



135 / 21

12 MAY 2021

DEEPENING INDO-U.S. STRATEGIC MARITIME CONVERGENCE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

RUSHALI SAHA

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies

On March 31, the Indian Navy completed a two-day passage 'PASSEX' exercise with the United States Navy in the eastern Indian Ocean.¹ Unlike previous PASSEX exercises, this time Indian Air Force fighters were also included to practice "air interception and air defence with the U.S. Navy."² In July 2020, India conducted this exercise with the U.S. carrier strike group led by USS Nimitz—one of the largest warships in the world—passing through the Indian Ocean Region.³ According to officials, the latest PASSEX exercises were aimed at "consolidating the synergy and interoperability" achieved during the Malabar exercises held in November 2020.⁴

India now conducts more military exercises—including a tri-service exercise since 2019—with the United States. This is emblematic of the deepening defence collaboration between the two countries. Naval relations have been a prominent aspect of the U.S.-India defense relations with observers suggesting that the U.S.-India navy-to-navy relationship is "already the best performing area of the bilateral partnership."⁵ Indian navy's participation in Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)—the world's largest naval exercise hosted by the United States—as a participant in 2014 and 2018, after being an observer in 2006, 2010, 2012⁶ is a welcome development in bilateral maritime relations. The burgeoning maritime ties between Washington and New Delhi come at a crucial geopolitical moment as the free and open rules-

based Indo-Pacific order is under threat because of Beijing's increasingly aggressive actions motivated by its expansionist territorial and maritime ambitions.

Evolution of U.S-India Naval-Military Relations

In the maritime sector, the US and India began cooperation by forming the Indo-US naval steering committee in 1991. One of the earliest steps in initiating bilateral defence contacts was through the Malabar exercise series, beginning in 1992. Since 2002, the exercises have continued annually and have increased in scope and complexity with the inclusion of anti-submarine warfare tactics, VBSS (visit, board search, and seizure operations), sea control missions, etc. In 2007, there were two Malabar exercises—one in the Bay of Bengal and the other in the Western Pacific—which for the first time was expanded to include Japan, Australia, and Singapore.⁷ Since 2009, the maritime exercise has been conducted alternatively in Indian and Pacific Oceans, with Japan taking part whenever it was conducted near its borders, until its formal inclusion in 2015.⁸ In 2020, India invited Australia to take part in the exercise, after having previously rejected Canberra's request to join in 2017 on grounds that more naval engagement at the bilateral level was necessary before entering multilateral engagements.⁹

Bilateral cooperation has expanded beyond military exercises and today both navies conduct

“naval staff talks, port visits, distinguished visitor visits and a wide array of personnel as well as subject matter exchanges through multilateral naval and security conferences.”¹⁰ In this mutually beneficial partnership, India’s seasoned forces, who are especially adept in handling terror induced situations, offer a lot in training U.S. forces for anti-piracy operations— while the U.S. Navy’s possession of high-quality military technology is an advantage for defence technical cooperation as the Indian navy currently lags in the development of indigenous manufacturing technology.

Indo-U.S. Maritime Cooperation in Indo-Pacific

In 2011, former U.S. Prime minister Barack Obama announced a “pivot” to Asia Pacific, which entailed a renewed strong military commitment to the region.¹¹ In little less than a year, the U.S. Department of Defence declared that 60 percent of its naval assets would be stationed under the U.S. Pacific Command.¹² Under the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy, India has been accorded a key position as revealed in the declassified US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific.¹³

U.S. interest to preserve its predominant position in the Indian Ocean is in sync with India’s efforts to bolster its regional influence beyond its immediate neighborhood, into the Indo-Pacific. Both sides understand that alone, the vast expanse of the ocean makes it impossible for any one country to cover the region in its entirety. This was reflected in the *U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region* announced in 2015.¹⁴ India embraced its maritime identity and began to look at the Indian Ocean as a strategic region in the 1990s within the ambit of the Look East policy. However, Look East was primarily an economically focused strategy that aimed at building trade and commercial ties with the East Asia tigers. Although commercial drivers remain important, military and security concerns as drivers of India’s engagement with the region are gaining

India’s seasoned forces, who are especially adept in handling terror induced situations, offer a lot in training U.S. forces for anti-piracy operations— while the U.S. Navy’s possession of high-quality military technology is an advantage for defence technical cooperation.

prominence because of China’s increasing military capabilities and ambitions. India’s Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) vision, emphasizes the need to protect the free, open, inclusive regional order from security threats. The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) have particular significance for maritime relations, as most of the cooperative activities falling within their ambit will take place in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—comprising the United States of America, Australia, Japan, and

India—in 2017 is another attempt by the four major democracies in the region to address threats to the rules-based order. New Delhi and Washington have ratcheted their anti-submarine warfare cooperation through military exercises and information sharing on the

movement of Chinese submarines and ships in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶

Challenges?

Contours of Indo-Pacific

While the expanding geographical focus of bilateral naval relationships has offered ample opportunities, it also comes with a handful of challenges. It remains unclear whether the United States and India agree over the geographical expanse of the Indo-Pacific. Washington officially defined the Indo-Pacific region in its 2017 National Security Strategy as stretching from “the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”¹⁷— excluding the east coast of Africa, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal— whereas the Indian vision incorporates the entire Indian Ocean and Africa.¹⁸ A stable and secure environment in the Indian Ocean is crucial for India, given its geographical proximity. By continuing to view the entire region only through the Pacific lens, Washington risks ignoring the unique features of the Indian Ocean which it can use to its advantage. The explicit mention of

“deepening of the US-India Major Defence Partnership and advancing cooperation between our countries for a free prosperous and open Indo-Pacific and *Western Indian Ocean Region*” (emphasis added) as the talking points of U.S. Secretary Lloyd Austin’s recent visit¹⁹ has however raised hopes that both countries will move steadily to achieve greater congruence in their regional vision.

Operationalizing Coordination in Western Indian Ocean

The artificial division of the Indian Ocean by the U.S. military, into eastern and western sections with the former under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the latter under U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Central Command respectively poses challenges for bilateral cooperation.²⁰ Indian navy currently has close relations with only the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, creating operational and logistical problems in coordinating activities in the region. The U.S. National Defence Authorization Act for the year 2020 incorporates amendments to improve military coordination in the Western Indian Ocean Region (IOR) However; such a massive geostrategic revision is likely to take time and serious financial resources to materialize.

U.S. Bases on Diego Garcia

The question of U.S. presence in the Diego Garcia islands is another important factor in US-India relations. India has long opposed U.S. bases on Diego Garcia, with former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi describing it as an attempt to militarize the Indian Ocean.²¹ India was among the 116 nations which voted in favor of a UNGA resolution demanding the UK to withdraw its “colonial administration” from the Chagos archipelago—where the U.S. has a major base—unconditionally within six months.²² However, the

non-binding nature of the resolution has prolonged the status quo and still keeps space open for a negotiated settlement.

Ties with Russia

With U.S.-Russia relations at a nadir, India’s long-standing defence relationship with Kremlin is now creating stress in burgeoning U.S.-India ties. The U.S. lawmakers have been obstinate on not giving India a waiver from Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for

acquiring Russian S-400, and even warning that future delivery of the weapon system could “put a ceiling on how far the relationship (India-U.S.) can go.”²³

Diverging Views on Freedom of Navigation

India and United States hold different views on the freedom of navigation in a country’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ). Questions of passage rights through a country’s EEZ are not a formal part of international maritime law, which is left upon the sole discretion of the coastal state. India, by law, requires all foreign warships to give prior notification when passing

through its EEZ. India’s ratification of UNCLOS was premised on the understanding that it did not grant other states the right to carry out exercises on its EEZ without permission. The United States, which is yet to ratify the UNCLOS, has repeatedly challenged the “excessive claim” of India for demanding the U.S. Navy to get prior permission for conducting exercises within

its EEZ.²⁴ This issue flared up recently when US Navy’s Seventh Fleet USS John Paul Jones conducted freedom of navigation operations in India’s EEZ without prior notification. In the past, New Delhi has largely been accommodative of US FONOP operations, however, the current crisis has caused considerable unease within the Indian strategic community. Now, with both countries

The artificial division of the Indian Ocean by the U.S. military, into eastern and western sections with the former under U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the latter under U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Central Command respectively poses challenges for bilateral cooperation.

India’s ratification of UNCLOS was premised on the understanding that it did not grant other states the right to carry out exercises on its EEZ without permission. The United States, which is yet to ratify the UNCLOS, has repeatedly challenged the “excessive claim” of India for demanding the U.S. Navy to get prior permission for conducting exercises within its EEZ.

jointly opposing Chinese attempts to disrupt the status quo in the South China Sea,²⁵ and global support for a free and open order, diplomatic dialogue on contentious, yet important bilateral issues such as this, becomes a geopolitical imperative.

Conclusion

India and United States' defence and security relations have to be seen as a subset of their larger strategic partnership which is unique in itself, different from the kind Washington enjoys with some of its closest partners. India has come a long way in overcoming its historic hesitations to nurture military cooperation with Washington. Similarly, Washington has adjusted its position to accommodate India's sensitivities towards maintaining strategic autonomy. These are signs of a maturing partnership. There is great potential for both countries to work together in the Indo-Pacific but it is imperative for both sides to address the hiccups emerging from the divergence in their respective strategic positions in the region.

There is great potential for both countries to work together in the Indo-Pacific but it is imperative for both sides to address the hiccups emerging from the divergence in their respective strategic positions in the region.

nation/2018/jun/30/ rimpac-india-takes-part-in-worlds-largest-naval-exercise-1835852.html. Accessed on April 2, 2021

⁷ Adarsha Verma, "The Malabar Exercises: An Appraisal," *The Malabar Exercises: An Appraisal*, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, July 18, 2017, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/the-malabar-exercises_averma_180717. Accessed on April 2, 2021

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Elizabeth Roche, "India Hasn't 'Closed Door' on Australia Joining Malabar Exercises," *mint*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/4Up1mGAcK11OacZ9hF2jcP/India-hasnt-closed-door-on-Australia-joining-Malabar-exer.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

¹⁰ S Amer Latif, "U.S.-India Military Engagement Steady as They Go," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2012, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/121213_Latif_USIndiaMilEngage_Web.pdf. Accessed on April 2, 2021

¹¹ "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," White House, 17 November 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/. Accessed on April 2, 2021

¹² PTI, "US Navy to Have 60% Surface Ships in Indo-Asia Pacific Region," *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-navy-to-have-60-surface-ships-in-indo-asia-pacific-region/articleshow/51778769.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on April 1, 2021

¹³ Tara Kartha, "In Declassified US' Secret Indo-Pacific Strategy, India Is Central, Pakistan Has Fallen Out," *The Print*, January 18, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/a-lot-has-changed-in-us-strategic-outlook-india-at-centre-of-plan-pakistan-has-fallen-out/587342/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021.

¹⁴ "US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 25, 2015, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl%2F24728%2FUSIndia_Joint_Strategic_Vision_for_the_AsiaPacific_and_Indian_Ocean_Region#:~:text=To%20support%20regional%20economic%20integration,people%2Dto%2Dpeople%20linkag Accessed on April 1, 2021

¹⁵ Vivek Mishra, "Indo-US Security Cooperation: Implications for the Indian Ocean," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 13, no. 1 (May 9, 2017): pp. 73-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2017.1315890>. Accessed on April 1, 2021

¹⁶ IANS, "Indian, US Navies Hold Anti Submarine Warfare Exercise," *The Hindu*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indian-us-navies-hold-anti-submarine-warfare-exercise/article26903138.ece>. Accessed on April 2, 2021. Accessed on April 2, 2021

Notes:

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

² Ibid.

³ Rahul Singh, "8 Indian, US Warships Conduct Maritime Drills in Indian Ocean," *Hindustan Times*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/8-indian-us-warships-conduct-maritime-drills-in-indian-ocean/story-WwAcBU0FyKbrwJLr05aGP.html>. Accessed on April 1, 2021

⁴ n.1

⁵ Abhijit Singh, "Searching for a High Note in the U.S.-India Maritime Partnership," *War on the Rocks*, May 4, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/searching-for-a-high-note-in-the-u-s-india-maritime-partnership/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

⁶ Ramananda Sengupta, "RIMPAC: India Takes Part in World's Largest Naval Exercise," *The New Indian Express*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/>

¹⁷ Donald Trump, "2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 19, 2017, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/2017-national-security-strategy-united-states-america-president/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

¹⁸ "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)," Ministry of External Affairs, June 1, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F29943%2FPrime%2BMinisters%2BKeynote%2Baddress%2Bat%2BShangri%2BLa%2BDialogue%2BJune%2B01%2B>. Accessed on May 10, 2021

¹⁹ Yashwant Raj, "The Western Indian Ocean Region Matters," *Hindustan Times*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/the-western-indian-ocean-region-matters-101615569099783.html>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

²⁰ Singh, n.5

²¹ S. P. Seth, "The Indian Ocean and Indo-American Relations," *Asian Survey* 15, no. 8 (January 1975): pp. 645-655. Accessed on April 2, 2021

²² PTI, "India Votes in Favour of UNGA Resolution Demanding UK Withdraw from Chagos Archipelago," *The Hindu*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/>

<international/india-votes-in-favour-of-unga-resolution-demanding-uk-withdraw-from-chagos-archipelago/article27215087.ece>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

²³ Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, "Russian Arms Sale Clouds U.S.-India Ties," *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/19/russia-india-defense-secretary-lloyd-austin-s-400-china-arms-sales/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

²⁴ Manoj Joshi, "What 'Excessive Maritime Claims' Is the US Challenging India Over?," *The Wire*, May 2, 2016, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/resolving-issue-of-excessive-maritime-claims-is-important-for-india-and-us>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

²⁵ Shubhajit Roy, "US Note Echoes 8 Earlier Ones but Its No-Consent Clause for China, India," *The Indian Express*, April 11, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/us-note-echoes-8-earlier-ones-but-its-no-consent-clause-for-china-india-7268327/>. Accessed on April 2, 2021

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



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies
P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.