26. S. P. Seth, "The Indian Ocean and Indo-American Relations", *Asian Survey* 15, no. 8 (January 1975), pp. 645-55. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

27. PTI, "India Votes in Favour of UNGA Resolution Demanding UK Withdraw from Chagos Archipelago", *The Hindu*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-votes-in-favour-of-unga-resolution-demanding-uk-withdraw-from-chagos-archipelago/article27215087.ece>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

28. Sanjeev Miglani, "Indian Warships to Stay Longer in Persian Gulf, but Won't Join U.S. Coalition", Reuters, July 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-india/indian-warships-to-stay-longer-in-persian-gulf-but-wont-join-us-coalition-idUSKCN1UD22S>. Accessed on April 2, 2020.

With strategic relations with both Iran and the US, New Delhi has been clear that its actions in navigating the US-Iran conflict will be dictated by its own national interests.

Ties with Russia

With US-Russia relations at a nadir, India's long-standing defence relationship with Kremlin is now creating stress in burgeoning US-India ties. The US lawmakers have been obstinate on not giving India a waiver from Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for acquiring Russian S-400—and even warning that future delivery of the weapon system could “put a ceiling on how far the relationship (India-US) can go.”²⁹

Diverging Views on Freedom of Navigation

India and the United States hold different views on the freedom of navigation in a country's exclusive economic zones (EEZ). Questions of passage rights through a country's EEZ is not a formal part of international maritime law, which is left upon the sole discretion of the coastal state. India, by law, requires all foreign warships to give prior notification when passing through its EEZ. India's ratification of UNCLOS was premised on the understanding that it did not grant other states the right to carry out exercises on its EEZ without permission. The United States, which is yet to ratify the UNCLOS, has repeatedly challenged the “excessive claim” of India for demanding that the US Navy get prior permission for conducting exercises within its EEZ.³⁰ This issue flared up again when the US Navy's Seventh Fleet USS *John Paul Jones* conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in India's EEZ without prior notification. The US Navy Seventh Fleet issued public statements after nine FONOP's were conducted where it challenged the “excessive maritime claims” made by allies and adversaries alike—Russia, Japan, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Maldives and India. However, the issue of “not requesting prior consent

29. Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, “Russian Arms Sale Clouds U.S.-India Ties”, *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/19/russia-india-defense-secretary-lloyd-austin-s-400-china-arms-sales/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

30. Manoj Joshi, “What ‘Excessive Maritime Claims’ Is the US Challenging India Over?”, *The Wire*, May 2, 2016, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/resolving-issue-of-excessive-maritime-claims-is-important-for-india-and-us>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

or permission” figured only in statements with respect to China, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka and is missing in the other FONOP statements.³¹ Although US FONOPs in India’s exclusive EEZs is nothing new, the highly public announcement—which came just after the two countries committed to uphold freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific at the recently concluded Quadrilateral summit—irked many in the Indian strategic community, who saw it as a mark of disrespect towards New Delhi. Now, with both countries jointly opposing Chinese attempts to disrupt the status quo in South China Sea,³² and growing global support for a free and open order, diplomatic dialogue on contentious, yet important bilateral issues such as this, has become a geopolitical imperative.

CONCLUSION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity compelled both India and the United States to readjust their policies which led to the steady evolution of a unique strategic partnership. The growing maritime intent in bilateral relations has accelerated over the past few years due to the convergence in their mutual interests and regional goals. With the emergence of maritime space as the theatre for US-China great power competition, Washington sees India as a significant balancer to China in the region. With one of the strongest economies and military in the Indo-Pacific, New Delhi is capable of supporting Washington’s long-term interests in the region. However, India views itself as an independent player and has formulated its own unique, nuanced vision for the region which—although converging with the US ‘Free and Open’ Indo-Pacific Vision—is distinct from it in terms of specifically emphasising inclusivity and ASEAN centrality. India envisages a multipolar Indo-Pacific in a multipolar Asia and strongly believes that contests should not become conflicts, differences should not become disputes. India’s concern is that it must not be perceived

31. Shubhajit Roy, “US Note Echoes 8 Earlier Ones but Its No-Consent Clause for China, India”, *The Indian Express*, April 11, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/us-note-echoes-8-earlier-ones-but-its-no-consent-clause-for-china-india-7268327/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

32. Anirban Bhaumik, “India, US Oppose China’s Bid on South China Sea Code”, *Deccan Herald*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-us-oppose-china-s-bid-on-south-china-sea-code-808426.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

as an ally to any containment strategy led by the West but is also pragmatically aware that a collective response to Chinese belligerence is necessary. India also acknowledges that China's military might and its exclusive view of Indo-Pacific is a common threat to the like-minded countries in the region, and the need to counter this forms the basis for the partnership between New Delhi and Washington—the world's largest and oldest democracy respectively. Thus, what we are witnessing is growth of a mature partnership which is not necessarily bandwagoning or hedging, but a strategic partnership dictated by national interest on both sides. Through their maritime cooperation, both India and the US can provide a secure and stable environment in the IOR, but to achieve this they must address the hiccups emerging from the spillover of the politico-military differences. At the heart of it lies the difference in New Delhi and Washington's definitions of Indo-Pacific. Although there is no universally accepted definition for the region, the different prioritisations of the two countries within the region—with India focusing on the Indian Ocean and the United States focusing on the Pacific Ocean—has created logistical difficulties in coordination. Thus, while India has close relations with the US Indo-Pacific Command—which is in charge of the eastern Indian Ocean—it does not with the US Africa Command and US Central Command which is in charge of the western Indian Ocean, creating challenges in coordinating activities in the region as a whole. More importantly, although freedom of navigation is in their common interests, both countries have varied on the strategy to achieve this goal. The differing interpretation over some sections of the UNCLOS concerning passage through EEZs recently caused some unease in bilateral relations, but its speedy diplomatic resolution also attests to the robust communication channels between the two sides. In the future Indo-US maritime relations are likely to move towards closer and holistic cooperation, especially if China continues to undermine the free and open order in the region with its aggressive activities. Maritime cooperation can be enhanced if the two countries adopt a flexible approach towards the existing differences and continue to focus on areas of convergence.