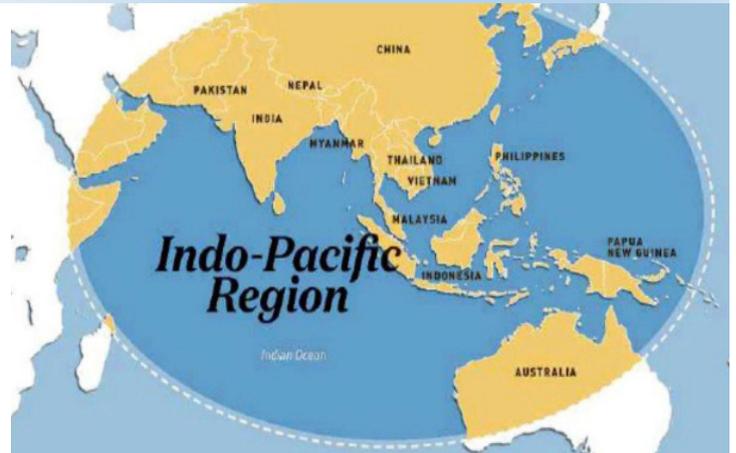




CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

INDO-PACIFIC NEWSLETTER



A Monthly Newsletter on Security and Strategic Issues on Indo-Pacific Region from
Centre for Air Power Studies

From the Editor's Desk

This month several important summits took place pertaining to the Indo-Pacific dynamics. On July 9–11, NATO held a summit in Washington, D.C. to commemorate its 75th anniversary. For the third time, the four Indo-Pacific partners—Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand—participated in the discussions on the last day. On July 12, the Indian Navy and Air Force conducted a combined drill in the Arabian Sea with the carrier strike group of USS Theodore Roosevelt. The 10th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) took place over three days, from July 16 to July 18, with participation from 18 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a regional organisation that includes Australia and New Zealand, and Japan.

Resupply procedures for the Philippines in the Second Thomas Shoal were purportedly agreed upon by China and the Philippines on July 21.

Throughout the month, there were three 2+2 conversations. The first was the signing of a Reciprocal Access Agreement between Japan and the Philippines on July 8. On July 28, there was a Japan-US 2+2, which led to an upgrade of US Military Command and Control arrangements in Japan. On July 30, the US-Philippines 2+2 took place.

At their meeting in Tokyo on July 29, the Quad Foreign Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to an inclusive, resilient, and free and open Indo-Pacific. In addition to the militarization of disputed features and the use of force and intimidation in the South China Sea, they raised grave concerns about the state of affairs in both the South and East China Seas.

To take part in Exercise Pitch Black-2024, an IAF contingent consisting of Su-30 MKI fighters and related support aircraft flew to Darwin, Australia. The workout takes place between July 12 and August 02.

Jai Hind

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Read more about it at :-

<https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/exercise-pitch-black-key-takeaways-for-indian-air-force-13800723.html>

QUOTE

As political democracies, pluralistic societies and market economies, there is the key question of upholding a rules-based order. It is only our collaboration that can ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains free, remains open, stable, secure and prosperous

- Dr S. Jaishankar
External Affairs Minister, India

Opinions/Review/Expert View

Why Indo-Pacific Countries are Joining the NATO Summit

Source: David Brunnstrom and Michael Martina | Reuters

<https://www.reuters.com/world/why-indo-pacific-countries-are-joining-nato-summit-2024-07-10/>

10 July 2024



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg delivers remarks at NATO's 75th anniversary summit in Washington, U.S., July 10, 2024. REUTERS/Elizabeth Franz Purchase Licensing Rights

WASHINGTON, July 10 (Reuters) - Joining this week's meeting of NATO leaders in Washington will be some countries far from Europe or North America - Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

Who is coming and what is the link between NATO, which was founded to help the North Atlantic region counter the threat from the Soviet Union, and countries in Asia and the Pacific?

Which Indo-Pacific Leaders will Attend?

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles are all attending.

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This is the third successive NATO summit for the countries, referred to as the Indo-Pacific Four (IP-4). They are due to hold a session with NATO and EU leaders on Thursday amid rising concerns that China might attack Taiwan and worries about Russia's stepped-up security ties with China and nuclear-armed North Korea.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has worked to strengthen ties in the Indo-Pacific, including with India, and has been disappointed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Moscow just ahead of the NATO meeting, which he will not attend.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese also will not be at the summit, given domestic political priorities.

What is Behind NATO's Interest in the region?

U.S. allies globally are increasingly aligned in their opposition to Russia's war in Ukraine, and Moscow's "no limits" partnership with China, which is helping to reconstitute the Russian military.

In 2022, NATO members identified China as a potential threat, opens new tab for the first time. At the 2023 NATO summit in

Vilnius, they condemned China and Russia for "their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order," and warned about Beijing's "coercive tactics" to divide the Alliance.

A draft of the Washington summit statement called China a "decisive enabler" of Russia's Ukraine war effort and said Beijing poses systemic challenges to Europe and to security.

It stressed the importance of the Indo-Pacific to NATO, saying developments there directly affect Euro-Atlantic security, and welcomed enhanced cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners to support Ukraine.

U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan said the NATO allies and Indo-Pacific partners would launch four new joint projects - on Ukraine, artificial intelligence, disinformation, and cybersecurity.

But while the Biden administration pushed for European allies to pay more attention to the Indo-Pacific after Biden took office in 2021, talk with Indo-Pacific countries this time will likely be more about how they can help Ukraine's war effort.

What Steps have NATO Members Taken in the Indo-Pacific?

Recent years have seen some stepped up European engagement in the Indo-Pacific, notably Britain's involvement with the U.S.

in the AUKUS project to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

However, most European defense engagement in Asia has been ad hoc and modest, involving occasional patrols or exercises by small visiting forces. Many NATO allies and Indo-Pacific countries do not want to see the alliance expanding its remit beyond the North Atlantic theater.

A proposal to establish a NATO liaison office in Tokyo, which angered China, was blocked by France last year.

What is Next for NATO Involvement in the Region?

Some analysts contend that Europe's NATO members must boost their ability to deal with European security challenges to enable the U.S. to focus on Asia and threats posed by China, including the dispute over Taiwan, the democratic island Beijing claims as its territory.

Christopher Johnstone, a former senior official in Biden's National Security Council, said the biggest contribution Europe could make was "to ensure that it is prepared to shoulder the burden of deterrence against the Russian threat in the event of a Taiwan or other contingency in the Indo-Pacific."

NATO has touted efforts by members to meet defense spending goals of 2% of GDP, but analysts say that decades of low spending have left most countries unable to play any

U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan said the NATO allies and Indo-Pacific partners would launch four new joint projects - on Ukraine, artificial intelligence, disinformation, and cybersecurity.

meaningful role the Indo-Pacific.

"There's nothing (NATO countries) can really do that would make a material difference," in an Indo-Pacific conflict, said Elbridge Colby, a former Pentagon official in the Trump administration.

Colby said most European militaries would be reliant on the U.S. for basic logistics.

"It's entirely possible that their contribution would be a net negative," he said.

Philippines-Japan Security Pact Puts China on Notice

Source: Richard Javad Heydarian | The Interpreter

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/philippines-japan-security-pact-puts-china-notice>

18 July 2024



Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff General Romeo Brawner, left, shakes hands with Yoshihide Yoshida, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff of Japan's Self Defence Force, in Manila, 8 July (Ted Aljibe/AFP via Getty Images)

The Philippines and Japan have finalised a vital security pact after years-long negotiations. The newly-signed Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) is a de facto visiting forces deal, since

it establishes "procedures for the cooperative activities ... while the force of one country is visiting the other country and defines a legal status of the visiting force." Accordingly, it allows the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Japanese Self Defence Forces (JSDF) to dramatically expand joint military activities, including large-scale drills focused on enhancing interoperability and joint response to various contingencies, including disasters as well as armed conflicts.

Moreover, the RAA paves the way for the transfer and exchange of increasingly sophisticated weapons systems. This is especially notable as the Philippines modernises its maritime forces amid the festering South China Sea disputes.

Both nations also have a direct interest in preparing for contingencies in neighbouring Taiwan, which is almost equidistantly positioned between important military facilities in northern Philippines and southern Japan. Thus, geography alone makes a more robust Philippine-Japan security cooperation pivotal to their American ally's "integrated deterrence" strategy against a resurgent China, which has repeatedly warned of potential invasion of the self-ruling island nation.

The RAA is widely expected to be ratified by the Philippine Senate and the Japanese Diet in the near future, thanks to bipartisan support for stronger bilateral security relations. Both populist and reformist administration in Manila have supported closer ties with Tokyo, while the Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's ruling coalition enjoys a comfortable majority in the Japanese legislature. Though both nations recognise the

The RAA is widely expected to be ratified by the Philippine Senate and the Japanese Diet in the near future, thanks to bipartisan support for stronger bilateral security relations.

indispensability of their respective treaty alliances with Washington, they are also hedging against potential uncertainties in the future.

In particular, there are growing worries over a more transactional and unilateralist American foreign policy under a second Trump administration. By all indications, the United States will remain as the “hub” of a network of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, but allies are stepping up their own defence spending as well as deepening “spoke-to-spoke” cooperation among themselves.

Tokyo had earlier signed RAAs with Australia and the United Kingdom, two other key US allies. The ultimate aim is to better manage intensifying great power competition and, crucially, more effectively constraint China’s revanchist ambitions in adjacent waters, particularly in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

For long, post-war Japan has been largely dismissed as the robin to the batman of America. After all, the Northeast Asian nation has supposedly outsourced its external security needs to Washington under the so-called Yoshida doctrine. Japan has also been ostensibly constrained by its pacifist constitution, which proscribes any offensive projection of military power. Upon closer examination, however, it’s clear that Japan has gradually carved out its own place as a potential “third force” in vital regions such as Southeast Asia.

Economically, Japan continues to trounce all major powers, including China, in terms of

offering big-ticket infrastructure investments as well as development aid from Vietnam to the Philippines. This largely explains why, despite its dark imperial legacy, namely its brutal occupation of neighbouring states during the Second World War, Tokyo enjoys considerable “soft power” across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the influential annual survey of regional thought leaders, “The State of Southeast Asia”, Japan has consistently ranked as ASEAN’s top favoured partner, well ahead of both the United States and China.

Throughout his decade-long stint as Japan’s leader, the late prime minister Shinzo Abe singularly focused on enhancing Japan-ASEAN relations and, crucially, revamping Tokyo’s post-war defence and foreign policy. And no regional state has been more supportive of an active Japanese security role in Asia than the Philippines. Under both the reformist Benigno Aquino and populist Rodrigo Duterte administrations, the Southeast Asian nation has actively supported a Japanese security role in the Indo-Pacific.

Kishida has positioned Japan as a “global partner” for a rules-based international order, thus underscoring his country’s newfound role as a pillar of peace and security in Asia.

In 2018, Japan deployed, armoured vehicles for the first time in its post-war history for joint exercises in the Philippines, at the time the pro-Beijing Duterte was in charge. Over the subsequent years, Japan-Philippine defence relations experienced other firsts, including joint aerial exercises in 2022. If anything, Japan became a regular “observer” during annual Philippine-US Balikatan exercises, which have simulated potential war scenarios with China.

Earlier this year, Kishida, an Abe protégé, doubled down on strategic cooperation with the Philippines under the newly-launched Japan-Philippine-US (JAPHUS) trilateral security partnership, which was launched at the White House. During his visit to Washington, Kishida positioned Japan as a “global partner” for a rules-based international order, thus underscoring his country’s newfound role as a pillar of peace and security in Asia.

Under his “realism diplomacy”, the Japanese leader has doubled Japan’s defence spending as a share of the Gross Domestic Product and pressed ahead with the development of next-generation military technology, including fighter jets and long-range missiles, to make JSDF a truly global force in the 21st century.

Japan’s newly signed defence pact with the Philippines bolsters its security role in the region and, crucially, allows both Asian nations to more effectively prepare for and respond to potential contingencies in their own backyard. In particular, it facilitates growing intelligence-sharing, joint drills and technology transfer between Manila and Tokyo with an eye on China’s increasingly aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea.

The two countries can also deploy forces to and coordinate their defence posture, particularly in vital military facilities in northern Philippines (Batanes) and southern Japan (Okinawa), which is extremely close to Taiwan’s shores.

For Manila, its burgeoning defence partnership with Japan allows it to lessen its dependence on Washington

and, crucially, access high-end technology and vital training, which is pivotal to the modernisation of the AFP. The spoke-to-spoke cooperation between Japan and the Philippines reflects the growing desire of middle-sized nations to upgrade their defensive capabilities and enhance their strategic autonomy amid a “New Cold War” as well as deepening uncertainty over the future of American foreign policy.

No, Quad hasn’t Lost its Relevance; India is Forcing it to Become more Broad-Based and that’s a Good Thing

Source: Sreemoy Talukdar | *The Diplomat*

<https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/no-quad-hasnt-lost-its-relevance-india-is-forcing-it-to-become-more-broad-based-and-thats-a-good-thing-13800894.html> 05 Aug 2024

(File) External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar during



a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Astana. ANI

Never a dull moment in geopolitics. Following Indian external affairs minister S Jaishankar’s two quick meetings with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, the last of which was held in Astana on the sidelines of the SCO Summit, assumptions of an India-China détente have started emerging that “some

India-China détente have started emerging that “some sort” of a compact has been reached between the two sides over withdrawing soldiers from the border.

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Along with the conjecture, which lacks any real evidence, fresh speculation is sprouting on the relevance and future of Quad – the quadrilateral grouping of four Indo-Pacific democracies: India, Japan, Australia and the US. Old charges of India being the “weakest link” are being levelled again with questions being raised over New Delhi’s reliability and intention in ‘diluting’ the framework with an ‘expansive’ agenda. Jokes are floating that Quad may end up as the “Asian UN”.

In this piece, I shall tackle the questions whether India is wavering on the Quad, if at all there is an underlying motivation for India to waver, and if the framework has lost its relevance as it evolves. Since these questions are closely tied to and have a bearing on the state of India-China bilateral ties, it is worth inspecting the current status of the relationship.

It seems a cleverly worded Chinese readout following Jaishankar-Wang meeting may be behind the speculation that India-China ties are perhaps on the mend. The debate intensified following a prescription from the latest pre-budget Economic Survey that India should look to increasing FDI from China to lower trade deficit, integrate better with the global supply chain and drive-up exports.

The chief economic advisor’s (CEA) proposal has since found backing from noted

economists and policy wonks who argue that a “nuanced discussion” on this issue is essential. As economist and Niti Ayog member Arvind Virmani says, if the trade-off is either more imports from China or FDI, we should allow more Chinese firms to invest in India. New Delhi’s current policy subjects investments from Chinese companies to intense scrutiny and mandatory approval.

Regardless of the CEA’s suggestion and the academic debate, this is a political decision. There is no indication that India is on the verge of rethinking Chinese investments. Union commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal recently scotched all speculation by clarifying in the Parliament that the government is not obligated to implement the recommendation of the CEA and by stressing that the Centre has no plans to change the stance on FDI from China.

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As trade deficit with China rockets to \$85 billion, the government, under fire from the Opposition for failing to stem the flow of Chinese imports across eight major industrial sectors, pointed out that imports from China have reduced under the NDA government compared to the UPA regime. Goyal justified India’s decision to back out of the RCEP trade deal by saying, “We would have been a nation of salesmen hawking Chinese goods.”

The minister’s comments and his exchange of barbs with the Opposition reflect a political consensus in India against further economic integration with China, even if it makes tougher

India's job to bring down the trade deficit or hitch India's boat to the global value chain (GVC) – as East Asian economies have done. The political consensus reflects a structural reality.

The reality hinges on the fact that China's hegemonic behaviour makes it impossible for India to coexist, grow and exert its influence in the region while avoiding a confrontation with its more powerful neighbour, unless New Delhi is prepared to forego its great power aspirations. This is illogical for a country of India's size, scale and demography, that has the self-image of being a great power and a pole in a multipolar world with its own value system and set of interests.

India's decision to restrict Chinese FDI, the conflict at the border or participation in frameworks such as Quad are manifestations of the structural reality.

This reality has also goaded India into boosting border infrastructure, launching defence modernization, enhancing operational preparedness, and building internal capacities with some help from external powers that share India's anxiety on China, while carefully avoiding the trappings of formal alliances.

This is entirely in keeping with India's great power ambitions. While New Delhi is not averse to joining minilateral or multilateral groupings that further its objective of self-strengthening, signalling and catering to its strategic needs, it remains antipathic to explicit securitization of such frameworks in a way that it approaches a formal hub-and-spoke alliance with a dominating

partner calling the shots.

As Rahul Jaybhay writes in *The Diplomat*, "rising powers (such as India) are always 'allergic' to maintaining alliances. Partnerships envisioning certain preferences for the global distribution of capabilities come with costs to secondary partners as they have to adhere to the strategic template outlined by the stronger ally. Avoiding such a step of strategic entanglement, Indian efforts are primed to focus on acquiring military arms and building indigenous capacities."

Quad is an important part of India's balancing strategy against China but it has

increasingly taken on a broader, substantive agenda that extends across multiple domains and requires deeper cooperation over several spheres of activities. The grammar of the framework is

participatory, consultative and cooperative. This lends itself to much more flexibility over issues and the ability to expand the horizons. Let's look at the outcome document of the Quad foreign ministers' meeting held recently in Tokyo.

Worth noting that while Leaders' Summit has been kept at abeyance due to a busy political season in India and the US, lower-level working group meetings have kept the framework alive. The Tokyo declaration proposes collaboration in the field of critical and emerging technologies, strengthening supply chain resilience, advancing telecom technology, including 5G and O-RAN, and promotion of digital connectivity.

In light of Russia-Ukraine conflict where

Goyal justified India's decision to back out of the RCEP trade deal by saying, "We would have been a nation of salesmen hawking Chinese goods."

hybrid warfare involving cyber-attacks and crippling of civilian infrastructure have been witnessed, the Quad has committed to a more open, secure, stable, accessible and peaceful cyberspace. A Quad Cyber Bootcamp on how to protect critical infrastructure will be hosted by India in November. Quad will also enhance cybersecurity in the Indo-Pacific region, including in supply chain security and resilience of critical sectors and for the protection of critical infrastructure including secure commercial undersea cables.

This is significant, since the Houthi rebels cut three undersea cables this year, and according to US State Department officials, undersea fiber-optic cables that ferry internet traffic are at risk of “tampering by Chinese repair ships”.

The Quad statement uses strong language to describe China’s territorial aggrandizement and bullying of neighbours. It has announced the expansion of Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to the Indian Ocean region and states the group’s “steadfast commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific”, “upholding the free and open rules-based international order”, and condemns the challenge posed by China to “the global maritime rules-based order”. Quad members state that they are “seriously concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and reiterate our strong opposition to any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion.”

India’s decision to restrict Chinese FDI, the conflict at the border or participation in frameworks such as Quad are manifestations of the structural reality.

That said, the name of China is never taken, and the Quad also focuses on enhancing supply chains and investments, innovation in agriculture through emerging technologies, developing high-level principles for digital public infrastructure, cooperation on space, and finalization of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which “enable an effective, immediate and coordinated response mechanism between Quad partners.”

There’s also a mention of counter-terrorism, cross-border terrorism, media freedom, climate action, encouraging climate information exchanges, disaster risk, resilience and capacity building.

It is evident that while China commands substantial attention from Quad, the grouping’s agenda has undergone a visible shift to take on more global responsibilities than a sharp, security-oriented focus. Its evolution from a security architecture aimed at tackling Chinese aggression to providing global public goods and economic collateral is complete. I posit that instead of diluting Quad’s agenda, this adds to the framework’s strength.

This evolution makes it difficult for China to whip up a frenzy over the premier grouping and play to the gallery of Southeast Asian nations who want to stay away from great power competition. Instead, the framework can work in the background and build structural deterrence against Chinese aggression by aiding capacity building and providing more options to regional powers.

While India is broad-basing the Quad, it is simultaneously increasing its defence, security and commercial engagement with Southeast Asian states and expanding its strategic footprint in the region to combat Beijing's growing influence and military assertiveness. New Delhi has a very good reason to do this. Not only it must keep the channels of navigation free considering that over 55 per cent of India's trade passes through South China Sea and Malacca Straits it must contribute towards building deterrence for its Southeast Asian partners and support the architecture of regional stability.

While the Quad expands its role from a security framework, India is boosting bilateral security engagement with East Asian neighbours who have long been at the receiving end of China's expansionism on the South China Sea. Quad's role therefore essentially complements India's policy and strikes a symbiosis.

As part of its counterbalancing strategy, India is expanding its naval presence, heightening maritime security cooperation with countries along the maritime rim of Indo-Pacific and backing their sovereign rights over the contested waters of South China Sea.

As Derek Grossman notes in *Foreign Policy*, "India has sealed an arms deal with Vietnam, sided with the Philippines over China on sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, and enhanced defense cooperation with Indonesia. It is balance-of-power politics worthy of an international relations textbook: Even though most Southeast Asian governments have long made it their mantra not to choose geopolitical sides, China's aggressive posture in and around the South China Sea is driving India and its

partners in the region together."

During Vietnam prime minister Pham Minh Chinh's recent visit to New Delhi, both countries tightened their comprehensive strategic partnership, while India announced a credit line worth \$300 million to strengthen Vietnam's maritime security. An MEA readout announced a "strengthening of defence cooperation" covering "dialogues, training and capacity building cooperation, exchange of best practices, exercises, defence policy and industry cooperation."

Worth noting that India sent national security advisor Ajit Doval to Hanoi last month to attend the state funeral of Nguyen Phu Trong, the late General Secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party and in June last year, India gifted an active warship to Vietnam, which has overlapping territorial claims with China over South China Sea.

Alongside, India is tightening its strategic partnership with the Philippines, holding maritime exercises and sent Manila its first batch of BrahMos missiles – part of a \$375 million deal. Early this year in March, India's foreign minister landed in Manila on an official visit and expressed India's firm support to the Philippines "for upholding its national sovereignty" while stressing on the importance of adhering to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), drawing a sharp reaction from Beijing.

New Delhi is also firming up its security partnership with Australia, holding defence policy dialogues with Indonesia and docking a submarine in Jakarta, taking part in bilateral Samudra Shakti exercise with Indonesia,

maritime Samudra Laksamana exercise with Malaysia and maritime bilateral exercise SIMBEX with Singapore.

Multilaterally, India has increased its security engagement with ASEAN states. IISS research fellow Viraj Solanki notes that “India and ASEAN states held their inaugural maritime exercise in the South China Sea in May 2023. India is the fourth country to hold a joint exercise with ASEAN, after China, Russia and the United States. Seven ASEAN states provided naval ships: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Brunei’s participation was notable, as India and Brunei have never held a naval exercise bilaterally.”

In taking up the responsibility of countering Chinese aggression through a latticework of plurilateral, multilateral and bilateral frameworks in the Indian Ocean region, India is exactly the kind of self-reliant partner Washington needs, and conversely it must also understand that New Delhi will never be part of a NATO-like security structure.

India’s engagement with US and its allies, by virtue of being expansive, participatory, cooperative and contributive – is more durable than a military bloc and contributes to regional stability without forcing reluctant Southeast Asian nations into making onerous choices.

Finally, the narrative over Quad’s relevance and weakening overlooks a crucial aspect. India’s approach to

Quad and maritime security in Indo-Pacific shuns a binary framing in favour of a multi-pronged approach, threading a line of action through various lenses and perspectives. This multiplicity is curiously missing in western intellectual discourse. The West should get over its scepticism and ideological trappings.

Western Indian Ocean: Key Geography for US-India Cooperation

Source: Sayantan Haldar and Vivek Mishra | ORF

[https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/western-indian-](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/western-indian-ocean-key-geography-for-us-india-cooperation)



[ocean-key-geography-for-us-india-cooperation](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/western-indian-ocean-key-geography-for-us-india-cooperation) 20 June 2024

Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un attend an official welcoming ceremony at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea June 19, 2024. Sputnik/Gavriil Grigorov/Pool via REUTERS

While a historical overview of the relations between New Delhi and Washington would prompt appreciation over the current state of affairs between the two powers, some critical divergences continue to characterise the relations between the two powers.

Amidst the shifting geopolitical landscape, the United States (US) has emerged as one of India’s most consequential partners. Several strategic variables appear to have been instrumental in solidifying this relationship. Convergences between New Delhi and Washington have

consolidated on key issues of trade, technology, defence, and, most importantly, on the commitment towards a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

While a historical overview of the relations between New Delhi and Washington would prompt appreciation over the current state of affairs between the two powers, some critical divergences continue to characterise the relations between the two powers. Historically, India and the US were seen as ‘estranged democracies’, especially during much of the Cold War period. Relations between New Delhi and Washington plummeted in the aftermath of India’s nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1998. These tests led to the US imposing sanctions on India. However, less than a decade later, the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement, signed between the two powers in 2005, marked normalisation of relations. Arguably, India’s relations with the US have only soared since. This even prompted India’s erstwhile External Affairs Minister, Salman Kurshid, to aptly characterise the progress of the bilateral ties as ‘engaged’, from ‘estranged’.

While India and the US have broadened and deepened their common grounds of convergence, the Indo-Pacific has become a pivotal issue that has significantly elevated their bilateral ties. Convergences between New Delhi and Washington appear to be multi-pronged. Firstly, both India and the US have exhibited normative commitment for a shared, value-based, free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Secondly, India

and the US have both been cautioned by China’s growing footprint and increasing belligerence in the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly, beyond the imperative of security, India and the US seem to place emphasis on the Indo-Pacific for burgeoning trade, supply chains, infrastructure-led connectivity, as well as tech-based partnerships.

While the foundations of the India-US partnership in the Indo-Pacific have consolidated, several key areas of divergence remain. Importantly, sometimes, these differences arise not from divergence but from differing geopolitical realities, interests, or even worldviews. Before

For India, the Indo-Pacific geography entails the maritime expanse between the west coast of America to the east coast of Africa. Whereas, for Washington, the Indo-Pacific expanse, as articulated by the geographical contours of the INDO PACOM, technically involves the west coast of America to the west coast of India.

glancing at the Indo-Pacific, it would be helpful to take stock of such nuances between the two countries on contemporary global issues of critical importance. Arguably, two wars – one in Europe between Russia and Ukraine, and the other in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine—have been at the forefront of global geopolitical discourse for the last couple of years. The world seems to be divided on these two issues. Washington has chosen to take a clear stand on these two wars by supporting Ukraine and Israel through various means, even at the cost of wide domestic backlash. On the other hand, India’s response has been nuanced and in tandem with the implicit principle of India’s foreign policy—strategic autonomy. While India has not refrained from condemning the enduring wars and highlighting the suffering they continue to cause for innocent people, it has also maintained a strategic balance through continued engagement with both sides, albeit at the cost of criticism from

the West.

The Status of the Western Indian Ocean in the Indo-Pacific

In the Indo-Pacific, while China has remained a common cause of concern, both India and the US have pursued varied degrees of (dis) engagement with Beijing. This approach has been primarily guided by the strategic objectives and compulsions of both powers. However, a more significant and fundamental area of divergence has left an enduring imprint, which merits critical attention. This pertains to how India and the US continue to outline the cartographic contours of their outlook towards the Indo-Pacific. For India, the Indo-Pacific geography entails the maritime

expanse between the west coast of America to the east coast of Africa. Whereas, for Washington, the Indo-Pacific expanse, as articulated by the geographical contours of the INDO PACOM, technically involves the west coast of America to the west coast of India. This entails that the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is a missing piece of the Indo-Pacific puzzle between India

and the US. Even though Washington has, in the past, sought to clarify the importance it continues to accord to the WIO in its Indo-Pacific outlook, it does not seem to be an active player in the region. The strategic importance of the Western Indian Ocean theatre has further exacerbated following the return of piracy in the region. Importantly, in the shifting global geopolitical matrix, Africa has continued to evolve as an important variable. This has further gained momentum given the

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critical Chinese inroads into the continent. In this context, the WIO continues to remain an important maritime expanse bridging the African continent with the Indo-Pacific.

To fill an extant strategic gap, it is important for India and the US to bolster their ties in the Indian Ocean with specific focus on the WIO theatre. The importance of the WIO for India cannot be overstated, given its core maritime security interests lie in the region. It remains a critical geography with immense scope for US-India cooperation, especially on issues of maritime security, ocean governance, critical supply chains and regional stability. The rise of piracy, the growing salience of the key Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) flowing through the

region, and China's growing political influence in Africa are vital concerns for India and the US. Therefore, a reorientation towards this sub-geography is important for New Delhi and Washington and merits critical attention. Nevertheless, the continued synergy between the two countries on issues pertaining to the Indo-Pacific, despite divergences in cartographic mapping of the region, demonstrates the maturity in ties amongst New Delhi and Washington.

The WIO is critical to a common strategic future in the Indo-Pacific because it has the potential to shift the focus of the Indo-Pacific strategy westward in the region. Without a strong WIO-oriented approach, the influences from the eastern flank of the Indo-Pacific are likely to intensify, potentially nullifying the gains sought

by the various iterations of the Indo-Pacific strategy—such as Pivot-to-Asia, Rebalance, and the current Indo-Pacific strategy. With common regional goals and objectives, India and the US are poised to increase their stakes in the WIO. The four foundational agreements between the two sides, real-time information exchange through the IFC-IOR, multilateral frameworks like the Quad, and the presence of like-minded extra-regional partners like France make the WIO a critical area whose potential is yet to be fully realised.

By the virtue of its location and shifting dynamics in the global order, the WIO could be pivotal, connecting the Indian Ocean with the Middle East and Africa. For India and the US, which have sought to link the Indo-Pacific with the Middle East through initiatives like the I2U2 and the IMEEC, the WIO could be the missing part of the puzzle to accelerate cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Cherry-Picks of the Month

1. The Multinational Joint Exercise “Pitch Black 2024” Concluded in Australia - <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/The-multinational-joint-exercise-Pitch-Black-2024-has-concluded-in-Australia/>
2. US-Japan Security Talks Focus on Bolstering Military Cooperation, Underscores Threat from China - <https://apnews.com/article/japan-us-military-command-missile-china-4e97f4cb01cfef7b6db8fb1a5df771e4>
3. Grand Strategy | The Quad Four and their Four Dilemmas - <https://hindustantimes.com/analysis/grand-strategy-the-quad-four-and-their-four-dilemmas-101722796516491.html>
4. Outcomes of the Quad Foreign Ministers’ Meeting - <https://www.csis.org/analysis/outcomes-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting>
5. China Uses Academia to Assert South China Sea Claims - <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-uses-academia-to-assert-south-china-sea-claims>
6. A New Era for Japan and the Pacific Islands - <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/a-new-era-for-japan-and-the-pacific-islands/>

Caps Experts View

1. Modi 3.0 and the Island States of the Indian Ocean - <https://capsindia.org/modi-3-0-and-the-island-states-of-the-indian-ocean/>
2. Ex-Pitch Black: IAF Operating in the Indo-Pacific Region - <https://capsindia.org/ex-pitch-black-iaf-operating-in-the-indo-pacific-region/>
3. Japan’s Increased Involvement with the Pacific Island Countries - <https://capsindia.org/japans-increased-involvement-with-the-pacific-island-countries/>

Podcasts/Debates/Discussions

1. This is not a talk shop, but...': EAM Jaishankar at QUAD Foreign Ministers meet in Tokyo - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCFMRqGROml>
2. Exercise Pitch Black 2024 Highlights - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFPFRzUQtio>
3. NATO and the Indo-Pacific: Podcast Episode by Michael J. Green and Jude Blanchette - <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/asia-chessboard/nato-and-indo-pacific>



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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284 Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi - 110010

Tel.: +91 - 11 - 25699131/32 Fax: +91 - 11 - 25682533

Email: capsnetdroff@gmail.com

Website: www.capsindia.org

Editorial Team: Ms Simran Walia

Composed and Formatted by: Mr Rohit Singh, CAPS

Contact: +91 9716511091

Email: rohit_singh.1990@hotmail.com

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