

U.S.-India Strategic Convergences in the Indo-Pacific: Evolving Regional Dynamics and Responses

Sobia Hanif & Rizwan Sharif

Abstract

US-India strategic relations have achieved many milestones, overcoming decades of mistrust. China's ascendance and its accompanying consequences have triggered an overarching convergence of US and Indian interests especially within the Indo-Pacific region. Building on the contributions of successive US administrations and overcoming the ideological barriers associated with non-alignment, the Modi-led BJP has chosen to pursue multi-alignment and a stronger strategic partnership with the US. In order to counter the growing power of China, the US and allies along with India are promoting the notion of Indo-Pacific and legitimizing New Delhi's role within the security architecture of the new regional construct. This is likely to have implications for China's security which has chosen to respond to the US-India geo-strategic approach by way of a grand geo-economic strategy in form of the BRI. It is also engaged in military modernization and actively asserting its claims within disputed territories. Additionally, India has been slowly yet steadily realizing the need to seek external balancing to resolve the challenges it faces vis-à-vis China. On more than one occasions India has witnessed the limits of its power and the lack of viable policy options while dealing with China bilaterally. Since 1962, this lack of options vis-à-vis China was never more evident than it was during the Sino-Indian clash in Ladakh in 2020. Therefore, the realization that the way forward is through external balancing, be it through bilateral arrangements such as Indo-US cooperation or through multilateral arrangements, for instance Quad with

Sobia Hanif is Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and Diplomatic Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi.

Rizwan Sharif is Lecturer, Department of Defence and Diplomatic Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi.

Sobia Hanif & Rizwan Sharif

Japan, Australia and USA. The idea of Quad is presumably to evolve into something more credible and a dependable mechanism that might have discernable impact on the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, an academic discussion is warranted to discuss the latest developments that are impacting the regional security dynamics.

Keywords: *US, India, Dynamic Regional, Indo-Pacific*

Genesis and Development of the US-India Strategic Partnership

The relationship between the US and India took off to an inauspicious start at the outset of the Cold War. With the USSR as the principal adversary sponsoring a rival ideology, the US foreign policy was driven with the primary objective of undertaking actions necessary to curb the spread of Communism across the world. American adherence to its principal aim not only laid the foundation of its global strategic footprint, it also contributed to shaping the contours of its relations with South Asia's largest state. India for its part was strongly influenced by its own experiences as a post-colonial state and an aversion to great power rivalries. Non-alignment therefore became the holy grail of the Indian foreign policy for the next at least four decades. If anything, it was India's politico- military relationship with the erstwhile USSR that continued to consolidate despite the absence of a formal alliance between the two. The US on the other hand preferred to view its partnership with Pakistan through a strategic lens. During this period of Indo-US strategic irrelevance, the US found Pakistan a more willing and able partner in its global campaign against the spread of Communism. On the contrary, for Pakistan the major threat emanated from India. Nonetheless the emerging scenario indicated the proclivity of the US strategic preferences in South Asia in its favor.

John Foster Dulles - the American Secretary of State in 1950s - unapologetically and vehemently opposed non-alignment since it was anathema to be in alliance with the USⁱ resulting in Jaswant Singh - Ex Foreign Minister, terming it "the fifty wasted years".ⁱⁱ Nonetheless, there were a few attempts during

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the Cold War period to forge strategic ties including limited US military assistance to India during the Indo-China War of 1962.ⁱⁱⁱ Sporadic attempts were made in 1985 when an MoU was signed between the two sides for Transfer of Technology and in 1991 with regards to the Kicklighter Proposals. Later in 1995, the agreed terms of military cooperation were penned down during the Head of Pentagon's trip to India.^{iv}

Since the early 1990s, the US preoccupation with Communism came to an end and it began to assess its foreign relations beyond the prism of the Cold War dynamics. Correspondingly, India, too began to recalibrate its options after the loss of its primary strategic and economic partner. A number of domestic and international factors contributed in a bringing about a transformation within the Indian foreign and strategic policies. The ushering in of the post-Soviet era which coincided with the Gulf War of 1991 landed the country into a balance of payment crisis and dismal state of economic recession. What ensued was a rethink of the country's foreign policy that eventually paved the way for its Look East Policy and a diplomatic outreach with the US. This era was marked by a thawing of Indo-US tensions and a gradual development of bilateral ties albeit marked with caution.

Under the Clinton Administration, India was frequently referred to as a 'potentially important power' yet the government's emphasis on the nuclear non-proliferation regime was viewed with concern in India.^v The US sought to extend the NPT indefinitely and India described this a case of unfair monopoly and discrimination of the "nuclear haves" against the "nuclear have nots". Additionally, Kashmir remained high on Clinton's agenda and India was accused for its poor track record on fundamental rights in the Kashmir valley. The US during this period prioritized its relations with China and sought to encourage its expanded role in South Asia to bring stability between the otherwise strained Indo-Pak relations. To make matters worse, India conducted its nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1998 and Washington responded by embargoes and condemned its actions in all international forums.^{vi}

In order to address the concerns of both sides, fourteen sessions of negotiations were held between the Foreign Ministers of USA and India over a period of two years. The US negotiated on the terms that India, 'cap, rollback and eliminate'^{vii} its atomic weapons stockpiles in exchange for lifting trade embargoes. The economic restrictions were eventually lifted by the US without India having committed to any of the US goals including signing of the CTBT and FMCT.^{viii} In March 2000 during President Clinton's visit to India, he described the two countries as "natural allies"^{ix} but despite accommodations by the US, India continued to view the Clinton administration with a general distrust.

The coming into power of US President George Bush in 2001 heralded an era of greater Indo-US convergences. Contrasting with his predecessor, the new president sought a re-set of Indo-US ties on equal terms and took the partnership to an unprecedented level. India's main concerns were addressed by "de-hyphenating" India-Pakistan relations. The US asserted that its ties with Pakistan and India would henceforth be seen individually as both states offered a separate set of challenges and opportunities. Ashley J. Tellis authored the approach in an influential RAND report for the administration in 2000 calling for a "deeper engagement with India and a soft landing for Pakistan".^x According to the US National Security Strategy 2002, the US stressed on seeking India's cooperation on shared interests including seamless trade flows, particularly in the all-important sea routes, combatting terrorism and establishing Asian stability.^{xi}

Prior to the Bush Administration, the US policies towards South Asia centered on moderating regional insecurity by mitigating the threat of nuclear war between India and Pakistan. Kashmir was viewed as the 'nuclear flashpoint' that could potentially drive South Asia's two nuclear armed states to the brink of war.

On the contrary, the de-hyphenation policy implied that the issue of Jammu and Kashmir would be left to be decided by the two countries; a position that was favored by India. Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Adviser to President

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Bush criticized the Clinton era policies for stressing the issue of Kashmir and ‘conceptually connecting India and Pakistan’ in terms of their nuclear competition.^{xiii} India was viewed as an emerging geo-political actor within the Indian Ocean and an important consideration in China’s deliberations, therefore it should also occupy a central place in American strategic thinking.^{xiii}

Although India and the US did not collaborate closely after 9/11, New Delhi’s offer to assist the US with counterterrorism and intelligence sharing did help the partnership to develop. Just three days after the attacks on the twin towers, the Indian government offered the US use of specific airbases for its War on Terror operations although Washington sought Islamabad’s assistance due to its influence with the Taliban and closer understanding of the Afghan terrain.^{xiv} Nonetheless, the offer of assistance and unconditional support from New Delhi, did contribute in promoting mutual trust and augmenting Indo-US strategic ties.

The ratification by American Senate of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal in 2008 implied that the US acknowledged New Delhi’s de-facto nuclear power status. Additionally, the Bush Administration supported India’s aspirations for great power status. He and his team viewed India as a potential balancer to PRC and a partner that could be vital to safeguarding American interests in the region. The deal required India to show that it was applying the highest level of safeguards and that its civilian and military programs were de-linked. Nonetheless, it was an unprecedented deal that created an exception for India allowing for nuclear trade with a country that chose to remain out of the NPT.^{xv} Later, the US also vowed to convince decision-makers of the 48- member NSG to commence collaboration with India thus facilitating its entry into the elite nuclear club.^{xvi}

In tandem with the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2005, the two sides also signed a ten year defence framework agreement the same year, which was arguably as significant. Based on the presumption that the two sides were now reaching the next stage of the NSSP (Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership), the agreement specified areas of mutual strategic cooperation

including technology transfers, co-development of advanced weapon systems, increased consultations in security-related areas and joint intelligence sharing with the ultimate goal of achieving broader understanding between the defence establishments of both states.^{xvii}

India and US Cooperation in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean

After assuming office in April 2009 President Obama undertook several initiatives to seek a cooperative approach with China based on the premise that the US would welcome China's rise in return for a strategic reassurance that its ascendance to power would not impinge on the security of others. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg called for a "a core, if tacit, bargain" between the two states.^{xviii} However, the US soon realized that its efforts of seeking a 'grand accommodation' with China were seen as a sign of America's waning global power in China. The financial crisis that hit the US in 2008 added to that perception.^{xix} Additionally, China began to assert its maritime claims more forcefully in the disputed South and East China Seas. Disappointed by Beijing's unwillingness to evolve and adapt to international norms, Obama sought a re-adjustment of his administration's policies and adopted a proactive approach of engagement with regional allies and partners within the Asia Pacific to moderate China's behavior.

Building on the growth of US-India partnership in the Bush era, the Obama Administration issued the US Rebalancing Strategy to the Asia-Pacific in later part of 2011.^{xx} The contours of the Rebalancing Strategy were defined within the Strategic Guidelines issued by the Pentagon in early 2012 outlining American strategic interests in Asia.^{xxi} The document places an emphasis on maintaining a vigorous military foothold within the Western Pacific in order to defend US interests in an increasing complex security environment. The Vision Document also highlighted a significant role that can be played by India in collaboration with the US efforts in Asia Pacific.^{xxii}

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It is pertinent to mention that the Indo-US partnership drifted after Obama took office and that New Delhi was unimpressed by the Pivot. India's perceptions were shaped by the Obama administrations' earlier approach of seeking a closer relationship with China. Subsequently, when the US did announce the Rebalancing strategy in 2011 declaring India the lynchpin of its Pivot to the Pacific approach, the Indian response was less enthusiastic than the US had anticipated. It took Modi's outreach in 2014 and then his Republic Day invitation to President Obama in 2015 to inject some energy again into the bilateral ties. Under the terms of the Joint Vision released on the occasion, India declared its willingness to engage in maritime cooperation with the US, marking a break with policies of past Indian governments that remained strong adherents to non-alignment and strategic autonomy.^{xxiii} The Modi led BJP government distanced itself from the ideological commitments of its predecessor governments. Quite to the contrary, the BJP sought to advance India's bid for great power status and American cooperation in this regard was warmly welcomed.

The focus of the bilateral strategic cooperation has been directed mainly within the maritime affairs of the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific combine, where China's growing footprint has been a cause of alarm for the US as well as India. However, despite ambitions to emerge as the dominant power within the Indian Ocean, India's military capabilities have remained largely restricted and its outreach does not effectively extend beyond the Malacca Strait. In order to address the deficiencies in India's military capabilities, the Defence Framework Agreement originally signed in 2005 was extended for another decade during Ashton Carter's 2015 visit to India.^{xxiv} More so, as a result of the emerging convergences, the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) was agreed upon which facilitates the co-development of advanced military equipment.^{xxv} It is pertinent to mention that India is amongst the top three arms importers whereas the US is the top arms exporter accounting for 36 percent of all global arms exports.^{xxvi} The bilateral cooperation is mutually beneficial and serves to address key US and Indian strategic interests. The US

Pivot to the Pacific is strategically aligned with Modi's 'Act East Policy'. Washington seeks to harness New Delhi's cooperation within the Asia Pacific to its advantage. India, for its part has been willing to take the opportunity to advance its own role as an Asia Pacific player and an emerging great power. The mutual convergence stresses upon the significance of protecting interests at sea and guaranteeing unimpeded passage of sea lanes in the waterways of Southeast Asia. In order to implement the Joint Vision, the US will augment India's naval capabilities and upgrade its status as a viable balancer against China's regional influence.

It is notable that China refers to its maritime interests the South China Sea as a strategic national concern. Neither the US, nor India have any claims to the islands and atolls within the South China Sea however, a huge amount of American and Indian shipping passes through the area. Protecting key shipping routes is of strategic significance and joint initiatives are being undertaken in order to ensure that unhindered passage is sustained. In recent years, India has been more articulate in raising the issue of freedom of navigation and backed up the American stance. Historically, the South Asian power has maintained amicable relations with states in Southeast Asia, several of whom have contentious and overlapping claims on the Spratly and Paracel islands. It has also cooperated with Vietnam for oil exploration within the region despite Chinese remonstrations. As India enforces the broader dimensions of its Act East Policy, it is beginning to assume a greater role within the region's security affairs and the US has assured India that it will provide continued politico-military support for such initiatives.

Indo-US Strategic Convergences within the Indo-Pacific

Regions are groupings of states that are influenced by a shared history and common geography. Reflecting security interdependence in terms of cooperation or competition, these dynamic entities can transform their character overtime. The Asia-Pacific region interconnects the interests of the US, North and Southeast Asia and Oceania.^{xxvii} However the growth of

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Chinese power has necessitated a re-conceptualization of the region reflecting the new security realities. As China strengthens its military influence within the Asia Pacific and expands its strategic footprint within the Indian Ocean and littoral regions, a counterbalancing strategy is also in the making which clubs the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one region. It is here that the great power contest of the future is likely to play out between the existing global hegemon and the rising one.

The “Indo-Pacific”, is a geo-strategic concept that emphasizes the “security linkage” between the Indian and Pacific oceans and implies a two-ocean strategy of treating the Indo-Pacific as a single theater of operation or strategic space. In some sense it highlights the prospects of future major power competition being playing out more in this broader maritime area than on the continent.^{xxviii} Executive director, National Marine Foundation, Gurpreet s. Khurana coined the term Indo-Pacific a decade earlier.^{xxix} The new term focuses on highlighting Indo-Pacific connections in an admission of the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in US policy calculations. More so, it acknowledges the possible contributions New Delhi can make within the security of the newly coined regional construct. Japan and Australia are the major US partners that are being encouraged to cooperate with India to manage the consequences of a rising China.

Before the US adopted the term Indo-Pacific in political discourse, Japanese leader Shinzo Abe, had proposed the idea of the Indo-Pacific in 2007.^{xxx} The original concept called for Japan, India, Australia and the US collaborating for the promotion of liberal democracy. Later he reiterated the concept during his visit to India in 2007 as the “confluence of the two seas”.^{xxxi} The initiative however did not take off as expected as it found little support with the administrations of Manmohan Singh in India and Kevin Rudd in Australia. Both states refused to be a part of any coalition that could invite the displeasure of China.

Conversely as the maritime conflicts intensified between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands and with claimant states over the Spratly Islands in 2012, the need for a joint strategy to manage regional issues gained traction. The concept of “Indo-Pacific” started surfacing in official Indian and Australian documents since 2013. Australia’s Defence White Paper, issued in May 2013, used the term to advocate closer cooperation with Tokyo and Washington.^{xxxii} The term was also taken up in the Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2015 which articulated the need for a stronger presence within the relevant region.^{xxxiii} The shift of emphasis in US policy from the Asia Pacific to the Indo-Pacific was made unmistakably clear during US President Trump’s tour to the region as he toured Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, China and Philippines in his first year of presidency. Throughout his visit he made repeated references to the term Indo-Pacific while emphasizing the US role within the region.^{xxxiv} In the last month of 2017, the US issued the National Security Strategy 2017 which designated China and Russia as “revisionist powers” seeking to upend the US led global order while emphasizing the need to ‘protect the homeland, advance US prosperity, safeguard peace through strength and expand American influence.’^{xxxv} Subsequently in May 2018, the Pentagon changed the name of its PACOM (Pacific Command) to Indo-Pacific Command in a move to signify the integrated security linkages. In doing so, the US seeks to strengthen its relations and modernize its alliances to sustain its global leadership in the 21st century as well as to safeguard the national interests of its partners and allies.

The US encourages India to guard the critical chokepoints connecting the two Oceans through narrow passageways. Of these the Malacca Strait is a critical chokepoint through which more than half of India’s own trade passes and reaches onto the major economies of the region.^{xxxvi} In addition, Indian islands in the Bay of Bengal working as key naval outposts, located in close proximity to the Straits of Malacca enable the country to perform such a role that entails securing uninterrupted passage for international maritime traffic while having the ability to obstruct it in case a contingency arises. Additionally, India is capitalizing on its past relations with states in Southeast Asia.

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Initially in 1990s, the 'Look East Policy' guided India's outlook towards Southeast Asian states to seek new economic and political partners. For over two decades India's relations with states in that region centered largely on building economic ties and promoting two way trade. Since the early 2000s the scope of engagements has been expanded to include strategic cooperation with key states within the entire Asia Pacific region.

With the coming into power of the BJP government India announced its "Act East Policy" in 2014 which was in line with what the US had been urging India to do for many years.^{xxxvii} The new policy was marked with vivid strategic overtones as desired by the US. A year later, the Indian Navy followed through and issued the Indian Maritime Doctrine 2015.^{xxxviii} The document calls for the Indian Navy to assume a proactive role within the Indo-Pacific region. Key strategic areas of interest within the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific are expanded and the resolve of India's naval forces to undertake security responsibilities within the Indian Ocean is reiterated. In order to effectively perform this role, India requires a rapid build-up of its naval forces and assistance with regard to resources and competencies. The US is willing to support the development of Indian naval forces to such an extent that they can assist in the attainment of US objectives in the region. This in turn would also be beneficial for India that seeks to develop a blue water navy with distant outreach and thereby realize its great power ambitions.

Implications of Indo-US Naval Cooperation for China

To a great extent, US perceptions towards India as a strategic partner have been influenced by the rapid economic and military ascendance of China. India's geo-strategic position as South Asia's largest state, a rising economic and military power and its aspirations for global leadership make it the appropriate counterweight to Asia's largest and most powerful state. More so, from the US perspective, India's democratic character offers a greater reassurance as compared to a Communist styled Chinese system of governance. The US recognizes that despite

its limitations, China is the only state that can present a viable challenge to the US global supremacy and its established world order.

When the US announced its Rebalancing policy almost a decade ago, it heralded a return of US strategic presence to the region. The decision to base sixty percent of its naval forces within the Asia-Pacific^{xxxix} indicated its intention to disentangle itself from the conflicts in the Middle East and Europe and to focus on the emerging developments in the region. A proactive defence and economic engagement policy focused on strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones. Enabling regional actors within Asia Pacific to deepen collaboration with one another in order to counter rising Chinese military power was an important constituent of the new approach. Such an eventuality could raise the specter of conflict and lead to the possibility of armed confrontation.

States within the Indo-Pacific region have experienced decades of steady growth with China as the major economic powerhouse. Conversely, at the same time, maritime and territorial conflicts have also intensified. Any breakout of hostilities could reverse decades of progress and seriously undermine the prospects of a shared future within the context of the ‘Asian century’. China therefore proposes regional solutions to regional problems with relevant stakeholders and dissuades ‘outsiders’ that do not have a direct claim in the disputes from interfering.

China for its part does not seek military confrontation. Economic growth of PRC is foremost goal of the Communist Party of China (CCP). The country has achieved many economic milestones since the economic reforms of the 1970s^{xi} and emerged as the largest trading partner for many states in the region. Surpassing the EU in 2020, ASEAN has become the largest bloc to trade with China with an overall volume of \$ 731.9 billion. Despite having maritime contentions, in the year 2020, ASEAN became the largest trading partner of China with a bilateral trade volume exceeding 731 billion dollars. China’s trade volume with the European Union stood at 711 billion dollars for the same time period.^{xli} Therefore, seeking

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confrontation is reckless and counterproductive to decades of growth and planning. Since India and the US do not have a direct claim to any of these disputes therefore, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has asked them to stay out of the region's affairs.

On the contrary, it is pertinent to mention that while India does not have any maritime contentions with China, the two states have an outstanding border dispute that resulted in a brief war in 1962, won by the latter. The two states have an estimated 3500 km long border which is disputed along various points. Border skirmishes have taken place in the past but have become more frequent since 2013.^{xlii} In 2017, during the faceoff between the two sides in Doklam, India was able to stand its ground indicating to domestic audiences that Modi would not bow down to Chinese pressure. However Galwan has been by far the greatest challenge to the bilateral relationship in over four decades. The latest confrontational exchange started in May 2020 across the Pangong Lake and by June the two countries engaged in a major military escalation that left over twenty Indian and an unconfirmed number of Chinese troops dead in a hand to hand scuffle with improvised weapons such as clubs and stones.^{xliii} Following this, extensive buildup of forces by both sides along the border was witnessed in subsequent months raising the possibility of an all-out war. In order to mediate the rising tensions, diplomatic efforts to bring an end to the standoff resulted in the partial withdrawal of troops in February 2021 during the ninth round of negotiations. While the de-escalation of tensions has been welcomed by both sides, it is at best a tactical move. In the long run, the event has substantially altered India's perceptions with regards to China and vice versa. The breakdown of trust will continue to dominate Sino-Indian ties for the foreseeable future and will possibly draw India even closer to the US in a bid to ward off Chinese assertiveness. In keeping with the aforesaid, the Himalayan border dispute is likely to remain a central preoccupation in Indian calculations for the foreseeable time.^{xliv}

With the US assistance, India is striving to acquire a strategic advantage within the Indo-Pacific against China. With India's

naval command the in Bay of Bengal and American bases in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, Indo-US naval cooperation can potentially obstruct the transshipment of China's oil and trade with much of the world at important choke points. It is noteworthy that in terms of global traffic, the Indian Ocean has surpassed the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and China is dependent on unhindered oil and trade passage across these choke points and Sea lanes of Communication (SLOC) to fuel and sustain its economy. India has strengthened its naval position at strategically important locations within the Indian Ocean. In case of a military confrontation with China along their disputed border, the Indian Navy could potentially restrict PLAN's entry into the Indian Ocean via the Malacca or Sunda Straits with the consequence of inflicting heavy damages to the Chinese economy. In wake of the June 2020 border clashes between India and China, Indo-US naval cooperation has taken on greater significance. Just a few weeks after the incident, an American nuclear powered aircraft carrier arrived to hold maritime exercises with India within the Bay of Bengal so as to communicate that the US stands by India to promote an Open and Free Indo-Pacific.^{xlv}

Having started in 1992 between India and the US, the Malabar naval exercises also invited Japan as a permanent member in 2015.^{xlvi} Australia has been an infrequent member and participated in the joint drills after 13 years in December 2020.^{xlvii} It is noteworthy that Australia was not invited to MALABAR between 2008 and 2020 by India. Australia had coordinated with the navies of the US, Japan and India in the aftermath of the cataclysmic Tsunami in 2004 for rescue, relief and rehabilitation efforts. Basing on their previous experience of joint collaboration, a trilateral security dialogue was established in 2006 between the US, Japan and Australia.^{xlviii} The next year, the US, India and Japan conducted their first naval exercises in 2007 and in May of the same year representatives of the four states met at the sidelines of the ARF meeting to give shape to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. However, a change of government in Canberra led to a new approach towards China leading to its exit from the Quad.^{xlix} In 2017, Australia approached India to participate

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within the Malabar exercise but the request was declined. The final breakthrough was arrived in 2020 when India extended an invitation to Australia to participate within the naval exercises marking a shift in its strategic hedging policy and a greater resolve to engage with Australia and other like-minded states within the Indo-Pacific. As China and India's militaries have come to blows in recent years, India is seeking a closer strategic alignment with Australia that could become the basis of an enduring partnership in the future. The coordinated exercises are aimed at building of strategic trust and joint coordination for maintaining security in the region.

Since 2007 the Malabar drills have altered between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. Recently the naval exercises have taken place in Japanese waters in 2016 and 2019; near the US Island, Guam in 2018; and off the coast of India in 2020. Such large-scale military exercises are aimed at detecting PLANs submarine forces and promoting US-India presence in the region according to the Global Times, the official mouth piece of the Chinese government. These naval exercises in the disputed waters signal a closer strategic understanding between the three states. India's Malabar exercises with Japan and the US, and an infrequent participant like Australia are a case in point where there is a structure to periodically undertake joint operability. The resulting matrix could form the basis of an expanded Indian naval influence within the Western Pacific much to the preference of the US.

The Conclusion of Logistical Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in August 2016 provides logistical access to one another's naval bases for refueling and refurbishment. This implies that Indian Navy will expand its influence and outreach within the Indian Ocean by utilizing military facilities in Diego Garcia. Additionally, India and the US signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in September 2018 which allows India to use US developed secure and encrypted communications systems that can be used for its naval operations. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement was also

signed on October 26, 2020 and allows India access to geo-spatial information through US satellite systems enabling it to hit targets with a high degree of precision. Additionally, the South Asian country has concluded an agreement to access facilities at the French base on Reunion Island. France shown interest in multilateral efforts in the Indo-Pacific.¹ More so, since 2007 the Indian navy has regularly deployed as far ahead in Western Pacific as Vladivostok to conduct naval exercises with Russia.^{li}

Also, in an Indian-led initiative, Milan naval exercises have been conducted with sixteen other navies in 2018. The Indian Navy also participates within the US-led multilateral RIMPAC exercise (Rim of the Pacific).^{lii} These initiatives are aimed at limiting the PLAN's naval choices within the Western Pacific where it shares several maritime disputes. Simultaneously the actions also contribute towards countering growing Chinese influence within the Indian Ocean; an area which India considers its strategic backyard.

China's Response

While Indo-US naval cooperation is largely a geo-strategic initiative, China's response has been the launch of a grand geo-economic strategy. Consolidating its control over its immediate periphery, China is also strengthening its influence abroad by incentivizing economic engagement. The One Road One Belt (OBOR) also called the BRI initiated in 2013 seeks to develop overland and maritime routes to connect markets in the East to those in the West. Conceived as a part of the BRI, the Maritime Silk Route is Beijing's response to the US and India's security strategy. The BRI aims to engage regional states, by providing economic opportunities and close partnerships whereas the same will also serve as a diplomatic lever enhancing China's international profile.

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (Overland and Maritime Routes)

Source: "One Belt One Road: Implications for the European Union", European Union, Academic Programme, Hong Kong, June 2, 2015, <http://euap.hkbu.edu.hk/main/one-belt-one-road-implications-for-the-european-union/>

Under the project China aims at connecting the mainland with the markets in Europe and oil fields in the Persian Gulf and Africa across Asia and via the Indian Ocean. The massive infrastructure project includes construction of roads, rails and optical fiber networks along with the establishment of electricity generating power plants and industries as well as the establishment of industrial hubs and trading centres. The BRI is in effect an extension of China's "Go West" strategy wherein China has been looking forward to connecting its vast and resource rich Xinjiang province to its developed east coast along with its interior provinces. The proposed Chinese strategy would create the necessary logistical and infrastructural support for Chinese overseas investments; it could also provide alternative transportation routes to Chinese energy and trade interests in Europe and Africa that are otherwise dominated by US and its allies in and around the critical maritime junctions of the Indo-Pacific in wake of growing Indo-US maritime interoperability.

Simultaneously, as a consequence of its rapid economic growth over the past four decades, China has been effectively directing its resources towards the development and modernization of its

armed forces. As its power based expands both economically and militarily, it has begun vigorously pursuing its maritime and territorial claims that were, so to say 'dormant' almost a decade and half ago.^{liii} It has become more capable and willing to exercise its power capabilities in the pursuance of its national interests. As China continues the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea and steps up its naval presence around the Senkaku islands within the East China Sea, there is a growing sense of unease amongst regional states about its intentions. Confrontation with India during the Doklam crisis in 2017 and Galwan in 2020 as well as pressure on Taiwan have contributed towards this perception. Additionally, India for its part is critical of China's BRI strategy. CPEC, which is a central corridor of the megaproject passes through the Gilgit Baltistan area which is claimed by India. It also views China's increased engagements within South Asia as interference within its immediate neighborhood where it could be found competing for influence within its own regional periphery.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

The Quadrilateral initiative is an informal mechanism that is beginning to take a more cogent form due to the geo-political uncertainties associated with the rise of China. Joint collaboration initially begun as a response to the 2004 Tsunami off in the Indian Ocean where joint naval collaboration contributed towards rescue and relief missions. Initially proposed by Shinzo Abe in 2007, the Quad sought to explore and extend possibilities of cooperation between India, United States of America, Japan and Australia in response to China's rising economic and military power. However, the idea was soon disbanded after China issued strong diplomatic protests to the participating members following a naval exercise between the Quad and Singapore in October 2007.^{liv} Domestic political changes within Japan and Australia a few months later also contributed towards the unravelling of the Quad initiative.^{lv}

However within the past decade or so perceptions regarding China's intentions have changed considerably. Member states believe that on most contentious matters pertaining to Chinese interests, it has shown a greater propensity to use force.

Apprehensions regarding China's artificial island building in the SCS, Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) declaration in the East China Sea, assertions against Taiwan and the resultant consequences of its BRI including access to ports and economic diplomacy have all contributed to the need of adopting a combined approach to 'reset' the balance of power within the Indo-Pacific.^{lvi} The India-China standoff in 2017 and subsequently in 2020 have considerably shaped India's approach towards the Quad after the realization that it cannot independently withstand the Chinese pressure. India has taken more than a decade to put its weight behind the initiative which is aimed at checking Beijing's expanding military clout. Australia too has expressed a greater commitment to the Quad and aligned itself in a more self-assured way with the US led order within the Indo-Pacific. Resultantly, the Quad negotiations were revived in November 2017 and it was agreed to hold regular consultations in the future.

Through the framework of the Quad, the members seek to constrain China's naval assertions by establishing a coalition of forces making Beijing more amenable to international maritime laws. But it needs to be seen to what extent the Quad's participating states are practically willing to take action in order to address the challenges emanating from China. While the US views an expansion of Chinese maritime influence as a zero sum equation, India fears encirclement, Japan's concerns are related to potential disruption of energy supply routes, and Australia is concerned with reducing China's interference in domestic politics by joining the Quad.^{lvii} Parties to the Quad agree there is a need to ensure an inclusive and rule-based Indo-Pacific region in a bid to shape China's strategy in a more benign direction. To add substance to the Indo-Pacific strategy, leaders of the US, India, Japan and Australia agreed to hold a virtual meeting for the Quadrilateral Security Initiative on 12 March 2021.^{lviii} By bringing the Quad to the fore from the shadows, leaders of the four countries hope to instill life in the joint initiative and deliver a strong message to China that it would not be allowed to influence the strategic choices of regional states based on its superior military capabilities

From the Chinese perspective, the initiatives reeks of Cold War containment strategies and would prove to be counter-productive. Mutual threat perceptions and pervasive distrust have the potential to initiate a strategic misstep that could potentially thrust the entire region into armed conflict. If the Quad were to assume a more direct military role directed explicitly against China, it could lead to open hostility and risk a major confrontation. However, as it appears for now the member states are adopting a pragmatic, proactive and cautious approach stressing democratic norms, abidance of International Law, and ensuring the safety and security of all regional states under the 'open and free Indo-Pacific' concept.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The incompatibility of interests between the India and the United States vis-a-vis China indicate that their geo-strategic rivalry is likely to play out in the future, particularly within the Indo-Pacific region. Emerging great powers are usually dissatisfied with the existing power system and strive to change it to their advantage, while the global hegemon seeks to preserve that system in order to maintain its supremacy. The scenario is not managed appropriately often results in collision course that is likely to end in conflict.^{lix} Within the stated region, the US is vigorously pursuing a strategy of defence collaborations with like-minded states to make China's behavior amenable and to dissuade it from using coercive tactics against smaller regional states. However, containment strategies against China are unlikely to achieve the desired result. It possesses one of the world's most powerful armies and is economically enmeshed with in the international system in a way the erstwhile Soviet Union was simply not.

More so, despite its growing power capabilities, China most of the time has not been a disruptive force to the status quo. Instead, it has benefitted from the US led global order, profited from its economic liberalization and has not sought expansion in overseas territories. On the contrary China has in general discouraged violent means for dispute resolution. However, it has been persistent about its core national interests which

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include Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. In 2009 a leading Chinese representative, also defined the South China Sea as a “core interest”.^{lx} Most of these claims are based on historical justifications tracing it back to the Western Han Dynasty^{lxi} while regional states invoke international law in support of their maritime claims. To offer its support, the US has challenged China’s assertions by conducting FONOPs in the disputed waters with its allies and partners. The aim is to communicate to China that smaller states cannot be forced into making concessions because of its superior economic and military power. Also, that regional powers such as India, Australia and Japan will rally with the US in support of an open and free Indo-Pacific. Steps towards establishing the Quad as a regular feature of the diplomacy between the major democracies of the region is likely to contribute to the regional order and could evolve into a more reliable mechanism with the potential to impact the Indo-Pacific region.

Additionally, despite the differences, mutual threat perceptions can be managed through a steady exchange of communication between the relevant stakeholders. Parties to the territorial and maritime disputes should be encouraged to resolve their issues through the use of confidence building measures and diplomatic initiatives. Regional organizations such as ASEAN can play an important role in bringing the disputing parties to the negotiating table. China and India are already members of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN. Both are amongst the first states to have signed this treaty with ASEAN in 2003. The treaty which has over a dozen signatories was also signed by the US in 2009.^{lxii} International norms, good practices and a cooperative approach to the regional problems should be promoted. While rivalries are expected to grow within the future within the Indo-Pacific region, they do not necessarily have to escalate into an armed conflict and can be managed through cooperative initiatives subject to political will.

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