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Indo-US Naval Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

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The Indian envoy to the United States, Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu, recently labelled navy-to-navy cooperation as “one of the most dynamic and significant components” of the India-US defence partnership.¹ Defence ties between New Delhi and Washington have grown considerably over the past few years. The two have shared a vibrant partnership dotted with ministerial dialogues, exercises, and agreements.

The US has labelled India its ‘strategic partner’ in the Indo-Pacific and a ‘net-security provider’ in an increasingly turbulent Asian order. Much of this can be credited to India’s growth as a maritime power and its influence in the Indian Ocean Region, especially as Chinese expansion and power projection demand naval attention from both powers.

Naval policy in the Indo-Pacific

Indian foreign policy associates an expansive vision with its naval fleet. The Navy is a valuable instrument of power projection, an envoy for partnerships, and an increasingly significant entity in the regional and global maritime domain. Within the Indian Ocean, the western region has remained a theatre of priority for the Navy. Important chokepoints dot this geography, explaining naval efforts to sustain relationships with countries in the region. Djibouti, located along the Bab al-Mandeb strait, is a good example. In recent years, the Navy has also focused on reiterating naval relationships with the Indian Ocean littorals and countries along the Malacca Strait. Initiatives like SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and exercises like MILAN have reinforced these efforts.

The US Navy has a ‘globally-distributed, mission-tailored’² naval fleet which is an important agent of American geopolitical and economic interests and values. As per the Indian Ocean, the US Navy maintains a large naval footprint. While it does not have a separate fleet command for the ocean, its fifth, sixth, and seventh fleets operate in the region. Against the background of Chinese expansionism, American maritime interests in the region have grown.

Naval interests and engagements

US perception of China is increasingly gaining maritime orientation and reasonably, so. Through its seemingly commercial ventures, China has scattered its presence through ports and development projects, while simultaneously growing the largest navy in the world.

India, with a long coastline and considerable influence in the ocean named after it, is a fitting partner for the US. This is reflected in the increased list of agreements “tailor-made” for India, signed

between the two in 2016.³ The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) have all aided the Indian Navy's access to American-origin intelligence systems and weaponry, while positively affecting navy-to-navy interoperability.⁴ A number of '2+2' dialogues have also sown seeds for defence trade, shifting the Indo-US dynamic from 'buyer-seller' to that of 'co-production', eventually giving India the status of a 'Major Defense Partner.'⁵

In addition, the two navies have also engaged in exercises to build interoperability. The Indian Navy joined the U.S. Africa Command's (USAFRICOM) Cutlass Exercise for the first time in 2021 and the Rim of Pacific exercise for the third time in 2022. The Malabar exercise marked the first military exercise engaged in by all four QUAD countries.

The maritime interests of the two extend beyond the military. The US and India find a convergence in their interests related to free sea lanes. While India has a stake in oil imports, the US is interested in promoting the values of a liberal world order. The two make their own headway in protecting chokepoints. Their difference in advantages and convergence of interests produce a somewhat fitting arrangement, at least for the short term. While the US remains the power that can 'shape' Indian Ocean events,⁶ India's advantage lies in proximity, especially in the context of the 'Malacca Dilemma'- a strategic tool against the PRC. Reaffirmed US commitments in the West Asian region stand to tighten security along the Hormuz and Bab El-Mandeb straits, both of which are important Indian import routes.

Challenges and the way forward

Naval ties between the two are not without tensions. Historically averse to military alliances, India doggedly guards its strategic autonomy in engaging with the US. Delhi chooses a 'parallel' way of working, avoiding any inflexible modes of partnership. The threat of resurfacing US-Pak relations also looms in the background.⁷ While some scholarship predicts these ties to be short-lived even if they resurface,⁸ India remains cautious. The US views the general difference in capacity as a challenge. The presence of Russian equipment in the Indian inventories is also seen as offsetting in terms of interoperability. The allocation of budget shares to the Indian Naval force has also increased only in recent times.

Regardless, navy-to-navy ties between India and the US have grown significantly in the past few years, as can be ascertained from the many agreements and exercises. A recent milestone is the repair of the USNS Charles Drew in Chennai, marking the first American vessel to have been

repaired in India.⁹ It can also be gathered from statements of naval officials that India is integral to US policy in the region.¹⁰ The partnership has scope for more areas of cooperation, including coastal security and joint disaster response. The two navies may also bring back exercises such as the INDIA EX submarine operation or the SPITTING COBRA which they have engaged in in the past.¹¹

US foreign policy has historically viewed a single dominant power in Eurasia as an offsetting factor. As China builds up its naval presence, US efforts will attempt to counter it. The Indian Navy's approach differs. Its significance lies in a tailored approach to relationships with friendly navies, including the US. It pursues engagements with strategic interest at the heart and prudence at hand. The substance of an India-US naval partnership will lie not in the depth of convergence but in the nature of it. The two Indo-Pacific nations imagine a free and open geography, but they must respect each other's means to achieve it.



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- ¹ "India-US Navy cooperation vital for defence ties, says US Ambassador" *Business Standard*, August 25, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-us-navy-cooperation-vital-for-defence-ties-says-indian-envoy-sandhu-122082500272_1.html. Accessed on September 13th 2022.
- ² Avinandan Choudhary and P.Moorthy "Strategic-maritime triangle in the Indian Ocean: An emerging Indo-US Naval Entente" *Indian Quarterly*, Indian Council of World Affairs Volume 74(3) <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/iqq>.
- ³ Rahul Roy Choudhary "US Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean" *Strategic Analysis* (1998) Volume XXII No. 9 https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_98ror01.html#note
- ⁴ 'India and US sign key agreement: LEMOA supports defence cooperation between the two countries' *FirstPost* August 31, 2016, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-and-us-sign-key-agreement-lemoa-supports-defence-cooperation-between-the-countries-2984276.html>. Accessed on September 12th 2022.
- ⁵ Liu, Hongsong. "India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Pragmatic Balancing between the United States and China" *Pacific Focus* (2021), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pafo.12178>
- ⁶ Pawel Paszak "The Malacca Strait, the South China Sea and the Sino-American competition in the Indo-Pacific" *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* (2021) Vol 8 Issue 2 DOI: [10.1177/23477970211017494](https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970211017494). 179
- ⁷ Choudhury, Avinandan, and P. Moorthy. "Strategic-Maritime Triangle in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Indo-US Naval Entente?" *India Quarterly*, Indian Council of World Affairs Volume 74 No, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928418785477>
- ⁸ Samaranayake, Nilanthi, Michael Connell and Satu P. Limaye. "The Future of U.S.-India Naval Relations." *Centre for Naval Analyses* (2017) <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1029962.pdf>
- ⁹ "India-US Navy cooperation vital for defence ties, says US Ambassador" *Business Standard*, August 25, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-us-navy-cooperation-vital-for-defence-ties-says-indian-envoy-sandhu-122082500272_1.html. Accessed on September 13th 2022.
- ¹⁰ "India to play a key role in countering China" *Mint*, August 27, 2022, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-to-play-a-key-role-in-countering-china-says-us-navy-chief-11661599675347.html>. Accessed on September 13th 2022.
- ¹¹ Samaranayake, Nilanthi, Michael Connell and Satu P. Limaye. "The Future of U.S.-India Naval Relations." *Centre for Naval Analyses* (2017) <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1029962.pdf>
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