

India-US Maritime Cooperation: The Next Decade

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Today India conducts the largest number of military exercises with the USA than with any other country. A significant number of these take place in the maritime domain. Recently, maritime partnerships between India and the USA have ridden high on the back of multiple agreements in the areas of defence and security, particularly the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) and Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), besides some others that are in the pipeline like Communication and Information Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). However, two significant developments that could potentially change the course of the India-US maritime partnership in the next decade are the actions on the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean signed in 2015, and India's elevation to a special status of 'Major Defence Partner' through a Congressional imprimatur in the USA. The paper seeks to explore the ramifications in the Asian maritime domain of an enhanced partnership between India and the USA, besides looking at the geopolitical fallouts of the Indo-US effort to link the security of the Asia-Pacific to the security architecture of the IOR as we go forward. It also looks at how the maritime and riparian ramifications of burgeoning Indo-US ties have altered the rhetoric of the balance of power associated with Asia, and its consequent fault lines.

US-India maritime cooperation has been the pioneering collaborative development between the two countries in the post Cold War period. Ever since the formation of the India-US Naval Steering Committee in 1992,¹ the maritime partnership between the two countries has ridden high on sustained

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bilateral endeavours, with the Malabar series of naval exercises leading from the front. The USA's maritime strategy has gradually become one of the strongest pillars of the India-US defence partnership, augmented by quite a few other partnerships and agreements between the two sides. This trend has reformulated some of the traditional geopolitical and geostrategic notional attributes of Asian waters, even as regional maritime dynamics has been upended in the region due to the altered nature of extra-regional powers' interventions, motives, and partnerships, along with the rising profiles of some of the regional powers.

Extrapolating further, the more than bi-decadal history of Indo-US bilateral cooperation in the maritime domain leaves one with a graph that appears to be peaking gradually as we go into the next decade. Such conjectures are based on common rising equities as well as increasing threat perceptions² of both the USA and India in the Indian Ocean as well as in the contiguous region of the Indo-Pacific. A futuristic assessment of the US-India maritime partnership has, thus, become critically essential in the light of its regional dynamics that is increasingly moving towards adopting an extra-regional scope. To start with, the USA's partnership with India in the 21st century has been riddled with farsighted rationales which saw growing military partnerships between the two countries as central to their bilateral ties.³ As the post-Cold War order evolved and changed, India emerged as a strong military and strategic alternative to the USA's own altered purpose in Asia. While an expanding defence partnership dominated by military sales became the bedrock of the US-India partnership ever since the 'New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship,' was signed at the end of June 2005, the maritime domain became the actionable ground for implementing the promise of this partnership. The ambit of annual Malabar naval exercises has crossed regional waters to include the western Pacific, the Luzon Strait, the Philippine Sea, and the waters extending up to the east of Okinawa in Japan.

Besides geographical expansion, growing technological sophistications have led the bilateral cooperation in the Malabar exercises. More importantly, some of the positives accruing out of these recalibrations in India-US relationship promise to position India at an advantageous pedestal vis-à-vis its own changing regional outlook. In this respect, it is important to analyse the future implications of the India-US partnership in the maritime domain, not just with respect to the regional waters of the Subcontinent but also beyond it.

In the last few years, several assertions from either side have backed popular sentiment supporting a strong US-India maritime partnership. These have included Presidential assertions, the rhetorical pandering of leaders, military

analyses, and media opinion. Most of these declarations have had a unidirectional flow - from the USA to India - and were partly (albeit tacitly) ascribed to effecting a change in how India behaves in the maritime domain. President Obama's hailing⁴ of the US-India partnership as "a defining partnership of the 21st century," the former US Defence Secretary Ash Carter's description of India as an "anchor of global security",⁵ and another former US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's rhetorical characterisation of India as the "lynchpin"⁶ of the US Rebalance in Asia, have all broadly underscored one canvas theme: India should step up its regional maritime profile, intent, and action. More recently, rhetoric has paved the way for plain-speaking and action-oriented deliverables.

A strong justification for a long lasting maritime partnership between India and the USA has also emerged as a result of India's own desire to put behind its image of a country that punches below its weight. Resultantly, the present government in India has not only focused on finding strategic partners in the IOR but also on restoring its maritime heritage through successive strategic shifts in policy. A decisive shift came in India's reorientation from its notional Look East Policy to the Act East policy, which emphasised the embrace of boldness, and imparted a sense of character in India's maritime strategy. Prime Minister Modi also led a successful Indian Ocean diplomatic mission in 2015 when he visited Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka all tied in one trip. Importantly, during that visit, India's move to lease—and eventually build—a naval base on Assumption Island in Seychelles marked a serious departure from its erstwhile policies.⁷ A year later, in 2016 during his Africa visit, Prime Minister Modi chose his destinations in a manner that reflected India's interests in the contiguous Indian Ocean; Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya—all located in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littorals.⁸ However, in the recent past, India's balancing act in the IOR and the resultant ambiguity have paved the way for some obvious choices, despite their anti-China smear. India has also not shied away from professing a threat perception from increasing Chinese presence in the IOR, thereby creating a strategic rationale not just for its own naval build up but also for partnering with the USA.

China in the IOR: An Undying Rationale

The ever increasing presence of China in the IOR is a dominant and, at the same time, an undying rationale for a strong US-India maritime partnership in the region. As maritime space for the USA in the Asia-Pacific is shrinking with Chinese expansion and bellicosity, the IOR provides ground for its

strategic expansion. In the recent past, increasing Chinese presence in the IOR, and its growing assertiveness beyond, has led to some compelling thinking on India's part too. While uninterrupted trade flow, security of maritime choke points in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, and other non-traditional threats have remained central to India's current and prospective maritime roles, increasing Chinese presence in India's neighbourhood has starkly driven some of its recent reformulations, the strategic embrace of the USA being the most prominent one.

It has been widely assessed that Indo-US collaboration in tracking and managing Chinese submarine presence in the Indian Ocean is an imperative. Recently, Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr. of the US Pacific Command (USPACOM) noted that the increasing presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean should be of immediate concern. Furthermore, he revealed that India and the USA are already sharing data on Chinese submarine presence and stealth sub-surface movements.⁹ The bilateral maritime cooperation between India and the USA, led by the Malabar exercises, has entered uncharted territory in the areas of strategic data sharing, transfer of technology, reconnaissance, and the training of personnel. All of these have taken maritime interoperability between the two sides to a new high, creating greater maritime domain awareness and effectiveness than ever before.

China has ramped up its activities in the Indian Ocean, and is inching closer to India's littorals. After building a series of littoral ports in the IOR, China has followed up with creating ambiguities in their real purpose by ratcheting up its strategic activities in ports that lie in close proximity of India. At least since 2010, Chinese forays in the Indian Ocean have adopted an overtly provocative character. In 2014 alone, an amphibious landing ship, the *Changbaishan*, and a frigate, *Yuncheng*, of the 18th escort fleet of the Chinese Navy, sailed to the Colombo harbour in August, followed by a submarine docking at Colombo port.¹⁰ The rather demure justification of its submarine presence in Sri Lanka - as only 'replenishments' - seemed far from convincing to India. India has played smartly by adopting the same rationale for enhancing its relations with the USA in the maritime domain. India's LEMOA with the USA provides India with similar scope to allow the USA to engage in refuelling, replenishments, and the mutual use of bases for similar purposes.

Of more concern to India has been the presence of Chinese submarines in Pakistani ports. Satellite images have shown that a Chinese submarine had docked in the harbour at Karachi in May 2016, and more worryingly, might have spied on Indian warships and their movements in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the Indian Navy Chief has strongly speculated on the presence

of Chinese submarines at the strategic Gwadar port in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, a key access port to the Arabian Sea for Pakistan.¹¹ This is on the top of a US\$5 billion defence agreement between China and Pakistan as per which China will provide the Pakistan Navy with eight modified diesel-electric attack submarines by 2028. Closer to home, China also sold two type 035G class submarines, a class of diesel-electric submarines of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), to the Bangladesh Navy. Clearly, there is an emerging Chinese maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean which is stacked against India's interests.

As China tries to push its Maritime Silk Route (MSR) through the Indian Ocean to further its One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, smaller nations in the IOR have emerged as decisive pawns in the larger great game between regional and extra-regional heavyweights present in the region. Recently, Feydhoo Finolhu, an uninhabited island of Maldives, has been leased to a Chinese company for 50 years at a cost of about US\$ 4 million.¹² China has also invested heavily in the Ihaven atoll in the Maldives chain, which lies just south of the Minicoy Islands in the Arabian Sea. The atoll's location is important for China as it lies in the heart of the international shipping route from West Asia to the Far East. Extending its importance to the strategic domain, the atoll could be a future submarine or warship docking ground for the PLAN. Another port in Kyaukpyu in Myanmar has emerged as an important node that allows China to circumvent the Malacca Strait for its energy access through a land-based gas pipeline from Kyaukpyu to Kunming.¹³ The Great Coco Island and Little Coco Island, both controlled by Myanmar, have also emerged as maritime pivots consolidating Chinese presence close to the Indian Subcontinent. There is increasing evidence¹⁴ that China has constructed an electronic intelligence installation in the Greater Coco Island, and is building a base on the Small Coco Island in the Alexandra Channel between the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea, north of India's Andaman Islands. Chinese presence on these islands places China in the Bay of Bengal, understandably causing a great degree of strategic discomfort to India.

Besides the seemingly innocuous string of ports and island presence that have been installed by China in the IOR, China's building of its first international naval base at Djibouti is a concern for both India and the USA. China's first overseas military base in Djibouti - just a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, one of the Pentagon's largest and most important foreign installations - is near its completion. For the USA, whose troops have been stationed at Djibouti for a long time, the Chinese presence could conflict with the counter-terrorism efforts on land, air, and in the maritime domain. For instance, the USA's

concerns regarding Chinese presence have emerged as it has been using Camp Lemonnier for anti-piracy efforts in the Indian Ocean as well as an intelligence gathering post against the Islamic State militants. For India, Chinese naval presence at Djibouti metaphorically stands for another 'pearl' in the string of Chinese ports around it. Sitting at the mouth of the strategic Horn of Africa, China's Djibouti naval base could give it greater control over movement of ships in the Indian Ocean.

India's access to and presence in the northern Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and the waters of the Gulf have traditionally been very limited. India excluded itself from the Cold War era regional security initiatives like the SEATO and CENTO which had a strong maritime dimension in the northern waters of the Indian Ocean. In the new context of the post-Cold war era, getting access and increasing its naval footprint in the Gulf waters and the Arabian Sea could be a strategically important next step in India-US relations going into the future.

As India's concerns in the IOR vis-à-vis the Chinese presence mounts, India would need strong partners such as the USA in the future besides developing its own capabilities.

Indo-US Agreements: Implications for the IOR

When the Defence Framework Agreement was signed between India and the USA in 2005, it laid down a long-term vision for partnership. Further, when the same was renewed in 2015, it portrayed not just a sense of regularity in the bilateral defence partnership but also institutionalisation and creation of a future roadmap for the bilateral partnership. Besides defence sales, stepping up joint military exercises, and enhanced intelligence-sharing, maritime security forms one of the core principles of cooperation between the two sides as per the framework agreement. When President Obama visited India for the second time, both the countries clearly put forward a long-term vision for joint maritime goals. The Agreement said that both the countries

expressed satisfaction over the efforts made by both countries to deepen cooperation in the field of maritime security, as reflected in the 2015 Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship. To this end, they agreed that the navies of both sides would continue discussions to identify specific areas for expanding maritime cooperation. They also reiterated their commitment to upgrading their bilateral naval exercise MALABAR.

The effectiveness of these maritime goals have been further strengthened by the DTTI which has facilitated high-end technology transfers to India from the USA, besides initiating the co-production and co-development of technologies as partners rather than as buyer and seller. During the visit of the former Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter to India in April 2016, both the sides identified cooperation in the maritime domain as an area that would benefit from technology transfers. For instance, talks between the two sides started on Joint Working Group on Aircraft Carrier Technology Cooperation (JWFACTC). The two countries also agreed to work towards greater cooperation in the field of cutting-edge defence technologies, including deepening consultations on aircraft carrier design and operations, and jet engine technology. They noted the understanding reached to conclude an information exchange annex (IEA) to enhance data and information sharing specific to aircraft carriers.¹⁵ India and the USA are close to finalising the IEA on aircraft carrier technologies, as well as cooperation on air wing operations for carrier Vikrant under construction at the Kochi port. The IEA is expected to formalise the exact technology that the USA will share—that is, on classification levels, the design side, operations, etc. These are expected to have immense ramifications for India's maritime force-posture in the Indian Ocean as well as on joint capabilities with the USA in the maritime domain. For instance, the IEA will now allow the transfer of Electro Magnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) technology to India, which hitherto was not possible.¹⁶

Another decisive agreement with immense future implications for the Indian Ocean has been the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). Although the USA has signed such agreements with a host of countries, the LEMOA agreement with India has the potential to take the bilateral maritime partnership to a new high.¹⁷ Reliance Defence's Pipavav shipyard has been qualified by the US Navy under the Master Ship Repair Agreement (MSRA), with US Navy's an approved contractor for the Seventh Fleet vessels operating in the Asian-Pacific region.¹⁸ It is being estimated that over 100 ships of the US Navy operating in the Indian Ocean can now avail of the services at the Pipavav shipyard. The agreement will allow the US Navy to visit Indian ports for essential supplies, refuelling, and replacement in mutuality. By signing the LEMOA and not the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) - an agreement that India gauged to be more intrusive and encroaching - it has kept its powder dry. This approach will also help India in keeping a balance between US assistance and its own force projection in the region.

As part of the four foundational agreements being pushed by the USA for more than a decade now, the two other agreements CISMOA (Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement) and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) are looming large as future possibilities on India-US relations, especially after the former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar's assurance that, in the longer run, both these agreements will also be signed. While the BECA would set a framework through which the USA could share sensitive data to aid targeting and navigation with India, CISMOA would allow the USA to supply India with its propriety encrypted communications equipment and systems, thus allowing secure peacetime and wartime communication between high-level military leaders on both sides. The CISMOA would extend this capability to Indian and US military assets, including aircraft and ships. These agreements would provide India better maritime awareness and preparedness in the future. However, some concerns remain on the Indian side regarding the nature of the agreement and the degree to which India's autonomy could be affected.

In the era of combined force projection, cooperation on aircraft technology is as consequential for the maritime domain as for the continental land mass. To that extent, both India and the USA have a promising future in aircraft manufacturing and technology cooperation. India and the USA are in talks for the construction of a Lockheed Martin's F-16 jet factory in India. Also, the frequent stealthy nature of Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean has also required India to up the ante in the areas of maritime reconnaissance and surveillance. Treating maritime reconnaissance as a priority, India signed the US\$ 1.1 billion deal with the American defence and aerospace company, Boeing, to buy four Poseidon-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft, on the back of an earlier purchase of eight P-8Is from Boeing in a US\$ 2.2 billion deal.¹⁹ The Indian Ocean has become the applicative forefront domain for the P8-Is. These are being used by the Indian Navy to keep a vigil over the Indian Ocean, especially to keep a check on Chinese sub-surface forays in its waters. Besides a force-posture, these aircraft are used for Search and Rescue as well as for the aerial surveillance of disaster-hit littorals of the Indian Ocean region. These new dimensions in the Indian Navy's arsenal have augmented its future capabilities in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific.

Bridging Asian Maritime Security Architecture

Given the direction of US-India relations in the maritime domain, bridging the security of the Asia-Pacific maritime theatre with that of security in the IOR seems to be the eventual goal of the USA, particularly since the fight for

dominance in the South China Sea has escalated. The early push during the Obama Presidency to co-opt the Indian Ocean as the south-western leg of the US Rebalance sought to achieve the same goal. The USA's refurbished role in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor has also sought reciprocity from India, even as the term 'Indo-Pacific' is largely getting replaced by 'Indo-Asia Pacific' in US strategic diction.²⁰ This shift in the USA's regional emphasis has come about owing primarily to two factors: the traditional hub-and-spokes model of its alliance is losing its effectiveness in the Asia-Pacific in the face of Chinese economic and military resurgence, and increasing belief that Asia's future economy is tied to the Indo-Asia Pacific region.²¹ Such an approach has also hinted at a possible resurrection - and consequent shift of the US Rebalance to the Indo-Asia Pacific - with India as a possible future bilateral or multilateral partner. India stands to play a greater role in this new strategic mix given its increasing eastward focus.

The 2015 US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region²² essentially aimed at the comparative linking of security in the two theatres: the IOR and the Asia-Pacific. The joint document's stress on regional economic integration, interconnectivity and, above all, the importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring the freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea, was geared towards coupling the security and economics of the Asia-Pacific with that of the IOR.

India's own effort at extending its nascent IOR security architecture to the Asia-Pacific has also been upbeat. India's Act East Policy, and the following focus on defence sales to some of the countries that lie to its east, have not only bolstered but complemented the westward interconnectedness that is directed from the Asia-Pacific region towards the IOR. India has been strengthening its defence relations with countries to its east, particularly Myanmar and Vietnam. In November 2016, the Indian Navy Chief visited Myanmar on a four-day visit to advance naval ties. India has also recently decided to supply indigenously developed lightweight torpedoes to Myanmar in a contract estimated at being US\$ 37.9 million.²³ Besides, India is already providing rocket launchers, mortars, rifles, radars, night-vision devices, Gypsies, bailey bridges, communication and Inmarsat sets as well as road construction equipment like dozers, tippers and soil compacters to the Myanmar armed forces.²⁴ India's supersonic missiles offer to Vietnam, and the training of its soldiers in India's north-east have already acquired a China dimension. India's Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) maritime exercises in the waters of Southeast

Asia have helped it to gradually extend its sphere of maritime influence eastward.

India's indigenous efforts—like Security and Growth for All in the Region, or “SAGAR”, which is Prime Minister Modi's vision of using India's economic and military capabilities for the benefit of the entire region - is also an effort towards regional integration. By linking prosperity to security, India has revived the scope for a future multilateral approach towards not just the Indian Ocean but the entire Asian maritime theatre.

India's eastern maritime focus has also been propped up by its growing proximity with Japan. This special relationship has further enhanced the possibility of the strengthening of an India-Japan-USA trilateral, or the revival of Australia-India-Japan-USA quadrilateral relationship. The revival of the latter has garnered much attention in the wake of threats by the Trump Administration²⁵ of wanting to deny China access to some of the artificial islands that have been built in the South China Sea. This can be seen as the USA's desire to not just counter but respond to Beijing's Anti-Area/Access-Denial (A2/AD) strategies which plan to keep Washington out of the two island chains.

Increasing India-US Proximity: Mapping Future Asian Fault Lines

As India and the USA inch closer agreement-by-agreement, a cycle of regional apprehension and counter-apprehension cannot be detached from the resultant geopolitics. The Indian Ocean sits at the heart of such a contested milieu in Asia. This regional maritime contestation has emerged as a result of a growing polarity among core stakeholders, including India, China and the USA. There is a semi-peripheral stakeholder in Pakistan in so far as the future security and stability of the IOR is concerned, besides there being a future X-factor in the form of Russian presence. The IOR's future stability will depend on the role that each of these stakeholders will play in the future, and the alignments they assume vis-à-vis the developing polarity among the two sets of power axes. There is a great degree of effort being made to include Pakistan as the fourth decisive stakeholder of the India Ocean strategic balance, primarily through the increasing participation and access of China to Pakistan's Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. Chinese continental and maritime assistance to Pakistan, along with the latter's rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons has earned it some leverage as a potential destabiliser of the IOR's strategic balance in the future. However, Pakistan is going to take some time before it is inducted into the Indian Ocean's strategic mix as a core stakeholder.

In the above context, the contours of future Asian fault lines are expected to be most prominently felt in the Indian Ocean. A future Indian Ocean contestation can be imagined where a US-India-Japan power axis could be antagonistically placed against a China-Pakistan nexus, with Russia as the regional wild card. However, such imaginations would place too much trust in the USA by India, a possibility that is increasingly narrowing in the face of a transactional foreign policy by the Trump administration in the USA. Two recent developments seem to have cemented hopes of a sustained partnership between India and the USA which may continue taking a cue from the bilateral trend under the Obama Administration: India's newly attained status as a Major Defence Partner (MDP) through a US Congressional mandate²⁶ and the current Defence Secretary, James Mattis' assurance of USA's relationship with India as being 'utmost important'.

Conclusion

Although security remains the most dominant theme of India-US relations for now and the foreseeable future, there are some other grounds where cooperation between the two sides is only expected to increase in the maritime domain. In the areas of Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (HA/DR), both the Indian Navy and the US Navy are already cooperating substantially with immense prospects. As the global climate pattern grows more unpredictable and the IOR littorals more vulnerable, strong regional navies like those of India and the USA could work together to enhance their joint capacity to respond to environmental crises. Both India and the USA with strong regional navies also have some scope for cooperating in addressing human trafficking and the refugee crisis. The littorals of the IOR have many conflict-ridden countries which are facing population-spill due to conflict, terrorism, environmental disasters, or other excesses. As more common interests between India and the USA emerge, and as the interoperability between the two sides grows, both the countries have immense possibilities of deeper cooperation in the next decade. In the most recent chapter of the Raisina Dialogue earlier this year,²⁷ when the PACOM commander Admiral Harris saw an Abraham Lincoln quote befitting India-US relations - 'Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening the axe' - he clearly hinted that the bilateral relationship is in its nascent metaphorical 'first hour' while the future for cooperation between the two sides lies in the next five. Yet, the last decade has witnessed tremendous maturity in the bilateral relationship between

the two countries. More importantly, the promise lies in the coming decade.

Notes :

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- ²⁷ Please see, <http://www.orfonline.org/raisina-dialogue/>

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