



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

## INDO-PACIFIC NEWSLETTER



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

### From the Editor's Desk

*This month the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) concluded its 20th Party Congress wherein, Xi Jinping was re-elected for a third term. This implies greater geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific with China's assertive behaviour turning aggressive. Dr S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister visited New Zealand and Australia for the 13th India-Australia Foreign Ministers' framework dialogue. The Biden administration of the US announced its National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy this month which also included the US Coast guard strategy 2022.*

*The Prime Ministers of Japan and Australia signed a Joint Declaration on security cooperation on October 22 and also focussed on the critical minerals partnership between the two nations. This joint declaration on security cooperation aims at securing the Indo-Pacific region by countering China's expansionist behaviour. India also participated in the 29th edition of the Singapore and India bilateral maritime exercise. This month we present specially selected opinions and cherry-picks covering all this and more. Do check out our Social Media Corner for some engaging and insightful content, including debates, interviews and podcasts from eminent experts.*

*Jai Hind*

Vol II, No 06, 07 November 2022

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### PEEP-IN

*Can the Quad Contain China?*

Read on more about it at :-

<https://intpolicydigest.org/can-the-quad-contain-china/>

### QUOTE

*"Growing defence and security cooperation between India and Australia ensures a peaceful, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific".*

*- Dr S. Jaishankar  
External Affairs Minister*

## Opinions/Review/Expert View

## Ream Naval Base Upgrade Project in Cambodia: New Point for Geopolitical Contestation in the Indo-Pacific

Source: DCaptain Kamlesh K Agnihotri, Apila Sangtam, Khath Bunthorn, NMF

<https://maritimeindia.org/ream-naval-base-upgrade-project-in-cambodia-new-point-for-geopolitical-contestation-in-the-indo-pacific/>. 05 Oct 2022.



Heads of state and government from NATO's member countries and key partners are meeting June 29-30, 2022, to discuss security concerns and the alliance's new Strategic Concept. (Emmanuel Dunand/AFP via Getty Images)

This article endeavours to examine, from multiple perspectives, the impact of China's financial and strategic involvement in the Ream Naval Base. Beginning with an evaluation of the decision to develop and modernise Ream from a Cambodian domestic and foreign policy perspective, the article will continue with an exploration of China's strategic interest in this base. The impact of this development upon the broader ASEAN community, as well as on the already deteriorating US-Cambodia relationship, will then be examined. Finally, the emerging

**A resurgent China aspires to be a great maritime power with a vision to maintain a naval presence in distant seas across the globe. Recognising that this presence can only be sustained through logistics and administrative support, Beijing seeks to establish military bases across the Indo-Pacific.**

policy-options for India will be discussed.

Over the past few years, as the geopolitical jockeying between Beijing and Washington has intensified, the possibility of China securing a military base in Cambodia has been in the spotlight. In 2019, The Wall Street Journal reported that China would construct additional jetties and related infrastructure as part of the Ream Naval Base modernisation project. The report alleged that Cambodia had, in this secret deal, agreed to grant China exclusive rights to a certain portion of the newly expanded naval base for 30 years, with the option to extend these rights for additional periods of 10 years at a time.

'Ream', named after 'Lord Rama' — the main protagonist in the Indian epic, Ramayana — is situated in Cambodia's southwestern coastal province of Preah Sihanouk (also known as Sihanoukville). Ream is about 220 km from the national capital Phnom Penh, connected by the American-funded National Road Number 4, which had been built in the

Sangkum era of the mid-1950s. In 2019, construction began on the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway. The US \$2 billion project, funded by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under a build-operate-transfer financial model, is likely to be completed by 2023. Despite being the oldest and largest base in Cambodia, Ream remained underdeveloped for a long time. On June 8, 2022, long overdue plans to upgrade and expand Ream were jointly announced by

Cambodia and China in a public groundbreaking ceremony. The event, however, sparked serious global concerns over China's intended military presence in the kingdom, and the consequent enhancement of its military power-projection capability in the region.

### Cambodian Perspective vis-à-vis Ream Naval Base Developments

Beijing's involvement in the Ream Naval Base expansion project, with the potential for future Chinese military use, is, in fact, an indicator of a much broader Cambodia-China partnership. An overview of the national political backdrop in Cambodia will further illuminate the interplay between domestic politics and the significance of Chinese involvement in Ream in the regional and international theatre.

#### Domestic Political Backdrop in Cambodia

Domestic power politics in Cambodia has been a major force in driving the kingdom progressively into China's embrace while widening its rift with the west. Two main political parties have struggled for power in Cambodian politics — the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). The CNRP — a coalition of the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Human Rights Party (HRP) — emerged as the imminent challenger to Prime Minister Hun Sen's CPP in the 2013 general election. The CNRP won 56 out of

123 seats in the National Assembly, despite alleged polling irregularities by the ruling CPP, resulting in the CPP — which had dominated the Cambodian political arena for over three decades — having its lowest share in the National Assembly since 1998.

A survey conducted by a foreign firm — which appeared to have been hired by Cambodia's high-ranking officials — suggested that the CNRP could supersede the ruling party

**China's engagement with Cambodia to upgrade the Ream Naval Base near Sihanoukville, with a possible objective of securing some part of it as a Chinese naval base, is an example of this. The Ream Naval Base project has elicited much concern from international quarters – the US, and ASEAN countries in particular.**

in the next general election in 2018. Quite determined to stay in power by whatever means necessary, Prime Minister Hun Sen of the CPP enacted the 'Political Party Law' in November of 2017, one year before the general elections and six months after the commune elections which had reinforced the increasing threat of the CNRP. The

CNRP was dissolved by a Supreme Court ruling under the newly enacted law. The reason cited was that the President of the CNRP was involved in treason, allegedly in collusion with US agencies. Concurrently, a five-year ban on active politics was imposed on 118 top party leaders. The dissolution of the only credible opposition party marked a death of sorts for Cambodian democracy. This was also followed by restrictions on press freedom, and the suspension of US affiliated organisations working to promote human rights in the country.

In response, the US imposed sanctions against a variety of individuals in the Cambodian government. In August 2020,

the European Union (EU) withdrew 20 per cent of the EBA (Everything But Arms) trade privileges that had been granted to Cambodia (under which the latter was allowed to export goods to the European market without quotas and tariffs). This partial withdrawal of EBA privileges has cost Cambodia US\$ 1.09 billion annually. In May 2022, the EU further threatened to withdraw the EBA completely if Cambodia did not conduct free and fair commune and national elections in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

The US and the EU combined accounted for over 60% of Cambodia's total exports in 2016, compared to China's share which was only 6 % in the same period. Special trade agreements with the US and EU have helped sustain Cambodia's rapid growth over the past decades, giving the Western world substantial economic leverage in the small nation. Although Phnom Penh has maintained a tough public stance in the face of Western sanctions, the severity of the ensuing economic loss has driven the government to actively take steps to help improve the kingdom's image and enhance its bilateral ties with Washington.

It is instructive to note that just before the dissolution of the CNRP in 2017, Cambodia had suspended its bilateral military exercise ANGKOR SENTINEL with the US Army, which had been an annual feature since 2010. In 2018, the country began the GOLDEN DRAGON military drills with China. A few months thereafter, Phnom Penh also cancelled

its annual counter-terrorism military exercise with Australia. In the run-up to the general election in July 2018 — in which the CPP won all the National Assembly seats — China pledged a US\$ 100 million defence package to Cambodia, becoming its largest military donor besides being the largest creditor, investor and bilateral trading partner of the country.

These actions clearly signalled Cambodia's pivot to China for political backing and as a counterfoil to Western politico-economic pressures. It is through this lens that the US and its regional allies view China's growing military influence in Cambodia

### **Breaking News: Ream Naval Base Modernisation Project**

**While Cambodia cites its constitution to quell these concerns, the absolute power of the current political party renders this a weakened defence. A review of the geographical, naval and political topography of Ream reveals significant strategic and military issues that China will have to resolve in order to leverage a military presence in Cambodia.**

Since July 2019, when The Wall Street Journal broke its story, the Ream Naval Base has remained the subject of headlines in the international media. Some reports, based on satellite imagery, have revealed details of China's construction and upgradation activities, including dredging, landfill, and demolition. In early June 2021, on a visit to Phnom Penh, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, voiced "serious concerns" over China's prospective military presence in the country. The Cambodian Defence Minister, Tea Banh, is reported to have responded with an admission that Beijing was, indeed, helping Cambodia to construct the naval base but with "no strings attached". The US military attaché was also invited to visit the base in June 2021, although the trip apparently

ended in disappointment as the visitors were not allowed access to certain areas.

As recently as June 2022, The Washington Post reported that unnamed yet credible Western officials were

claiming that “China was secretly building a naval facility in Cambodia for the exclusive use of its military” and that the two countries had taken “extraordinary measures to conceal the operation.” While analysts appear to still be unclear about the exact scope of the Chinese-built facilities at Ream, it is speculated that the project will include a new

command centre with meeting- and medical halls, a drydock, a slipway, and two new piers. Dredging to deepen the channel may also take place to allow larger vessels to berth, although the depth to be maintained remains unclear. According to Professor Carl Thayer of the University of New South Wales in Australia, the total area allocated to the Chinese for renovation of the base is about 0.3 square kilometres.

A day after report by The Washington Post, Cambodia’s Defence Minister, Tea Banh, used the ground-breaking ceremony of the Ream Naval Base construction to rebuff the US media report. Citing the attendance of foreign diplomats, including Australian ambassador, Pablo Kang, and Indian ambassador, Devyani Khobragade, the Defence Minister stated:

“I invited our friends to see that there is nothing going on like what is being alleged by

people saying that the Ream base modernisation is for the exclusive use of China’s People’s Liberation Army. It is not true, but they come to these conclusions anyways. It just isn’t possible...”

**China’s involvement in the project has created an Indo-Pacific axis of uneasy informal alliances, with China-Cambodia on one side and US-Vietnam on the other. Further, the ten ASEAN nations and their unity are also impacted by this development, which only exacerbates their negative reaction to China’s unduly aggressive stance on ongoing disputes in the South China Sea.**

Chinese Ambassador, Wang Wentian, also debunked the theory of his country’s ‘exclusive use of the base’ as reported by The Washington Post. Speaking at the ceremony, he clarified:

“This project respects the laws of Cambodia. Honestly speaking, this project has mutual benefits for both countries. But some other countries criticise it with bad

intent. They say wrong things in order to do wrong things...”

To further dispel global concerns, Cambodia organised official visits to the base — a rather unprecedented measure from a nation’s military perspective. A tour for local media reporters and journalists was arranged within weeks of The Wall Street Journal’s report. However, news analysts speculated that they only saw “exactly what the Cambodian government wanted them to see”.

### **Cambodian Constitution and the Ream Naval Base**

As has already been indicated, Cambodian leaders have gone to great lengths to deny the allegation that the country will provide China with exclusive access to as strategically important a location as the Ream Naval Base. They cite the kingdom’s Constitution,

which ‘prohibits foreign military bases on its soil’ and requires it to pursue a foreign policy of ‘permanent neutrality’. They state that the Chinese involvement in Ream falls under a constitutionally given permission for Cambodia to receive defence aid and assistance from a variety of sources to meet the nation’s security challenges — much like any other nation.

Prior to the ASEAN-US Special Summit in Washington DC in May 2022, Cambodian Foreign Minister, Prak Sokhon, who was also the erstwhile Chair of ASEAN, in a briefing to the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, about the Ream Naval Base, emphasised “Cambodia’s adherence to its own constitutional principles in forbidding the presence of foreign military.” On the sidelines of the same meeting, in a press statement along with his US counterpart, Anthony Blinken, Sokhon reiterated Cambodia’s firm adherence to its Constitution on the issue, emphasising that “the renovation of the base served solely to strengthen the Cambodian naval capacities to protect its maritime integrity and combat crimes”. He also delivered a similar message telephonically in response to an inquiry by Penny Wong, the Australian Foreign Minister, about The Washington Post report concerning the Ream Naval Base.

In May 2022, amidst these conflicting narratives concerning the Ream naval base

and Phnom Penh’s all-encompassing embrace of Beijing, Cambodia released its latest Defence White Paper entitled, “National Defence Policy” — a move that could well be interpreted as a direct effort to assuage the general consternation over Ream. The paper outlines the need for the modernisation of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and specifically covers the Ream Naval Base modernisation policy. Quoting the entire Article 53 of the Constitution, it seeks to quell the fears of neighbouring nations, stating that

**With the South China Sea being part of India’s secondary area of maritime interest, there is reasonable scope for the Indian Navy to leverage the additional concern of neighbouring Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, to strengthen naval diplomacy in furtherance of India’s maritime security vis-à-vis China.**

the modernisation of the Ream Naval Base did not aim to “threaten any particular nation in the region while Cambodia did not permit any foreign military base on its sovereign territory”.

However, historical precedent would suggest that the invoking of the Cambodian constitution does not, in fact, provide an ironclad guarantee against granting

China a military presence in Cambodia. In the 1960s, Prince Norodom Sihanouk forged military deals with China and North Vietnam with no regard for the Constitution or, for that matter, the 1954 Geneva Accord. Under those unpublicised deals, China could use the port of Sihanoukville to transport military equipment to Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Prominent opposition leader Sam Rainsy, in self-imposed exile in Paris since 2015, also refutes the Cambodian government’s claim of upholding their Constitution, and has publicly argued that a [Chinese] base in Cambodia only

marks the beginning of China’s designs on democracy in Southeast Asia, stating, “...as if the very existence of the prohibition made a Chinese troop presence impossible.”

The current political stranglehold of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s CPP on the National Assembly further weakens Cambodia’s defence of adherence to the Constitution. With all State institutions, including the National Assembly, under the firm control of the ruling CPP, an amendment-of or exception-to the Constitution to allow China’s military presence in Cambodia is entirely plausible.

### Geopolitical Significance of Ream Naval Base

Despite the insistent chorus of opinions from all players, the crucial questions that remain to be answered are the actual scope of the upgrade and, more significantly, China’s role and future military and/or strategic intent in the Ream Naval Base project. While an answer would require far greater transparency on the part of both protagonists, an analysis of the geographical significance of the base for China and the other nations in the region reveals much.

### Geographical Importance of Ream Naval Base

The Ream Naval Base is located adjacent to the Ream National Park, a heavily forested area on the coastline of the Gulf of Thailand. It is the largest naval base in Cambodia, covering about 190 acres and lies about eight kilometres from the Sihanoukville International Airport. The nearest Vietnamese island, Phu Quoc — pronounced Fu Kuod in Vietnamese — lies barely 15 nautical miles (nm) away, while the

distance to the nearest Vietnamese mainland is 55 nm. Phu Quoc has an international airport with a 3,000 m runway. Figure 1 provides a visual representation.

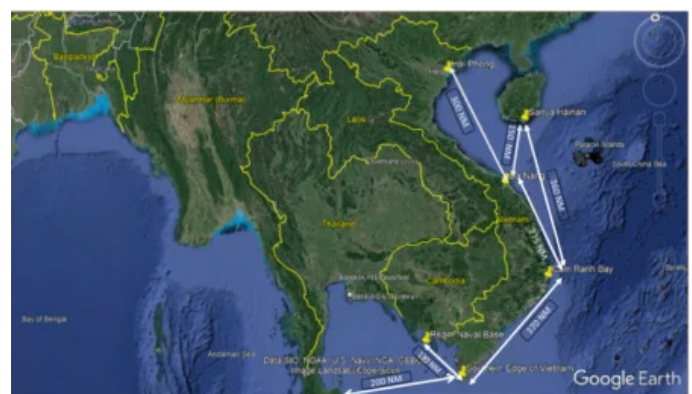
**Figure 1: Location of The Ream Naval Base vis-à-vis Vietnam**



Source: Map from Google Earth; markings by the Authors

A wider perspective brings in the context of the South China Sea and highlights the geopolitical significance of the Ream Naval Base. Ream lies quite deep into the Gulf of Thailand, about 130 nm from the southern tip of Vietnam. Ships heading to the Ream Naval Base — particularly from Chinese ports and the South China Sea — would have to traverse significant distances in waters proximate to the Vietnamese seaboard. Figure 2 provides a spatial perspective of the area under discussion, with the relevant distances marked.

**Figure 2: Ream Naval Base – Locational Perspective vis-à-vis South China Sea**



Source: Map from Google Earth; markings by the Authors

An assessment of any Chinese decision to base PLA Navy ships at the Ream Naval Base, whether as part of some ‘forward deployment’ or as a temporary outpost, would require a critical look at these distances between key strategic locations. The close-coast distance from the Sanya Naval Base in Hainan, the Chinese port closest to Cambodia, is around 900 nm. The South Sea Fleet headquarters of Zhanjiang in Guangdong province lies a farther 250 nm to the north. PLA Navy ships in transit would have to add at least another 200 nm to the above distances to maintain a reasonable separation from Vietnamese maritime zones. This will make the total passage from the Ream Naval Base to Sanya and Zhanjiang, 1,100 nm and 1,350 nm, respectively. A PLA Navy flotilla moving at an average speed of 20 knots (kn) will require approximately 55 to 65 hours of transit time and will be under the constant watch of the Vietnamese Navy and Air Force. In times of hostility, this passage will most certainly become untenable for the PLA Navy.

Besides the issue of a long and potentially hostile transit, it does not seem strategically prudent for the PLA Navy to station its ships so far into the Gulf of Thailand (130 nm or approximately seven hours sailing-time from the southern tip of Vietnam) with the only ingress and egress route being through the mouth of the Gulf. The proximity of the Vietnamese coastline and the location of Phu Quoc Island with its large airfield and (albeit uncorroborated) military installations would pose a significant naval strategic issue for the PLA.

All these geographical factors, even without

a consideration of the regional geostrategic environment, lead to the conclusion that a Chinese naval base in Ream does not come with clear strategic or military advantages for the Chinese. This, then begs the question — why might China be interested in naval presence at Ream?

### Chinese Interest in the Ream Naval Base

To understand why China is interested in establishing a military presence in Cambodia, one must first evaluate China’s geopolitical ambitions and power-projection intent in the Indo-Pacific.

Military bases are no rarity in the Asia-Pacific. They are an important manifestation of national power projection strategies. Being cost-intensive to build and requiring vast financial resources to maintain, military bases are generally indicators of the long-term intentions and priorities of nations. Politically, they demonstrate a level of national commitment and deter potential adversaries in a way that naval fleet deployments cannot.

Militarily, they extend capabilities by serving as platforms from which countries can monitor and exert influence on the proximate domain. Beijing has, largely through economic prowess, progressively cultivated influence in its immediate surrounding areas and beyond. It has promised to invest more than US\$ 1 trillion in infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative, which will impact more than 60 nations.

Since President Xi Jinping’s election in 2012, one of the central components of China’s

**PLA Navy ships in transit would have to add at least another 200 nm to the above distances to maintain a reasonable separation from Vietnamese maritime zones.**



ambition has been to enhance and expand the nation's military capabilities, with the goal of executing military reform and modernisation by 2035, and becoming a world-class force by 2050. Its target for military growth in the Western Pacific Ocean is to match that of the US by 2027. Having established its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, at the western extremity of the Indo-Pacific region as India sees it, and given its above stated military ambition, Beijing's possible intent to establish a naval presence in Ream seems quite plausible. It would extend China's regional influence and power-projection capacity in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of logistics, it would reduce the distance from, say, Hainan to the Malacca Strait, and consequently to the Indian Ocean, by more than 500 nm — or 25 hours at a transit speed of 20 kn — thereby significantly improving its logistical capabilities.

### **Impact on Cambodia's Immediate Neighbourhood and ASEAN**

A Chinese naval base at Ream would enable China to severely constrain Vietnam's autonomy by engaging in pre-emptive, close-quarter coercive diplomacy. Other nations in the Gulf of Thailand littoral as well as the larger grouping of ASEAN member-states — barring Myanmar and Laos — will also be subject to an ominous 'new normal' of Chinese presence right at their doorstep. Gregory Poling, from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has stated that “while access

**International Studies (CSIS), has stated that “while access to Ream facility may not mean China's navy is geographically closer to the Strait of Malacca; it would enhance China's ability for surveillance and intelligence collection around the Gulf of Thailand”.**

to Ream facility may not mean China's navy is geographically closer to the Strait of Malacca; it would enhance China's ability for surveillance and intelligence collection around the Gulf of Thailand”. It is considered opinions such as these that have led to the conclusion that a Chinese naval presence at the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia will pose a direct threat to Cambodia's neighbours and disrupt the peace and stability of the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific.

The above assessment, coupled with Cambodia's lack of sufficient transparency, reinforces global suspicions that the Ream upgrades are part of a much larger clandestine strategy to enable Beijing to project power into the region and beyond, potentially as far as the Indian Ocean. These suspicions gain ground from an emerging pattern of Chinese engagement in constructing port infrastructure and managing port operations in various countries in the Pacific and the northern Indian Ocean. According to the US Department of Defense (2021), China is “seeking to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to support naval, air, ground, cyber, and space power projection. Other than Cambodia, it has likely considered a number of countries, including Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.” The April 2022 Security Agreement signed between China and the Solomon Islands is an extension of the same expansive pattern. It supposedly allows Beijing to station armed police and military troops in the South Pacific Island, in what

could be a forerunner to a permanent military presence.

A Chinese military presence in Cambodia by way of a naval base also has the potential to disrupt ASEAN's supposedly united stance vis-a-vis the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) — an agreement that has been under negotiation with China for more than a decade with no tangible progress. Furthermore, it may foreclose the possibilities for maritime security enhancement, limit the freedom of navigation and overflight, and hinder peaceful dispute-resolution in the South China Sea and related maritime zones. The Paracel and the Spratly group of islands offer a case in point. Beijing is leveraging its militarisation of certain features in the Paracel island

chain to coerce the disputants and undermine their efforts to exercise their sovereign rights under international law. This is a matter of great concern to ASEAN nations.

To date, ASEAN has been conspicuously silent on the Ream Naval Base controversy; an indication of the Association's overtly cautious approach to matters involving China. Since its inception, ASEAN has had a chequered track record. Two success stories are the resolution of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989, and the Preah Vihear Temple dispute between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011. On the other hand, ASEAN faced criticism for its lack of response to Myanmar's military coup in February 2021 and its lack of effectiveness in resolving the South China Sea conflict. The 'non-binding' Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the

South China Sea (DOC) was signed by ASEAN in 2002. In 2012, under Cambodia's rotating presidency of ASEAN, the grouping failed to issue a joint communique for the first time in its history, thanks to disagreements on South China Sea issues. Interestingly, especially with the Ream Naval Base in play, Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN this year (2022) has raised concerns that the South China Sea issue will be sidelined once again.

With the recent formation of new groupings such as QUAD and AUKUS, ASEAN's centrality has been called into question, even though several major nations — the US, Japan, Australia and India — continue to highlight the importance of ASEAN in their

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official Indo-Pacific policies and declarations. The fact of the matter is that ASEAN's de facto centrality can only be determined by clearly demonstrated ASEAN unity, with the successful negotiation of the Code of Conduct (COC) — as the foremost item on its agenda.

ASEAN's questionable centrality notwithstanding, there is little doubt that a Chinese military presence in Ream will catalyse Cambodia's neighbours — Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore — into jointly raising their readiness levels and augmenting preparedness, both conceptually and materially. It will most likely also cement their mutual resolve and strengthen ties as they look to confront Beijing's ever-increasing assertiveness in the Western Pacific.

## China-US rivalry – Effect on Subregional Dynamics

The rivalry between the US and China has seen a distinct increase in the last five years, and the strategic fault lines are, at present, at their widest ever. US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi's, visit to Taiwan in August 2022, where she pledged US "commitment to Taiwan's vibrant democracy" led to China issuing diplomatic warnings and commencing military exercises encircling Taiwan. This kind of military brinkmanship in the region could very well lead to a Cold War-like situation in global politics with potentially dangerous, uncertain, and unpredictable outcomes. Caught between China's economic influence in the region (with trade volumes crossing US \$878 billion in 2021) and the Washington-Beijing rivalry, Southeast Asian nations are finding themselves unable to choose sides.

As a small and economically vulnerable nation, Cambodia finds itself trapped in the middle of the Sino-American jockeying for influence in the region. Cambodia is dependent on the US for its exports and on China for direct foreign investment. To exacerbate matters further, the authoritarian nature of the Phnom Penh government has invited economic sanctions from the US and a reduction in EBA trade privileges from the EU. Despite trying to maintain 'permanent neutrality' in its foreign policy and pursuing a diversification strategy of 'minimising foes' and 'maximising friends', Cambodia cannot resist being drawn into Beijing's orbit.

**US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi's, visit to Taiwan in August 2022, where she pledged US "commitment to Taiwan's vibrant democracy" led to China issuing diplomatic warnings and commencing military exercises encircling Taiwan.**

Summarising the situation quite candidly and succinctly at Nikkei's 'Future of Asia Forum 2021', Hun Sen said, "If I don't rely on China, who will I rely on? If I don't ask China, who am I to ask?" (sic)

Besides the China-US rivalry, the Ream Naval Base developments have played out against a backdrop of worsening political, economic, and military interactions between the US and Cambodia. The US imposed sanctions on the Union Development Group, a Chinese company, involved in the Ream project. Subsequently, the Phnom Penh government ordered the demolition of two American-funded facilities in the naval base despite Washington's offer to renovate them. [38] The US retaliated with further sanctions on two high ranking officials in Cambodia's Ministry of Defence, to which Cambodia

responded with ordering the recall and destruction of American-made weapons in the Cambodian military inventory.

Perhaps the most effective strategy for Washington in response to China's quest for greater influence in the Kingdom would be to convince Cambodia to adopt an independent and neutral position vis-à-vis China. However, its strident criticisms of the Hun Sen government's disregard for democratic processes, and human rights violations, remain major barriers to bilateral relations between the US and Cambodia. In contrast, helping Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party to stay in power serves Beijing's broader strategic

interest. Cambodia can serve as a model for other countries in the region, for allying or band-wagging with China. Analyst opinions regarding the matter have ranged from, “China intends to use Cambodia as its beachhead in Southeast Asia and as a showcase for Chinese soft power” to “...with its growing influence on world and Asian affairs in recent decades, Beijing continues to display an interest in keeping Cambodia as close to China as possible;” and “for his part, Hun Sen treats China as the most credible protector of his regime”.

Since both countries mutually benefit from their comprehensive strategic partnership, there is no reason to expect a reversal, at least not in the near future. If Ream does, in fact, become China’s first naval base in Southeast Asia, it would mark a new highpoint in their bilateral relations and significantly change the power balance in the region. That said, the Cambodian government remains cautious about over-reliance on a single power. In recent years, Cambodia has sought to forge Free Trade Agreements with major Asian powers such as South Korea, Japan and India. It has also, since 2021, indefinitely postponed its annual military drills with China.

With all these dynamics in play, somewhat loosely bound groupings of sort are beginning to emerge in the region. The US and its regional allies continue to exert pressure on Cambodia to reconsider its military dealings with Beijing and be more transparent about the Ream Naval Base. Vietnam, traditionally an ally of Cambodia, is slowly but surely aligning with

the US on the issue of Chinese involvement in Cambodia’s defence modernisation. The Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc is extremely close to Ream and a Chinese military presence there is understandably perceived as a serious security threat. Vietnam’s concern presents the US with an opportunity to better its relations with Vietnam, which is a longstanding strategic goal. The US has occasionally sent its naval ships, including its aircraft carrier group, to Vietnamese ports, and engaged with senior members of Vietnam’s political and military hierarchy on such occasions.

How might a tactical scenario look in a

**Vietnam, traditionally an ally of Cambodia, is slowly but surely aligning with the US on the issue of Chinese involvement in Cambodia’s defence modernisation.**

region defined by this US-Vietnam and Cambodia-China axis? If PLA naval ships were to be deployed at the Ream Naval Base, a US Carrier Strike Group (CSG) positioned astride the mouth

of the Gulf of Thailand — just about 200 nm wide at its narrowest point — would effectively leave the Chinese ships stranded in Ream. With constant US overtures towards Hanoi and other Gulf littorals, a tactical scenario such as the above seems entirely plausible and serves to clearly illustrate the dynamics of the power projection strategies and emerging alliances in the region.

### **Policy Options for India in Support of National Interests**

The Indian Navy has always been an active instrument of Indian diplomatic outreach towards Southeast Asian countries as part of the India’s ‘Look East’ policy, followed by the more comprehensive ‘Act East’ one.

In particular, India and Vietnam have had a vibrant bilateral relationship for more than half a century. The two countries have robust political, military, and economic engagements, predicated upon the mutual complementarities of their respective national interests. In December 2020, the Prime Ministers of both nations adopted a historic “Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People” policy document to guide the future development of these bilateral relations. In fact, the Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009 mentions the South China Sea as a secondary area of Maritime interest for India. The Indian Navy’s warships regularly call at Vietnamese ports as part of their overseas deployments. A review of these visits over the last decade (Table 2 refers) indicates that they have become an annual feature and demonstrates the close navy-to-navy relations between India and Vietnam.

India could leverage its regular presence in Vietnamese waters and proximate seas to build collaborative frameworks, structures, and develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the collection of hydrological data, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), underwater surveillance, and aerial reconnaissance. An augmentation of the Vietnamese aerial reconnaissance capabilities would enable the monitoring and profiling of all PLA Navy ships that transit through the Vietnamese maritime zones. Similarly, an underwater domain awareness project predicated upon the laying of seabed sensors across the mouth of the Gulf of Thailand would ensure that no submarines can proceed

in or out without being detected. With its sizable maritime training infrastructure and established prowess in sonar, remote-sensing satellites, space-based positioning systems, and hypersonic anti-ship missile technologies, India can support Vietnam in securing its maritime interests against external threats. Developments such as these will significantly restrict the capability of the PLA Navy to conduct operations, clandestine or otherwise, in the Gulf of Thailand.

In summary, furthering the traditionally strong India-Vietnam ties ensures mutually beneficial outcomes for both countries against a common challenge. While the effect of such synergistic collaboration may not be immediately apparent, it will certainly constrain Beijing’s capacity

to leverage the Ream Naval Base as a means of gaining influence and projecting power in the sub-region.

## Conclusion

The developing informal alliances between Cambodia and China and US-Vietnam are playing out in an international theatre where the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region have gained much significance and attention in recent years. The perceived decline of American influence, juxtaposed against the rise of China, India, and other select nations, has significantly altered the power structure, allowing new players to jockey for supremacy. China views this as a grand opportunity to become the major maritime power in the Indo-Pacific and challenge US hegemony.

**The perceived decline of American influence, juxtaposed against the rise of China, India, and other select nations, has significantly altered the power structure, allowing new players to jockey for supremacy.**

While it may well be in Cambodia's legitimate national interest to modernise its defence capacity, it must take into account the regional and international concern being generated by Chinese involvement in the Ream Naval Base. Given its strategic and foreign policy limitations and the geopolitical consequences of over-reliance on Beijing for military modernisation, Cambodia cannot afford to jeopardize its relationships with its ASEAN neighbours and friendly Indo-Pacific nations such as Japan and Australia. It would do well to remember the tragedy of its Cold War history where it was a mere pawn on the superpower chessboard; and carefully weigh its alliance choices that could jeopardise not only its own national security, but the entire region's peace and stability as well.

There is no doubt that both, Beijing and Phnom Penh, aim to reap mutual benefits from their close relationship as 'ironclad friends'. However, if China actually aims to establish a naval base there — as the world believes — then it must factor in the geopolitical, military and diplomatic implications of such a move in the immediate Gulf of Thailand littoral, the South China Sea, and the greater Indo-Pacific region.

While China benefits from an 'ironclad friends' relationship with Cambodia, it must also take into account the significant levels of mistrust it elicits from the ASEAN group due to longstanding territorial and maritime disputes. Its aggressive posture and non-negotiable stance have further widened the internecine

fault lines. Although it's economic centrality to Southeast Asia means that those nations remain eager to expand their economic ties with China, they will hesitate if doing so comes at the expense of their autonomy. Ream might well be the perfect launching point to China's ambition of building new military bases in the Indo-Pacific, but it also places China in direct confrontation with the common desire of Southeast Asian nations for an 'open and inclusive' regional order, where freedom of the seas is guaranteed — a desire that is supported by all the other stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region, including India.

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### The India ASEAN AOIP-IPOI cooperation

Source: Gurjit Singh, ORF

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-india-asean-aoip-ipo-cooperation/>. 15 Oct 2022.



India's sectoral dialogue partnership started with ASEAN in 1992, soon after India announced its Look East Policy (LEP). The LEP was a consequence of India's economic liberalisation and an economic construct. In 1996, India's partnership was raised to a Dialogue Partnership. In 2002, it was enhanced to the summit level. In 2005, ASEAN was instrumental in bringing India into the East Asia Summit, a major ASEAN-centric institution.

**India and ASEAN commemorate three decades of dialogue partnership this year with the region being more strategically sensitive than ever before**

India and ASEAN marked their 20th anniversary with a Strategic Partnership in 2012. The 25th anniversary summit was held in January 2018. That year, the 10 ASEAN leaders were chief guests at the Republic Day celebrations.

Meanwhile, the LEP was converted to the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014. It sought to deepen and diversify the economic and related cooperation. It increased cooperation in different spheres. In 2015, ASEAN created three communities under which it organised its development and relations with its partners. These were the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community.

### **India, ASEAN and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific**

Traditionally, India's relationship was on the economic side; the socio-cultural aspect moved ahead purposefully through functional cooperation. It was perceived that the political-security pillar of the relationship required attention. This included traditional and non-traditional security challenges including HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief), security cooperation, and freedom of navigation as the key areas for maritime cooperation. These were discussed at the Delhi Dialogue X in July 2018. This was a month after PM Modi articulated India's Indo-Pacific policy at the Shangri-La Dialogue.

ASEAN was apprehensive about its relationship with China, particularly in the South China Sea. There was little progress on the code of conduct, under negotiation since 2002. China consolidated its hold over its claims under the nine-dash line over islands and waters of ASEAN

countries. In the face of this, India-ASEAN maritime cooperation was really a function of how much anxiety ASEAN would bear from China. By 2018, their apprehension of dealing with India based on what China would think was overcome.

Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific concept had come to the fore. PM Modi enunciated India's policy at the Shangri-La dialogue in 2018. Japan, Australia, and the US announced their policies too. In 2019, despite Chinese aversion, ASEAN announced an ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).

This was a significant landmark. At the 14th East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok, in November 2019, India announced its Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), emphasising the need to

work together to seek common solutions while following a rule-based international order. The IPOI sought a safe, secure, and stable maritime domain in

the region. Partnerships amongst willing countries to enhance maritime security, sustainability of marine resources, and disaster prevention and management were sought. IPOI synchronised with priority areas in AOIP, and the EAS statement for a Partnership on Sustainability,

At the 18th ASEAN-India Summit on 28 October 2021, the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region was enunciated.

### **ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP**

The Indo-Pacific concept is a strategic one; the AOIP and joint statement are functional. They are about peace and stability, but focus

**China consolidated its hold over its claims under the nine-dash line over islands and waters of ASEAN countries.**

on prosperity. There is a commitment to support the ASEAN community building using development cooperation; it mentions grasping opportunities from current and future regional and global events. The exploration of cooperation between the AOIP and the IPOI include the four priority areas of the AoIP, which are maritime cooperation, connectivity, the SDGs (sustainable development goals), and economic and related cooperation. The SDGs and the non-strategic maritime cooperation are within the domain of socio-cultural cooperation while the connectivity and economic aspects are cross-cutting.

Of the 21 specific activities mentioned under paragraph 4 of the Statement, there is only one is security related: 4.21 refers to ‘maritime security, efforts to counter piracy and armed robbery against ships, maritime safety and search and rescue (SAR) operations’ The 20 other points are all functional, like narrowing the development gaps and capacity-building development of social infrastructure including public health vaccines and pharmaceutical research and cooperation amongst universities rather than research agencies in the health sector.

Human capital development through technical and vocational education; People to People connectivity through education, women empowerment, youth, tourism media, think tanks and local governments are all key priority areas. Science, Technology, smart and green infrastructure, sustainable cities and engaging with the ASEAN Smart Cities Network emerge from this cooperative document. Renewable energy, reducing carbon imprint, bio-circular green development, environment protection,

waste management, marine debris management and the like are also clear-cut areas of collaboration mentioned.

Collaboration on maritime Education Research, Development, Innovation and pilot projects are introduced through this mechanism. Support for the ASEAN Centre for biodiversity through regional capacity building and climate change adaptation and mitigation measures as well as Disaster Risk Reduction and Management including through cooperation with relevant ASEAN centres all find clear cut mention.

**Partnerships amongst willing countries to enhance maritime security, sustainability of marine resources, and disaster prevention and management were sought.**

The statement is intended as a strategic one; in reality, it is functional, focusing on aspects of the socio-cultural cooperation even more than in economic cooperation. Most of these are covered under the India ASEAN Plan Of Action 2021-2025. Since no financing mechanism is mentioned in the document, the POA funds will be utilised.

The enunciation of the AOIP was important from the point of view of ASEAN because it took the ASEAN-centric Asia Pacific concept to a wider concept across the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN placed itself within the new strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific, but hedged it with immense functionality. In fact, ASEAN while talking about it's a AOIP in June 2019 emphasised that the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions were economically dynamic and experiencing geopolitical and geostrategic shifts. The AOIP grasps at opportunities since mostly the challenges were beyond the realm of ASEAN to deal with.



## Linkages with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

ASEAN's intent was to prevent a lack of trust leading to miscalculations and to induce Confidence Building Measures while at the same time working to improve the life of the people in the region. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) relooks at the Indo-Pacific to create a functionality and confidence building for a rule-based maritime order. The IPOI supports an open inclusive, resilient, prosperous Indo-Pacific; it seeks to build practical cooperation including with Quad partners like Australia, Japan and the US besides with ASEAN.

Under IPOI, bilateral goals with various partners are lured into specific areas of cooperation within the defined pillars. For instance, the Australia India Joint Declaration on a shared vision for maritime cooperation in the Indo Pacific, which is a part of the Australia India comprehensive strategic partnership of June 2020 augments IPOI. The IPOI is aligned with bilateral arrangements and extends to cooperation that both Australia and India have with ASEAN under the AOIP. These commonalities are also very well captured in the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on cooperation on AOIP, which now acts as a beacon to guide our engagement in the region.

In fact, the enunciation of the AoIP at the EAS in November 2019 followed the AOIP and sought deeper engagement between India and its partners in the region to safeguard the oceans, enhance maritime security, preserve marine resources, and capacity building. HADR, R&D, academic cooperation, and mutually beneficial trade and the like, were all important. The IPOI has seven

pillars. Capacity Building and Resource Sharing; Disaster Risk Reduction and Management; Maritime Ecology; Maritime Resources; Maritime Security; Science, Technology and Academic Cooperation; and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.

To cooperate on the pillars of the IPOI, India identified partners for each of the IPOI pillars

**At the 18th ASEAN-India Summit on 28 October 2021, the ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region was enunciated.**

to generate ideas and develop studies. These include NCCR/ INCOIS for Marine Ecology, NMF and ICWA for Marine Security, FSI, Mumbai and NIOT Chennai for Marine Resources, NIO Goa, INCOIS

Hyderabad, ICWA for Capacity Building and Resources Sharing, NDMA for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, FSI, Mumbai, IOM, Chennai, NIO Goa, and InCOIS Hyderabad for Science, Technology and Cooperation, RIS for Trade, connectivity and Transport.

These pillars are not directly mentioned but are all covered among the 21 paragraphs that are written from the ASEAN point of view. What IPOI seeks are individual countries to join selected pillars. India is the lead in the Disaster Risk Reduction and Maritime Security pillar of the IPOI. Australia is the lead partner on the maritime ecology pillar. In 2020, Japan agreed to lead the connectivity pillar. France and Indonesia lead the Maritime Resource Pillar. Singapore is in the academic and S&T pillar. The partners also place seed funding into their activities and this should see expansion in the future.

IPOI is a wider partnership to nurture cooperation, and it will link with existing regional mechanisms and arrangements, including those with ASEAN through AOIP, the IORA (Indian

Ocean Rim Association) and the Pacific Islands Forum, besides BIMSTEC (The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). It requires an ASEAN+ approach. ASEAN and India agree on AOIP-IPOI cooperation. India will implement some of the AOIP objectives as part of its ASEAN partnership. For IPOI, Indian partners could link with individual ASEAN members. Singapore and Indonesia are a good start and Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia are candidates once their approach to the Indo-Pacific matures.

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## Filling the Gaps in the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture

Source: Brad Glosserman, *Japan Times*

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2022/10/26/commentary/world-commentary/indo-pacific-security-2/> 25

Oct 2022



The leaders of “the Quad” nations, Japan, Australia, India and the U.S., meet in Tokyo in late May. Originally formed to deal with hard security concerns, the group as of late seems more focused on diplomatic initiatives and the provision of public goods. | POOL / VIA REUTERS

All The big minds designing Indo-Pacific security policy have decided that “minilateralism” — collaborative efforts by three to five countries — is the route to regional peace and stability.

Several minilateral mechanisms have been created in recent years. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“the Quad”) and the Australia-U.K.-

U.S. enhanced security partnership (AUKUS) are the most prominent, but others are contributing too.

These initiatives and their logic make sense, but they remain tentative steps toward a more substantive regional security order. More troubling is a contradiction inherent in Indo-Pacific minilateralism: the need to produce hard security — to deter and defend against potential adversaries — scares off governments that might otherwise be enticed into joining these coalitions.

Minilateralism is based on two principles. First, recognition that existing security mechanisms are not sufficient to deter or defend against a regional aggressor. Even U.S. alliances, alone or acting in concert, may not be able to do the job. Second, a belief that starting small with coalitions of the like-minded can fill the gap and grow into larger, more substantive initiatives. Problems with that evolution and that logic show up throughout a timely new set of analyses of deterrence and Indo-Pacific minilateralism in *Asia Policy*, a journal published by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR).

While there is an intuitive appeal to that approach, there are prosaic reasons to be skeptical about minilaterals. By definition, their membership is limited so more initiatives are needed to include more states. Initiatives have expanded in scope and focus to address new threats and challenges, This creates efficiency concerns as the number of meetings proliferates, demanding time, resources and coordination across initiatives. It also requires alignment of priorities across governments and bureaucracies.

The Asia-Pacific has a rich history of minilateral initiatives, most of which address

nontraditional security problems. A version of the Quad was created to deal with the humanitarian crisis that followed the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. The strategic importance of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, through which pass nearly half of the world's total annual seaborne trade tonnage and 70% of Asia's oil imports, prompted creation of the Malacca Straits Patrol, a set of practical cooperative measures by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to ensure the security of those Straits.

Efforts to create larger institutions of order failed — there exists a subregional ceiling. Geopolitical competition pushed Southeast Asian nations to organize and demand that they serve as the coordinating mechanism for security efforts. Unwilling to offend, foreign powers acquiesced, producing the ritual bow to ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN serves many purposes, but creating a coherent and substantive security framework is not among them. In the face of discrete threats, smaller groupings emerged and when really nervous, individual nations reach out to external powers for help. While countries throughout the Indo-Pacific have no illusions about the security outlook, most remain hesitant to commit to more than ad hoc arrangements and reject larger, more substantive efforts. (A more detailed explanation is provided below.) In other words, an Asian NATO remains a distant dream.

Nevertheless, an increasingly assertive China with the muscle to close the gap between its ambitions and the status quo has demanded a response and unilateralism seems to fit the bill,

producing both the Quad and AUKUS. Once envisioned as a “hard security” project that would bring together some of the region's most formidable militaries, the Quad instead seems more focused on diplomatic initiatives and the provision of public goods, such as 1 billion COVID-19 vaccines — perhaps its signature project.

Those are valuable — although the vaccine effort has stalled, sending a worrying message of its own — but they don't address tough security challenges. There are reports that Quad leaders and officials talk about those “hard” problems when they meet, but leave those discussions out of joint statements to avoid feeding regional anxieties. In fact, before the first leaders summit in 2021, a senior U.S. official described the initiative “as a discussion and engagement effort around a number of practical matters ...” emphasizing that “There is not a military dimension to it or security dimension to it.”

**U.S. alliances, alone or acting in concert, may not be able to do the job. Second, a belief that starting small with coalitions of the like-minded can fill the gap and grow into larger, more substantive initiatives.**

Statements like this are problematic. They could be intended to dampen fears that the Quad is intended to draw a line through the region, to force nations to choose between China and the U.S. or to militarize the region. It could reflect a genuine lack of consensus in the group about what to do. It could be a signal of benign intent to China (although Beijing is unlikely to be mollified).

Whatever the explanation, failure to take up hard security issues denies the group the credible signals of intent that are needed to deter. Oriana Skylar Mastro, a China scholar at Stanford, warned in the NBR discussion

that “if peacetime interactions do not hint at joint planning and execution, the hypothetical aggregation of capabilities will not significantly enhance deterrence against China.”

Critical to deterrence and defense are force deployments throughout the region that would counter an adversary’s capabilities. Neither Mastro, nor Eric Sayers, a defense expert at the American Enterprise Institute and a former colleague of mine, believes that U.S. forces are currently configured to achieve these objectives. Fortunately, that can be fixed.

Sayers endorses a “strategy of distribution” that would spread forces across the region, increase strike options across military services and domains to make targeting more difficult and complicate Chinese planning, and create broad coalitions that would “multilateralize China’s diplomatic problems.” AUKUS does that, but more is required. Mastro backs “deterrence by resiliency,” which creates ways to prevent an aggressor from achieving its objectives by either absorbing or deflecting military action. A minilateral approach would facilitate both strategies.

But if the goal of minilateralism is to ultimately expand the coalition of the like-minded, prepare for disappointment. Evan Laksmana, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and an insightful observer of the region, concludes in the NBR volume that it is “difficult to envisage Southeast Asian minilateral arrangements contributing to general and collective actor regional deterrence.”

Those governments are fearful that these

new arrangements could undermine ASEAN-centered institutions, in which Southeast Asian nations remain sovereign because they have a veto in a consensus-oriented system. They worry that minilaterals provide footholds for outside powers to gain influence in the region and their own countries would be subordinated by big external powers.

Laksmana argues that commitments needed for effective “collective actor deterrence” are thus far alien to ASEAN states. These arrangements need “robust, institutionalized arrangements” that undercut national autonomy and sovereignty. (Without those pledges, there is no guarantee of action and thus no deterrence or defense.) For Southeast Asian governments, “the primacy of sovereignty, veto power and limited security goals” are necessary elements for any successful initiative. That would seem to preclude participation in the new crop of multilaterals, although he hedged by noting that minilateral arrangements could be useful “if and when

Southeast Asian states decide to seriously consider ‘non-ASEAN’ options in the Indo-Pacific.”

These speculations won’t stop Japan, the U.S. and their allies and partners from promoting minilateralism. Those two governments are also eager to re-enlist South Korea in the trilateral cooperation against North Korea that has been on life support in recent years. Getting Seoul to join efforts to address the China challenge remains a distant ambition.

Seoul’s seeming ambivalence reflects the foundational challenge surrounding these

**ASEAN serves many purposes, but creating a coherent and substantive security framework is not among them.**

initiatives. Minilaterals are being designed to address gaps in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Success in those efforts is supposed to encourage other countries to participate, strengthening the existing security order. But a focus on those security concerns threatens to scare off other governments that fear being entrapped in the competition with China with all the attendant negative consequences. Paradoxically then, the success of minilateral efforts in this region could undermine prospects for their long-term growth and expansion.

**USBs and WiFi are technologies that can be used globally because they're built on technical standards.**

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## High time for Australia and India to step up their tech diplomacy

Source: Arindrajit Basu, Baani Grewal and Bart Hogeveen, ASPI

[https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/high-time-for-australia-and-india-to-step-up-their-tech-diplomacy/?utm\\_medium=email&utm](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/high-time-for-australia-and-india-to-step-up-their-tech-diplomacy/?utm_medium=email&utm) 21 Oct 2022



Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and US President Joe Biden meet on May 23, 2022. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Last month, UN member states elected American candidate Doreen Bogdan-Martin as the next secretary-general of the International Telecommunications Union in a fiercely contested diplomatic battle against a Russian

candidate (and former executive of Chinese technology giant Huawei).

Divided along geopolitical fault lines, the election received an unusual amount of attention because of its significance in potentially determining the future of internet-based communications and the values that underpin them. Away from the media glare, ITU member states also passed their first resolution directly addressing artificial intelligence, tasking the organisation to ‘foster information-sharing and build understanding about the challenges and opportunities of deploying AI technologies in support of telecommunications and ICTs [information and communication technologies]’.

Emerging technologies such as AI now take geopolitical centre stage, and therefore the global tug of war over their development, use and deployment is playing out at standard-setting organisations.

A good example is China’s push for dominance to influence standards in 5G technology. After failing to meaningfully influence the setting of standards for 3G and 4G, the Chinese government commenced a national and diplomatic effort, in partnership with Huawei, to export its 5G standards. This effort included making a domestic push to formulate technical proposals, filling in key leadership positions in international bodies and participating in a variety of standard-setting initiatives across the globe.

Standards are blueprints or protocols with requirements that ‘standardise’ products, ensuring that they are interoperable, safe and sustainable. For example, USBs and WiFi are technologies that can be used globally because

they're built on technical standards. Standards are developed domestically—by a body such as the Bureau of Indian Standards or Standards Australia—and negotiated internationally at global standards-development organisations such as the ITU and the International Organization for Standardization.

While international standards don't tend to be binding, they have great coercive power. Not adhering to recognised standards means that products may not reach foreign markets because they're not compatible with consumer requirements or can't claim to meet health, safety or data-protection regulations.

The ability to shape global standards is of immense geopolitical and economic value to states and companies. Harmonisation of internationally recognised standards serves as the bedrock for global trade and commerce. States that can export their domestic technological standards internationally are giving their companies a massive competitive advantage. Also, companies draw huge revenues from holding patents to technologies that are essential for complying with a certain standard and licensing them to other players that want to enter the market.

It's no surprise that Chinese companies now lead the way on 5G—Huawei owns more 5G patents and more 5G contracts than any other company, despite restrictions placed on it by the United States, Australia and other countries.

Now is the time for states in the Indo-Pacific to revamp their approach to engaging in standards-

development initiatives. Given the value of being able to shape global technical standards and their reflection of normative principles, it's imperative that Indo-Pacific partners such as India and Australia are strongly positioned to promote a democratic, inclusive and transparent environment for setting technical standards, and ensure adequate representation of the broader Indo-Pacific community.

This is why ASPI and India's Centre for Internet & Society have partnered to produce a 'techdiplomacy guide' on negotiating technical standards in AI—a crucial but general-purpose

**This is why ASPI and India's Centre for Internet & Society have partnered to produce a 'techdiplomacy guide' on negotiating technical standards in AI—a crucial but general-purpose technology that will affect all aspects of work, industry and warfare.**

technology that will affect all aspects of work, industry and warfare.

States have contemplated the regulation of AI but are unlikely to be able to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technology. Nonetheless, the European Commission has drafted a legal framework on

AI to address various levels of risk. At the same time, global tech companies have announced self-declared initiatives focused on principles for 'ethical AI', but they tend to be too broad and can serve as avenues for tech companies to skirt legal restraints.

Technical standards offer a middle ground where diverse stakeholders can collaborate to devise uniform requirements in AI development, and follow a rigorous process of exchange, debate and negotiation on the basis of consensus. Standard-setting in AI is an emerging field that has had limited scholarly engagement from a strategic and diplomatic perspective.

China is a notable exception. Several

groups and companies, including Huawei and Cloud Walk, contributed to China's 2018 AI standardisation white paper, which was further revised and updated in 2021. The white paper maps the work of standard-

**The white paper maps the work of standard-setting organisations in the field of AI and outlines a number of recommendations on how Chinese actors can influence these organisations to boost their industrial competitiveness and promote 'Chinese wisdom'.**

setting organisations in the field of AI and outlines a number of recommendations on how Chinese actors can influence these organisations to boost their industrial competitiveness and promote 'Chinese wisdom'. While there are cursory references to the role of standards in furthering ethics and privacy, the document doesn't outline how China will look to promote these values in standard-setting.

Yet, these are the values that are at stake. An excessive focus on security, accuracy or quality of AI may legitimise applications that are fundamentally at odds with human rights, the protection of privacy and freedom of speech. China's efforts at shaping standards for facial recognition technology at the ITU have been criticised for moving beyond mere technical specifications into the domain of policy recommendations, despite there being a lack of representation of experts on human rights, consumer protection and data protection at the ITU.

For the project, titled 'Strengthening Indo-Pacific techdiplomacy in critical technologies', ASPI and CIS will unpack the various processes for international standard-setting in AI and identify the main stakeholders driving these initiatives along with who would bear the responsibility for ensuring that AI technology standards are

developed responsibly, bearing in mind the key strategic priorities of stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific. We will also explore requirements for diverse representation—in expertise, gender and nationality—and offer learning products to policymakers and technical delegates alike to enable Australian and Indian delegates to serve as ambassadors for our respective nations.

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### How to Make the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness Work

Source: Jasmin Alsaied, *The Diplomat*

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/how-to-make-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness-work/> 11 Oct 2022



Credit: Depositphotos

Russia's t's a pleasant day in the South China Sea aboard USS Benfold. The deck officer is taking all precautions to ensure a smooth voyage toward the Paracel Islands. Outside the glass windows of the pilothouse, the lookouts see hundreds of ships sprinkled throughout the horizon. But when the deck officer takes a look at the identification transponder, he only sees four dots. Why is that?

In 2021, the Chinese government passed two laws allowing vessels to turn off their transponders in some of the most congested and

contested waterways in the world. Instead of seeing the hundreds of boats traveling through Asian waterways, seafarers see a picture that doesn't correlate with what they see out of the window. China's new Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law protect nefarious smugglers, illegal fishermen, and potential proliferators that evade sanctions and international law.

Criminal threats like these are becoming more of the norm in the Indo-Pacific and threaten the maritime security of the region. Therefore, the United States, members of the Quad, and other Indo-Pacific states have recently become motivated to take a positive step toward enhancing maritime awareness in the region. In May 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden announced the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), an initiative with regional partners and allies to promote a free and open Pacific. The IPMDA intends to connect regional partners and allies with American technologies to provide greater maritime situational awareness in real-time.

Though maritime domain awareness is a vital tenet to securing the Indo-Pacific, this is the first time the United States has included nations in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region in a single framework. The IPMDA will funnel investment into commercially available data, existing technologies, and existing regional fusion centers, improving partners' ability to protect their waters and resources vital to Indo-Pacific economies and deterring illicit Chinese maritime activities.

**Smugglers, pirates, and other non-state actors have long engaged in the illicit trafficking of nuclear material, drugs, humans, and critical resources.**

But effective maritime domain awareness does not rely solely on new software or a single state. Both the United States and other nations need to work with existing technology and existing organizations with shared goals to solve the challenges surrounding maritime domain awareness

The Biden administration needs to take a closer look at the issues that the IPMDA will face in implementation and the potential strains the initiative will have on smaller allies in the Indo-Pacific. For this initiative to be successful, partners must prioritize solving challenges related to the identification of vessels, the collaboration of forces, technology interoperability, and resource availability.

**The Problem**

Vessel identification stands as the IPMDA's most pressing issue. For the IPMDA to succeed, efficient and expedited identification of suspicious vessels must be a priority. Smugglers, pirates, and other non-state actors have long engaged in the illicit trafficking of nuclear material, drugs, humans, and critical resources. These vessels and criminals can be hard to spot since many operate under the cover of night or withhold information about their destination or cargo to avoid being tracked in congested waterways, ports, and the open ocean.

Smugglers and criminals of this type can exploit a loophole that is unique to maritime traffic identification: flags of convenience. Ships, though owned and operated by organizations under the jurisdiction of a specific country, are legally allowed to choose to flag their vessel under another nation, sometimes unbeknownst



to the host nation. This amounts to a loophole through which vessels escape oversight. Shipping companies and illicit financiers prefer this arrangement as it allows the company to avoid taxes and makes it difficult for government entities to interdict and board suspicious vessels.

In part because of flags of convenience, attempts to locate, stop, and deter maritime crime have met with minimal success. Many Asian nations affiliated with the United Nations' Global Maritime Crime Program (GMCP) lack the resources to effectively police their own waters. In these instances, passing information about traffickers or smugglers to another maritime agency or law enforcement office can be fruitful but rarely ends up in an arrest or seizure.

Identification, even with all the right tools, can still be a nightmare. Commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) radars, as upgraded and sophisticated as they may be, cannot independently track and assess the massive amounts of fishing or sea traffic that travels through the Indo-Pacific daily. Even radar signatures can be questionable in a contested or degraded environment. Issues with legacy technology replacement parts, weather patterns, or operator error all play a hand in the efficacy of capturing electronic signatures.

Further, smaller vessels are significantly harder to acquire visually or by radar. The international rules of the road, a governing document that promotes navigational safety, mandates that vessels under 12 meters are only required to have some type of lighting device and sound-making device. In the Indo-Pacific, many

fishing dhows and smaller vessels operate under the light of cell phones out to sea and rarely use Automatic Identification System (AIS), radar, or identify themselves in any way. In congested fishing havens, this can make it difficult to maneuver and identify every contact you hold visually and electronically. You would be hard-pressed to find any dhows actively using all of these methods to positively identify themselves, especially if vessel operators engage in activities that are less than above-board.

This is where publicly available information sharing technologies and other identification systems can help rapidly identify ships more reliably. Integrated commercial technologies, like First Alert, quickly facilitate maritime information exchanges to partners by compiling

**Indo-Pacific, many fishing dhows and smaller vessels operate under the light of cell phones out to sea and rarely use Automatic Identification System (AIS), radar, or identify themselves in any way.**

publicly available data from numerous streams to provide greater maritime domain awareness to stakeholders. The platform “transforms publicly available information into actionable breaking news alerts” and identifies the most relevant information in real time. According to the Navy AppLocker, First Alert processes and translates billions of data units from alternative social media, blogs, Internet of Things sensors, audio transmissions, and the deep web.

The program, used by many international partners, however, is only as good as its input. Operators must realize that the platform, like other publicly available information like AIS or SeaVision, provides the who, what, when, and where, but gives no synthesis to actions.

### The Solution

To close the data loop on maritime domain

awareness, partners must combine these technologies with an investment in human capital. While acknowledging the inability for humans to handle the vast amounts of latent data associated with maritime domain awareness, trained maritime law enforcement teams in conjunction with improved digital goods run by algorithms will offer the greatest impact in the IPMDA.

The United Nations' GMCP operates in both the Indian and Pacific Ocean and has trained over 2,500 officers and prosecutors on boarding party procedures, detention processes, and information sharing mechanisms. To maximize the value of the partnership, the IPMDA must partner with these forces to enable the efficient sharing of information about crime trends and patterns. Maritime law enforcement teams from East Africa all the way to the Cook Islands have vast experience in multi-agency approaches meant to enhance regional cooperation.

Further, equipping teams with cutting-edge technology solutions that can remotely patrol and deliver information to a variety of stakeholders can help streamline the detection and identification process. In 2021, the United Nations provided aerial drones, X-band coastal radars, and biometric facial recognition equipment to 14 Indo-Pacific nations' maritime surveillance centers to upgrade their capabilities. Sharing information among maritime stakeholders with a presence in the area, in addition to nonprofit organizations like C4ADS, can help alleviate the burden of missing information needed to expose illegal fishing and crime.

Further, human lookouts and informants are one of the best ways to spot smaller vessels, preemptively identify and react to potential collisions, and spot suspicious activity out to sea. A human can take vessel information, radar picture, bearings, vessel markings, and corroborate all the data to accurately identify anything from a vessel transporting dual-use technologies for uranium enrichment to a dhow engaged in illegal fishing in a contested exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

**A U.S. Navy carrier strike group may initially leave port with the resources and availability to track, target, identify, and apprehend illicit cargo traders lurking near the South China Sea.**

Maritime law enforcement groups in the area have spent years building social capital to earn the trust and cooperation of locals in stopping illicit crime. These boarding and interdiction teams can provide trusted and effective methods of communication to fishermen and other seafarers to report suspicious activity. The local populace can provide accurate, real-time information regarding vessels of interest. In this case, providing very high frequency (VHF) radios to maritime law enforcement officers and trusted agents out to sea can exponentially cut down on the latency experienced when reporting real-time information. As an added bonus, this is a fairly robust and cheap solution.

Although identification, human capital, and collaboration seem like the only obstacles that the IPMDA may face, the partnership must still field concerns regarding resource diversion and bandwidth. A U.S. Navy carrier strike group may initially leave port with the resources and availability to track, target, identify, and apprehend illicit cargo traders lurking near the South China Sea. In the face of other national

security priorities, however, a carrier strike group or guided missile destroyer's tasking could quickly shift to supporting a different set of mission objectives in a matter of hours.

As American policymakers and defense strategists acknowledge China's growing illegal presence in the South China Sea and the country's aggression towards its neighbors, assets will inevitably get divided between two competing priorities: deterring an aggressive Chinese presence in international waters and maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific that harbors less crime and illegal activity.

### The Conclusion

If the United States shoulders the mounting pressure to make good on promises to its Asian allies, those partner nations will also feel the crunch of resources as their already strained governments try to deal with the demands of their domestic priorities and participate in large-scale naval exercises, information sharing programs, and maritime technology integration, all in the name of the IPMDA.

While the United Nations is making strides in equipping the maritime teams of less developed nations, these teams are still at a disadvantage as they typically operate adjacent to, and not with, their government's navy and do not possess the manpower, resources, vessels, or funds to track and target each potential suspect that enters their territorial waters. To bolster the process, the IPMDA should begin to engage in multilateral exercises that flex the muscles of partner navies, the United Nations GMCP, and other maritime law enforcement organizations with the goals

of integrating an equipped and knowledgeable force capable of overcoming the current threat environment at sea. In the interim, partners in the IPMDA must determine how to best fan out resources across the Indo-Pacific to not sacrifice the integrity, quality, and timeliness of data and arrests.

IPMDA collaborators will need to rely on new digital tools that source publicly available information to protect trade routes, fishing havens, and other maritime activities within the Indo-Pacific. The push for greater acquisition of COTS products across the United States government must not deter partners from pursuing new technologies that can handle data and support processing in light of these nuanced issues.

**IPMDA collaborators will need to rely on new digital tools that source publicly available information to protect trade routes, fishing havens, and other maritime activities within the Indo-Pacific.**

Simple marine radars from Furuno won't cut it anymore – the IPMDA will need to invest in interoperable and robust radar systems and data management software powered by artificial intelligence to provide real-time information between authorities on the water and data centers on land. The true key to interoperability with a variety of stakeholders in this region will be to develop, source, and invest in innovative technologies and digital public goods that will seamlessly integrate the operations of boarding teams, navies, non-governmental organizations, and other maritime law enforcement entities throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Ultimately, the IPMDA could act as a flagship to prove the worth and prowess of the Quad as a legitimate security grouping to be reckoned with. Immediately stopping and exposing China's

illegal fishing schemes, illicit nuclear trafficking rings, and firearms shipments will likely remain a priority of the Quad and is certainly feasible given the current intentions and capabilities of IPMDA partners. The question remains as to how quickly and how well Indo-Pacific partners will be able to carry the increased burden of tracking, targeting, and interdicting nefarious actors out to sea.

Quad leaders and Asian allies must urgently cooperate or accept that the Indo-Pacific will invariably fall exclusively into the Chinese sphere. China's illegal claims on the EEZs of other nations are the exception, not the rule, and must be deterred by a stronger, more capable unified maritime front in the Indo-Pacific.

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## **Cherry-Picks of the Month**

1. Chinese Aggression Is Driving India and Japan Together - <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinese-aggression-driving-india-and-japan-together-205188>
2. At IAEA, India Supports AUKUS - <https://www.orfonline.org/research/at-iaea-india-supports-aukus/>
3. Canada to seek membership to Indo-Pacific Economic Framework - <https://www.reuters.com/world/canada-will-seek-membership-indo-pacific-economic-framework-2022-10-27/>
4. Japan, Australia ink 'landmark' security pact to counter China's military build-up in Indo-Pacific - <https://www.wionews.com/world/japan-australia-ink-landmark-security-pact-to-counter-chinas-military-build-up-in-indo-pacific-527555>
5. US, Australia focus on maintaining free, open Indo-Pacific with eye on China - <https://www.thestatesman.com/world/us-australia-focus-on-maintaining-free-open-indo-pacific-with-eye-on-china-1503117206.html>
6. Japan as the third global military power - <https://www.army-technology.com/analysis/japan-as-the-third-global-military-power/>

## **CAPS Experts In Focus**

1. Abe's State Funeral and the Legacy of India-Japan ties - <https://capsindia.org/abes-state-funeral-and-the-legacy-of-india-japan-ties/>

## **Debates/Panel Discussions**

1. Ocean Nations: The 2nd Annual Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue - <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/19/ocean-nations-2nd-annual-indo-pacific-islands-dialogue-event-7921>

## **Interview/Podcasts**

1. In the middle of the Indo-Pacific: Japan, Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands - <https://podcasts.apple.com/no/podcast/in-the-middle-of-the-indo-pacific-japan/id1395131021?i=1000446937067>
2. Bridging the Oceans Podcasts - <https://rusi.org/podcast-series/bridging-oceans-podcasts>



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