



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 12 NO. 1

ISSN 2347 - 3703

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2022

- India's Balancing Act: Articulating India's Position in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict
Rohith Sai Narayan Stambamkadi
- India Ushering in the New Era of Warfare: Drone Indigenisation Prospects and Challenges
Richa Tokas
- Cyber Peacekeeping: Prospects for India
Divyanshu Jindal
- Looking Beyond the 'Hub and Spoke Model' in North-East Asia
Gaurav Sen
- Strategic Vision of Japan in the Indo-Pacific: Emerging Dynamics of India-Japan Partnership
Simran Walia
- Tracing the Dynamics of the India-US Partnership in the Indo-Pacific: An Analysis with a Focus on Foreign Policy Standpoints
Shalabha Sarath
- Employment of Indian Air Power in UNPK: Case for an Indo-African Partnership
Rajesh Isser
- India's Evolving Strategy for the Arctic
Ankita Dutta and Stuti Banerjee

Book Review

TRACING THE DYNAMICS OF THE INDIA-US PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: AN ANALYSIS WITH A FOCUS ON FOREIGN POLICY STANDPOINTS

SHALABHA SARATH

The 'Indo-Pacific region' in the maps of American foreign policy makers, extends from the Western Pacific shoreline to Western Indian Ocean. The US's principle aims in the region include the formation of a certain "framework" for American interests in the long term.¹ Washington formed a designated strategy to approach the region, the initial and renewed versions of which have been produced by two consecutive governments. The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" first released in 2020, was labelled essentially 'China-driven', each section being framed to counter certain parts of Beijing's policies. The US drove a campaign for itself to lead the states in this geography in

Mr **Shalabha Sarath** is pursuing International Relations at Shiv Nadar University and was an intern at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. Hongsong Liu, "India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Pragmatic Balancing between the United States and China", *Pacific Focus* (2021), p. 8, at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pafo.12178>. Accessed on July 8, 2022.

competing with China. While the Biden-led administration's strategy employs softer language and style, the China factor remains.

A prominent entity in the Indo-Pacific region, the US considers India a key player and a counterbalance to the expanding influence of China. As a growing regional power with considerable influence in the Indian Ocean Region, India is a 'strategic-partner' to the US. India's own imagination of the Indo-Pacific features multilateral interactions in a 'continental connect' across the region between the Western Pacific Coast and the East African Coast. Delhi gives special importance to 'inclusivity' and coming together with like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific region.² China invariably influences Indian foreign policy, given the robust nature of its prickly neighbour.

The Indo-US partnership has considerably grown since the definition of the Indo-Pacific region, as the two find several areas of converging interests in this geography. However, this dynamic has been subjected to various simplifications that interpret the partnership to be of symbiotic nature or one that exclusively focuses on managing China. However, their differing foreign policy temperaments and larger objectives have not been given enough heed. This article seeks to form a comprehensive analysis of the India-US partnership in the Indo-Pacific, complete with each state's foreign policy outlook, their current pursuits, where their interests converge, and how their temperaments differ. The text draws an analysis of the following areas of their relationship—their interactions with a major power, their military relations, and their approach to elements of the liberal order. These are expanded on in three corresponding sections that deal with their China policy, the India-US defence partnership and their approach to choke points. In doing so, the article produces an interpretation of what the India-US partnership amounts to.

INDIA, US, AND THE CHINA FACTOR IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

China is invariably a prominent player in not just the Indo-Pacific, but all regional geographies there are. However, the purpose of addressing China here is to bring out elements of US and India's approaches to a major power and their imaginations of the world

2. Ibid.

order. Both countries' individual and joint engagements with PRC are indicators of these aspects.

US's China Policy in the Indo-Pacific

The Biden administration characterised China as a “near-peer competitor”.³ The title served as an acknowledgement that China was the only country that was militarily, economically, and technologically able enough to challenge the US. The administration focused on imposing American values and the maintenance of a ‘rules-based’ order. This government moved past the Trumpian approach of ‘tit-for-tat’.⁴ The strategy now focuses on initiatives that pointed out fault lines in Chinese undertakings. It gave much more importance to partners and allies and their roles—the administration was quick to conduct “shuttle diplomacy” and revitalise relations.⁵ The Biden government's wider, multidimensional approach extended to the QUAD plus concept which marks the US's re-embrace of soft-powered and a value-based approach.⁶

India's China Policy in the Indo-Pacific

India conducts its relations with China with prudence. Despite their adversarial history, it has never officially labelled China as a revisionist state.⁷ The rationale for this is not just China's military capability and regional influence but certain other aspects of their bilateral relationship, including their economic ties. India refrains from framing its Indo-Pacific narrative along the lines of China's containment. Rather, it seeks “constructive engagements” with

-
3. Zongyou Wei and Yunhan Zhang, “The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and China-US Strategic Competition”, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2021), p. 173, at <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740021500068>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.
 4. Weixang Hu, “The United States, China and the Indo-Pacific Policy”, *The China Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, (2021), p. 136, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26928114>. Accessed on July 14, 2022.
 5. Wei and Zhang, n. 3, p. 215.
 6. Jakub Zajączkowski, “The United States in India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region since 2014”, *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 50 (2021), p. 15, at <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy202158>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.
 7. Jagannath P. Panda, “China as a Revisionist Power in Indo-Pacific and India's Perception: A Power-Partner Contention”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 30, no. 171 (2021), pp. 1-17, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766906>. Accessed on July 3, 2022.

Beijing.⁸ Indian exports to China currently stand at US\$ 21.25 billion. Beijing maintained its position as India's largest trading partner until 2021. Thus, maintaining economic relations is labelled the cause for Indian pragmatism, irrespective of whether it is in strategic interest.⁹ India as a developing state also shares more characteristics with China. In the early 2000s, Beijing was viewed as a fellow rising power and an economic partner.¹⁰ While much has changed since then, India still seeks an engaged relationship with China. This has been portrayed as the rationale for Indian participation in China-led multilateral forums such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).¹¹

While the nature of threat from China is different for India and the US,¹² their interests align in restricting its influence and preserving a liberal order. India's place in US foreign policy is reflected in the changing of terminology from 'Asia-Pacific' to the 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' in 2015 and finally 'Indo-Pacific' in 2017.¹³ India realises that relations with US are critical for maintaining its position as a legitimate power in the Indo-Pacific. From the year 2017, Delhi occupied the position of a "natural balancer"¹⁴ and "strategic and defence partner".¹⁵

However, in the context of China, India did not imagine a "zero-sum game". In Indian foreign policy makers' books, a confrontation with China discounts India's progress towards the goal of becoming a "regional and global power."¹⁶ In consonance with this goal, India assigns great importance to its strategic autonomy. The US's transactional behaviour with its allies and partners and the threat of

8. Hongsong Liu, n. 1, p. 20.

9. Ibid.

10. Panda, n. 7, p. 5.

11. Hongsong Liu, n. 1, p. 25.

12. Muhsin Puthan Purayil, "The rise of China and the question of an Indo-US alliance: a perspective from India", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2021), p. 66, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2021.1882139>. Accessed on July 16, 2022.

13. Zajaczkowski, n. 6, p. 8.

14. Kai He and Mingjiang Li, "Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US-China strategic competition, regional actors, and beyond", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 1 (2020), pp. 1-7, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz242>. Accessed on July 14, 2022.

15. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America December 2017* (Washington DC, 2017), p. 46, at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905>. Accessed on July 14, 2022.

16. Zajaczkowski, n. 6, p. 12.

CAATSA under the Trump administration caused Indian concerns. The lingering possibility of US-Pakistan military ties resurfacing looms in the background. On the American side, concerns existed about India's lack of heft in countering China. Interoperability and Indian military capability have also been causes of concern.¹⁷ The Galwan Valley incident also greatly affected relations. In response to the incident, India took stronger positions in issues related to China, for instance, the South China Sea.¹⁸ With the change of administration, India became more accepting of a renewed US policy in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ India's foreign policy thinking has been historically oriented towards a multipolar imagination of the world order.²⁰ The Biden administration's embrace of multilateralism, its intention of "mobilising like-minded nations"²¹ and focus on non-military areas of cooperation, is in alignment with Indian foreign policy.²²

In many ways, India and the US seek to gain from their implicit joint engagements against China. However, both their approaches differ. While the nature of threat from PRC is different for both countries, this is not the only aspect at play. American foreign policy has always carried out a robust approach to an adversary power. India, on the other hand, has valued prudence.

INDIA-US DEFENCE ENGAGEMENT

The defence engagements between India and the US have experienced significant growth since 2016. The Indo-Pacific states now share a defence partnership encompassing trade, co-production, agreements, and exercises.

17. Anil Ahuja, "Prospects of India-US Defence Cooperation", *National Security*, vol. 4, no. 3 (April-June 2021), pp. 131-32, at <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/national-security-vol.-4-issue-2-article-AAhuja.pdf>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

18. "South China Sea part of global commons: India", *Times of India*, July 17, 2020, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/south-china-sea-part-of-global-commons-india/articleshow/77009643.cms>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

19. Zajączkowski, n. 6, p. 15.

20. Shyam Saran, "The Sources of India's world view", in John Mearsheimer, *How India Sees the World* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017), p. 14.

21. Wei and Zhang, n. 3, p. 165.

22. Jagannath Panda, "India, the Blue Dot Network, and the 'Quad Plus' Calculus", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (2021), p. 11, at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/21/2002482235/-1/-1/1/PANDA.PDF>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

Agreements and Exercises

Washington and New Delhi have signed three major pacts for defence cooperation since 2016.²³ The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreements (LEMOA), signed in 2016, gives both militaries access to each other's facilities for the purposes of refuelling and replenishment. The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), concluded in 2018, facilitates India's access to advanced military communications systems of US military origin. More importantly, the agreement improves communication interoperability between both militaries. Lastly, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) adopted in 2020 provides India access to real-time American geospatial intelligence. Some analyses have claimed that these agreements were "tailor-made for India,"²⁴ displaying India's significance to the military aspect of American policy in the region.

The defence forces of both nations have engaged in joint exercises including their first tri-Service exercise TIGER TRIUMPH in November 2019. YUDH ABHYAS was conducted by both armies for joint training while the 11th edition of VAJRA PRAHAR—an exercise between the Special Forces was conducted in 2021.²⁵ Various '2+2' dialogues have played a role in developing the existing level of defence engagements between New Delhi and Washington. The initial two rounds of talks held in 2018 and 2019 resulted in commitments from both countries to work in bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral formats. The seeds of co-production were also sown in these meetings. The US welcomed India's inclusion in the Strategic Trade Authorisation-I category, facilitating two-way defence trade.

Maritime and Naval Engagement

India views its Navy as a forthcoming force and an important instrument of its modern foreign policy. In its immediate

23. Shreya Upadhyay, "India-US Defence Partnership", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* (April-June 2019), p. 125, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48636718>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

24. "India and US sign key agreement: LEMOA supports defence cooperation between the two countries", *Firstpost*, August 31, 2016, at <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-and-us-sign-key-agreement-lemoa-supports-defence-cooperation-between-the-countries-2984276.html>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

25. Upadhyay, n. 23, p. 120.

neighbourhood, India has focused on forging important maritime relationships facilitated through PM visits, fund provisions to ports and dockyards and assistance in defence capabilities. Exercises such as 'MILAN' and various SAGAR missions were pursued in this spirit. The relationships with countries like Seychelles and Maldives have also given India security advantages through access to intelligence.²⁶

The US carries out its maritime responsibilities through its 'globally-distributed, mission-tailored' Naval fleet. American geo-economic and political interests require the maintenance of a rules-based order—the Navy plays a significant role here. The US Navy maintains a large Naval footprint in the Indian Ocean. The 5th, 6th and 7th fleets of the USN are stationed in the region.

To increase its maritime security, India envisions a powerful blue-water fleet—the US is seen as a partner. The two Indo-Pacific countries have moved from a 'buyer-seller' dynamic to one of 'co-production', making Delhi a Major Defence Partner for the US in 2016. Many Joint Working Groups have delivered successes like the transfer of Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System technology to India. Defence agreements have also positively affected the navy-to-navy interoperability.²⁷ Both Navies have also participated in multiple joint exercises in recent years. The forces conducted the MALABAR exercise, which has now been joined by QUAD countries Japan and Australia. The Indian Navy participated in the Rim of Pacific Exercise and the USAFRICOM's Cutlass Express exercise.²⁸

Navy-to-navy ties have grown significantly since 2014.²⁹ More areas present opportunities for collaboration. Scholarship recommendations include reconciliation of the Pacific-focus of the US Navy and the Indian Navy's interests in the Western Indian Ocean.³⁰ Strategic areas such as the Malacca Strait presents opportunity for power projection, which carries immense strategic weight in politically vibrant regions such as the Indo-Pacific.

26. Hongsong, n. 1, p. 16.

27. n. 24.

28. Upadhyay, n. 23, p. 120.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

30. Rohan Mukherjee, "Keeping China Out, the United States In, and Pakistan Down: India's Strategy for the Indian Ocean Region", *Asia Policy*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2021), p. 32, at <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2021.0031>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.

Power Projection in the Indo-Pacific with a Focus on Air Power

For India, power projection is important and must be pursued for two categories of objectives; the need to guard the sea lanes and to maintain influence in the region of South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. However, power projection has not been a traditional element of Indian foreign policy. While it can be inculcated in a prudent strategy, India's prudence was not engineered towards military power projection beyond its immediate neighbourhood. It had a few selected instances of offensive action such as the Bangladesh liberation.

While Indian foreign policy may not have been traditionally tailored towards power projection, over the years, the Indian Navy and Air Force have articulated and acted upon the need to project power beyond India's immediate neighbourhood. The two forces' area of influence is mainly the Indian Ocean. However, they are becoming increasingly active in the region between the choke points, the Gulf of Aden and Malacca Strait. The air force has envisaged "its transformation into an aerospace power capable of conducting full-spectrum operations and extending its strategic reach".³¹ Over the years, the IAF has displayed good long-range and Heli-lift capabilities. The latter is supported by Mi-26, Chinook and a fleet of medium lift helicopters.³² However, India's power projection needs are not entirely met. The air force requires a more extensive fleet with multirole platforms and more airbases to become a "modern air force".³³ Defence research and development is of critical importance. Given the strategic climate of its neighbourhood and the broader Indo-Pacific region, India cannot afford to be in the stage of 'getting set' to project power any longer.

The US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) is the united combatant command responsible for the Indo-Pacific region. The Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) is its air component command. The

31. Walter C. Ladwig, "India and Military Power Projection: Will the Land of Gandhi Become a Conventional Great Power?", *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 6 (2010), p. 1163, at <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2010.50.6.1162>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.

32. Anil Chopra, "QUAD-significant air power", *Air Power Asia*, October 20, 2021, at <https://airpowerasia.com/2021/10/20/quad-significant-air-power/>. Accessed on August 27, 2022.

33. *Ibid.*

Pacific fleet includes the 3rd and the 7th fleets. The US uses air power projection not just for the security of itself and its allies but also to sustain a framework led by US and American values in the region. This manifests in military exercises such as the Freedom of Navigation Operations. In June 2019, the US Department of Defense (DOD) released its first Indo-Pacific Strategy report declaring the region a “priority theatre”, addressing the need to develop a “lethal, resilient and rapidly innovating Joint Force” and collaborations with allies and partners to meet the challenges in the region.³⁴ The DOD also addressed plans to invest in purchases and the modernisation of training facilities, weapons and equipment for increased readiness and more compatibility with systems of friendly forces.³⁵ Exercises such as the joint operation of B-1 and B-2 Bomber Task Forces in the Indo-Pacific were markers of increased focus of American air power in the region.³⁶

Indo-US Cooperation: Dimensions of Power Projection

Defence and diplomatic undertakings between India and the US have demonstrated growing cooperation in terms of power projection. When the theatre of Indo-Pacific was in the stage of being defined, high-level visits between the two regarding air power had already begun.³⁷ In 2017, the Pacific Air Forces F-16 Fighting Falcon demonstration team and a C-130J performed at the Aero India Show, marking the first time that a new UASF J-model has operated on the Indian subcontinent.³⁸ The IAF participated in the Red Flag for the first time in 10 years while the fourth iteration of the Cope India exercise

34. Amy Hudson, “New DOD Strategy: Indo-Pacific as priority theatre”, *Air Force Magazine*, June 3, 2019, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/new-dod-strategy-indo-pacific-is-priority-theater/>. Accessed on August 25, 2022.

35. Ibid.

36. Brian W. Everstine, “B-1, B-2 bomber task forces simultaneously operate in the Indo-Pacific”, *Air Force Magazine*, August 19, 2020, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/b-1-b-2-bomber-task-forces-simultaneously-operate-in-the-indo-pacific/>. Accessed on August 25, 2022.

37. Brian Everstine, “Increasing cooperation with India”, *Air Force Magazine*, August 30, 2016, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/increasing-cooperation-with-india/>. Accessed on August 25, 2022.

38. “USAF F-16s, C-130 perform at India air show”, *Air Force Magazine*, March 1, 2017, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/usaf-f-16s-c-130-perform-at-india-air-show/>. Accessed on August 25, 2022.

was held in 2019 at the Kalaikunda Air Force Station.³⁹ India and the US also participated in the Pitch Black exercise, conducted with the objective of strengthening partnership and interoperability among 17 air forces. With participation from all four QUAD nations, regional stability in the Indo-Pacific was a prominent theme, as pointed out specifically in the INDOPACOM statement.⁴⁰

Interoperability has been the theme of Indo-US discussions on occasions such as the India Executive Steering Group Conference in 2021.⁴¹ The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) has played a significant part in initiating joint projects such as the Air-Launched Unmanned Vehicle Project.⁴² The last few years have also featured private sector partnerships, including the TASL-Lockheed Martin collaboration to produce the C-130J Super Hercules.⁴³

Chinese Power Projection in the Indo-Pacific

The PLAAF is the largest air force in the region and third largest in the world. Today, China's air power is characterised by a range of capabilities with room for more. Beijing's air power research and development is focusing on more powerful platforms, weapons and integrated air and space capabilities.

As in all strategic areas, rising Chinese capabilities figure in the individual and joint strategic calculus of US and India. China's increasing influence in the South China Sea, such as through the Air Identification Zone, could become a tunnel for military projection in

39. Jennifer Hlad, "Exercise aims to strengthen partnership with India", *Air Force Magazine*, January 2, 2019, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/exercise-aims-to-strengthen-partnership-with-india/>. Accessed on August 24, 2022.

40. Staff Sgt Savannah Waters, "Pitch Black 2022 concludes international interoperability exercise", *US Indo-Pacific Command*, September 13, 2022, at <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3157357/pitch-black-2022-concludes-international-interoperability-exercise/>. Accessed on August 27, 2022.

41. Sgt Jimmie Pike, "PACAF hosts annual India executive steering group conference", *Pacific Air Forces*, October 25, 2021, at <https://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2822271/pacaf-hosts-annual-india-executive-steering-group-conference/>. Accessed on August 26, 2022.

42. Daryl Mayer, "India, US sign Air-launched UAV co-development project agreement", *Air Force*, September 3, 2021, at <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2764056/india-us-sign-air-launched-uav-co-development-project-agreement/>. Accessed on August 26, 2022.

43. "For India, from India", Lockheed Martin, at <https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/who-we-are/international/india.html>. Accessed on August 26, 2022.

the Western Pacific aiding sustain Chinese influence among US allies in the region. Consequently, the US has conducted various Freedom of Navigation Operations and overflight operations on the South and East China Seas. While China is ahead in terms of hypersonic technology and the aerospace domain, the US remains dominant in terms of its air presence and military conflict experience. While the IAF lacks certain inventory components, 20 Indian airfields face China against 8 of theirs. These airfields also have payload advantage due to their low altitudes.⁴⁴ India's strength also lies in its multilateral engagements. Given the size and capabilities of the Australian, US, Japanese and Indian forces together, air power balance favours the QUAD against China. Capacity-building in the areas where China has an edge—including aerospace and hypersonic technology—along with exercises will further strengthen the QUAD countries.

Largely, India-US defence relations have progressed to a considerable extent in the context of the Indo-Pacific. American interests lie in militarily balancing China's capabilities that come closer to the United States'—much closer than it would like. However, Chinese Naval and Air Forces cannot compete with the US in terms of military conflict experience. Hence, American thinking is not led by concerns of security. Instead, China, for the US, represents an influential actor whose capabilities take away from American prowess. To militarily challenge it, the US picks on a Chinese insecurity—the notion that the states of the world are against its rise. Among said states, India gains significance as a neighbour to China and a regional power.

India's engagements with the US find their roots in many aspects. In charting its rise as a global power in a multipolar world, partnership with the US, especially in terms of power projection, is seen as advantageous. This is also India's way of managing China's excesses at its borders. Military contributes to Delhi's larger presence and influence in the region. However, Indian foreign policy staunchly prioritises strategic autonomy and engages in only a partnership

44. Anil Chopra, "QUAD—significant air power", *Air Power Asia*, October 20, 2021, at <https://airpowerasia.com/2021/10/20/quad-significant-air-power/>. Accessed on August 27, 2022.

and not an alliance with the US. In balancing this partnership and its relations with China, India walks a narrow line.

In their interactions with China and their respective approaches to a defence partnership, one can mark differences of tone and temperament in US and Indian foreign policies. While their interests have converged more than ever in the contemporary era, their foreign policy approaches and imaginations of the world order are far from convergent. However, a greater value system joins the two together against one of liberal and democratic values. To analyse this aspect of the relationship, this article takes the example of an element of the liberal order that has found repeated mention in bilateral and multilateral engagements in the Indo-Pacific—open sea lanes.

INDIA, THE US AND THE INDO-PACIFIC CHOKER POINTS

The two components of the Indo-Pacific—the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are connected through the Sea Lanes of Communication that hold global importance. The choking of any of these would mean disruption of a large fraction of the world's seaborne trade. These 'choke points' are of special importance to countries that import energy, as about 61 per cent of the world's energy supplies move through these handful of straits.

The Strait of Hormuz

About two-thirds of India's oil and half of its liquid gas imports pass through the Hormuz Strait. Consequently, Delhi maintains naval links with Iran,⁴⁵ Oman and Qatar.⁴⁶ The US has maintained its position as a dominant military force near the Strait of Hormuz, deterring the choke point from piracy and attacks on commercial ships. It has had a history of tensions with Iran, which almost escalated into a confrontation along the strait. The US does not rely on the oil flowing

45. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India engages with Iran to keep Strait of Hormuz safe", *The Economic Times*, January 11, 2020, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-engages-with-iran-to-keep-strait-of-hormuz-safe/articleshow/73197846.cms>. Accessed on August 26, 2022.

46. David Scott, "India's Aspirations and Strategy for the Indian Ocean—Securing the Waves?", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2012), pp. 484-511, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2012.738115>. Accessed on July 21, 2022.

through the Hormuz strait. However, its closure would mean rising prices for the entire world, including the US.⁴⁷

Close to 40 per cent of China's oil imports flow through this strait, making ease of transportation its prime strategic interest in the region. The military base in Djibouti has been set up with the aim of protecting its energy imports. China's access to the port city of Jask raised Indian concerns about the strait's weaponisation⁴⁸ and Chinese presence. PRC exercises a certain caution in implementing its strategy in the area. Unlike the US, China has not maintained any military bases here. Some analyses argue that PRC has a certain degree of dependence on the US for maritime security in the area and the protection of its own tankers. The US's position in the region is certainly useful in mitigating a scenario of overwhelming Chinese presence along the strait.⁴⁹

The Strait of Malacca

India finds itself in a strategically advantageous position with respect to the Strait of Malacca, given its Naval presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. With the importance of the strait in mind, Delhi maintains ties with nations of the region including Singapore,⁵⁰ Thailand,⁵¹ Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. The MILAN exercise also includes anti-piracy patrols near the Malacca Strait.

Eighty per cent of China's oil imports flow through this strait. Besides China's presence at the strategic choke point, India also expresses concerns over the values that are promoted by Beijing's

47. Kathy Gilsinan, "America's free-rider problem in the strait of Hormuz", June 27, 2019, *The Atlantic*, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/why-does-us-protect-strait-hormuz/592654/>. Accessed on August 27, 2022.

48. Kabir Taneja, "Strait talking: China question extends from Malacca to Hormuz", Observer Research Foundation, July 21, 2020, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/strait-talking-the-china-question-extends-from-malacca-to-hormuz/>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

49. Ibid.

50. Dinakar Peri, "Singapore for more cooperation with India in Strait of Malacca, Andaman Sea", *The Hindu*, November 29, 2017, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-singapore-for-increased-activity-in-strait-of-malacca/article61850786.ece>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

51. "Navies of India, Thailand begin 3-day coordinated patrol in Andaman Sea", *Business Standard*, June 9, 2021, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/navies-of-india-thailand-begin-3-day-coordinated-patrol-in-andaman-sea-121060900635_1.html. Accessed on August 20, 2022.

unlawful claims in the sea. The Freedom of Navigation is central for India's large energy imports to flow through choke points.⁵² Examples of Chinese presence include the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and the Kyaukpyu, Gwadar⁵³ and Chittagong ports.⁵⁴

The US's engagements in the Malacca Strait indicate the strait's importance to certain American interests. In September 2019, Singapore and the US amended their 1990 MoU about the use of military facilities. The US Navy conducted exercises in the Philippine Sea and along the Malacca Strait with multilateral partners in 2021. The US also transferred an "aircraft upgraded to perform maritime patrol missions" to Malaysia.⁵⁵ The deployment of advanced weaponry in this base gives the US immense control of the strait and a huge fraction of the world's crude oil transport system.⁵⁶ The US is also enabling itself to block the Strait of Malacca in a conflict, cutting China off from crucial energy resources.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait

The Indian Navy has been heavily engaged with the Djibouti port, located near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait since 2002 through long-range deployments and extensive patrolling.⁵⁷ It also participated in the intervention by the navies of international coalition forces to reduce piracy in the strait.⁵⁸ Beijing's engagements in the region surrounding

52. Taneja, n. 48.

53. Ibid.

54. Sohini Bose, "The Chittagong Port: Bangladesh's Trump Card in its Diplomacy of Balance", May 17, 2022, Observer Research Foundation, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bangladeshs-trump-card-in-its-diplomacy-of-balance/>. Accessed on August 11, 2022.

55. Mike Yeo, "Malaysia Receives First Maritime Patrol Aircraft Upgraded with US Funding", August 5, 2022, *Defence News*, at <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2022/08/05/malaysia-receives-first-maritime-patrol-aircraft-upgraded-with-us-funding/>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

56. G.E. Valori, "The Strait of Malacca: China between Singapore and United States", *Modern Diplomacy*, November 24, 2020, at <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/11/24/the-strait-of-malacca-china-between-singapore-and-the-united-states/>. Accessed on August 18, 2022.

57. Scott, n. 46, p. 503.

58. Alexander Lott, "Maritime Security Threats and the Passage Regime in the Bab el-Mandeb", *The NCLOS Blog*, June 21, 2021, at <https://site.uit.no/nclos/2021/06/21/maritime-security-threats-and-the-passage-regime-in-the-bab-el-mandeb/>. Accessed on August 16, 2022.

Bab al-Mandeb are channelled through two main centres—Djibouti and Ethiopia. China has invested militarily and economically in the area.⁵⁹ India has maintained consistent patrolling at the strategic choke point and has detected most instances of Chinese presence. The region has been the field for “cat-and-mouse” games between the two navies.⁶⁰

While the Arabian Peninsula holds less relevance to the US in terms of energy, the area houses many seas, gulfs and canals that are central to global energy security and stand threatened to be taken over by other powers from the American point of view. This explains the Biden administration’s promise to “not walk away” from the region.⁶¹ The US’s Djibouti base is key to ensuring that no other powers interfere with maritime trade in the critical choke point.⁶² The US has claimed that Chinese partnership with Djibouti has “encroached” on American access.⁶³ The overwhelming debt in Djibouti and surrounding areas has been seen as giving China “leverage” and is hence of concern to the US.⁶⁴

In a 2009 speech, former Foreign Secretary Shivashankar Menon observes that threats to energy flows cannot come from major powers that are interested in keeping sea lanes open.⁶⁵ If India is interested

59. Eliza Gambino, “What interests does China have in the Southern Red Sea?”, March 10, 2020, *ISPI*, at <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/what-interests-does-china-have-southern-red-sea-25321>. Accessed on August 26, 2022.

60. Rajat Pandit, “India Sub Stalked Chinese Warships?”, February 9, 2009, *Times of India*, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-sub-stalked-china-warships/articleshow/4075792.cms>. Accessed on August 29, 2022.

61. “Biden says the U.S ‘will not walk away’ from the Middle East”, *NPR*, July 16, 2022, at <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/16/1111863983/biden-meets-gulf-leaders-strategy>. Accessed on August 19, 2022.

62. A.G. Alexandre, “The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb Stage of Geopolitical Disputes”, *Janus. net, e-journal of International Relations*, vol. 12, no. 2 (November 2021-April 2022), p. 63, at <https://repositorio.ual.pt/bitstream/11144/5244/1/EN-vol.12-n2-art05.pdf>. Accessed on August 16, 2022.

63. John Calabrese, “The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Regional and Great Power Rivalries on the Shores of the Red Sea”, *MEI*, January 29, 2020, at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea>. Accessed on August 17, 2022.

64. Lauren Blanchard and Sarah Collins, “China’s Engagement in Djibouti”, Congressional Research Service, *In Focus* (September 4, 2019), at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1170113.pdf>. Accessed on August 16, 2022.

65. S. Menon, *Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy* (India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, September 11, 2009), at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09733150903429460>. Accessed on August 27, 2022.

in keeping sea lanes open, so is the US. The US requires open choke points as “points of egress” to international markets and materials for energy development.⁶⁶ Free-flowing sea lanes also fit into a larger American vision of a liberal world order. Overall, both India and the US share interests of unhindered access to shipping and piracy-free shipping lanes. Choke points are an area of “primary strategic interest” for India and always figure in its maritime strategies.⁶⁷ This has been a factor in the Navy’s Western Indian Ocean orientation. Naval deployments are in accordance with the choke points that are important to India. The Indian Ocean is also India’s strategic backyard and a pronounced theatre of Chinese Naval power projection and commerce. While Delhi is constructing a regional security framework through Naval relationships, none of these regional powers are a global giant in equivalence with the US. It remains a power that can “shape” Indian Ocean events.⁶⁸ The power of American alliances has been acknowledged by Chinese strategists who have labelled them as “barriers”.⁶⁹

The Indo-Pacific is an important theatre for Washington to promote the freedom of navigation and other values of a liberal world order. However, American disadvantage lies in the lack of proximity. Referred to as the “tyranny of distance”, the US solves its proximity problem through a “hub and spokes” system of alliances and partners in the region.⁷⁰ New Delhi earns itself an important position through its geography. The dominant Indian position in the Indian Ocean is perceived by Chinese scholarship as the basis for an expansive strategy that will have a “particular impact” on China. The Indian Navy’s base in Andaman Nicobar Islands is perceived to be especially threatening to Chinese access

66. Valori, n. 56.

67. Scott, n. 46, p. 488.

68. Udita Banerjee, “US and India: Paving the Road to Ensuring Peace and Prosperity in the Indo-Pacific Region”, *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2020), p. 229, at <https://doi.org/10.47362/EJSSS.2020.1205229>. Accessed on August 12, 2022.

69. Pawel Paszrak, “The Malacca Strait, the South China Sea and the Sino-American competition in the Indo-Pacific”, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2021), p. 179, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23477970211017494?journalCode=aiaa>. Accessed on August 19, 2022.

70. Ibid.

to the Malacca Strait.⁷¹ With the US's reaffirmed commitment in the Middle East, the security of the Bab el-Mandeb and Hormuz Straits stand to become even tighter. India and the US both also have substantial engagement with Djibouti.

However, US-India ties in this context are not without existing and potential tensions. The India-US-Iran matrix comes to light in the context of the Bab el-Mandeb choke point. Iran is an important oil and nuclear trade partner to India while the US and Iran share animosities. However, tensions have mostly concluded in understandings. An example is the US's acceptance of India's development of the Chabahar Port, with the understanding that the project was motivated by the intention to balance China.⁷²

On the whole, US-India cooperation in the context of Indo-Pacific choke points stand to confer advantages to both powers. The US, leading a 'liberal world order', looks at choke points as fields for projection of power and promotion of liberal values. While India does have stake in open sea lanes, China is not blocking any, at least at the moment. However, Indian interests converge with US in protecting a liberal world order. Choke points are also playgrounds of power between India and China. India holds the Malacca dilemma as a strategic upside against China, and rightly so. The strategic choke point which Beijing heavily depends on lies well within India's strategic reach. In addition to ensuring open sea lanes, US-India partnership offers strategic benefits in the event of a conflict.⁷³ More importantly, US and India converge in their need to ensure free sea lanes and promotion of the values that enable them. No great power in the Indo-Pacific stands to gain from hindrances in energy trade, certainly not India and the US.

These engagements offer important insight into the US and Indian approach. Mostly led by values and seeking to maintain

71. Avinandan Choudhary and P. Moorthy, "Strategic-maritime Triangle in the Indian Ocean: An Emerging Indo-US Naval Entente", *India Quarterly*, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), vol. 74, no. 3 (2018), p. 307, at <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/iqq>. Accessed on July 7, 2022.

72. Anita Kumari, "Contemporary Iran-United States Antagonism: Consequence in Special Reference to India", *Journal of Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology*, vol. 9, no. 10 (2019), p. 69, at <https://www.xajzkjdx.cn/gallery/72-dec2019.pdf>. Accessed on August 1, 2022.

73. Paszak, n. 69, p. 97.

proWess, the US approach differs from the Indian one. India engages with countries based on its energy interests. The US, on the other hand, can afford to lead a policy that focuses on promoting a set of values and a certain world order while its hegemonic interests for control are also at play. However, it is noteworthy that the US is willing to push its value brackets (as in the case of Iran) to fit India's needs. This indicates that India's role in many areas, including choke-point safety, is important and irreplaceable in US policy.

CONCLUSION

A plain reading of the Indo-Pacific paints the picture of a rather rudimentary power dynamic at the crux of a vibrant geography; one that casts China and the US as major powers, and India as the middle actor that is increasingly choosing to side with the former. However, multiple, more nuanced narratives run parallel at the core of the Indo-Pacific. Narratives that affect power dynamics and translate into all areas including the countries' foreign policy approach, the nature of their partnerships, and their general political stance in the region. Indo-US relations in the region are defined, in the most essential form, by differing foreign policy goals but converging immediate interests. In the strategic dynamic, advantages of one expedite the achievement of interests of the other while larger objectives may remain different.

India is largely led by objectives of rising as a global power in its multipolar imagination of the world order. It also fights to prevent the bipolar narrative that China seeks to foster. New Delhi also expressed larger interest in bilateral and multilateral engagements with the US in response to Chinese military excesses at the border. These engagements gnaw on the Chinese insecurity that most states are against its rise; India and the countries it engages with are intended to be perceived by the Chinese as strategic watchmen. However, whether these engagements have real security or military substance, remains debatable. The US functions in the Indo-Pacific with the perception of China as a challenge to its hegemony. US foreign Policy has also traditionally seen the primacy of a single actor in Eurasia as an offsetting factor, further encouraging it to

laud the rise of India. The US also fights a war of values to ensure a liberal world order; one that encourages free-market, open sea lanes and democracy. This is one of the areas where objectives of Indian and US foreign policy converge—the maintenance of a liberal framework. However, the American intention is to be at the helm of this liberal world order while India seeks multipolarity. A common requisite for the above respective Indian and US objectives is limiting Chinese influence. While the US pursues a robust policy in this regard and India remains prudent, certain parts of the American approach are in accordance with Indian ways. The imagination of a network across countries, one that is not openly anti-China, is in Indian interest. In the case of trade and choke points, the US and India both have interests in maintaining open sea lanes. While the US wishes to promote certain values and maintain control, India is interested in oil imports and holding the Malacca dilemma against Chinese aggression.

It is of no doubt that the politics of the geography have brought the two powers closer than ever before. However, to cast them together in a zero-sum game against China is a shallow reading of Indo-Pacific politics. Instead, the geography presents a theatre of power that features India and the US with unique foreign policy objectives but a political circumstance that produces a convergence of interests. This has given rise to a unique courtship of dispersed advantages and matching interests—limited to the time and geography and far from the duty-ridden, value-laden commitment of a marriage. After all, the Asian rules-based order has been in crisis for much longer than the last seven years, so what is compelling the US to look Eastward now? Why does India continue to support China's multilateral engagements if it has 'turned' to the West? The India-US partnership confers advantages to both powers, especially in the face of a fast-changing world order. However, their differing objectives and foreign policy dispositions cannot be sidelined. India and the US must focus on the nature of their partnership and its adaptation to their respective foreign policy temperaments. Just as borders and world orders are hardly rigid, even interest-based partnerships transpire often, but rarely do they alter foreign policy temperaments.