

# **US-INDIA INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY**

Reimagining the Maritime Outlook

# US-INDIA PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

## ISSUE BRIEF

### US-India Indo-Pacific Strategy – Reimagining the maritime outlook

#### The project

The Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) is conducting a 10-month long project on US – India Relations: Change, Continuity and Transformation. This project is supported by the US Consulate General Chennai, Public Affairs Section. The project aims at studying the US – India partnership across the following focus areas – titled i) US and India: Partners in Global Climate Action, ii) Indo-Pacific Strategy: Reimagining the Maritime Outlook, iii) US-India Trade Relations: To the Next Level and Transformational Technologies and iv) US-India Science and Technology Cooperation. The project aims to prepare a platform for conducting informed discussions and sharing concrete and actionable policy recommendations for private and government functionaries from India and the United States on the focus areas. To that effect, CPPR will conduct four webinars on the selected topics with the participation of subject matter experts from the two countries. The first webinar of the series, on US and India as Partners in Climate Action: A Clean Energy Agenda, was held on June 17, 2021. The speakers at the webinar were Dr Jessica Seddon and Prof. Damodaran.

The second webinar of the series, on an Indo-Pacific Strategy: Reimagining the Maritime Outlook, was held on August 26, 2021. The speakers at the webinar were Dr Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan and Mr. Gregory Poling.

Dr Rajeswari (Raji) Pillai Rajagopalan is the Director of the Centre for Security, Strategy and Technology (CSST) at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. She was the Technical Advisor to the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Prevention of Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) (July 2018-July 2019). She was also a Non-Resident Indo-Pacific Fellow at the Perth USAsia Centre from April-December 2020. As a senior Asia defence writer for *The Diplomat*, she writes a weekly column on Asian strategic issues. She joined ORF after a five-year stint at the National Security Council Secretariat (2003-2007), Government of India, where she was an Assistant Director.

Mr. Gregory B. Poling is a senior fellow for Southeast Asia and director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at CSIS. He oversees research on U.S. foreign policy in the Asia Pacific, with a particular focus on the maritime domain and the countries of Southeast Asia. His research interests include the South China Sea disputes, democratization in Southeast Asia, and Asian multilateralism. Mr. Poling's writings have been featured in *Foreign Affairs*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Nikkei Asian Review*, and *Foreign Policy*, among others.

The discussion was moderated by Dr. Lawrence Prabhakar Williams. He is an Author, Researcher & Professor, International Relations & Strategic Studies, formerly with the Department of Political Science, Madras Christian College. His research fellowships have been at IDSS & RSIS Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2004-07); The Fulbright Fellowship at University

of Michigan Ann Arbor (1996); Policy Research Fellowships at The Henry Stimson Center, Washington DC (2001) & Center for Naval Analysis, USA (2001). Other research assignments have been with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC; Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Hawaii (2003); Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra (2007); Near East South Asia Center-National Defense University, Washington DC 2009-2012; Consultant, Net Assessment Directorate, IDS, Ministry of Defence, New Delhi (2001-04). Adjunct Professor & PhD Supervisor Naval War College, INS Mandovi; China Studies Centre, IIT-Madras. He is a senior advisor with CPPR.

The discussions at the webinar were synthesised into this issue brief by Purvaja Modak, Research Fellow, International Relations – Geoeconomics at CPPR, with assistance from Aastha Hazarika, Intern at CPPR.

## US Administration on the Indo-Pacific region

Speaking in Singapore on August 24, 2021, US Vice President Kamala Harris emphasized the importance of the partnerships forged by the US across the Indo-Pacific region, saying that the region holds critical importance to the US' security and prosperity. She said that the US intends on strengthening these partnerships and reinforcing a shared vision - Peace and stability, freedom on the seas, unimpeded commerce, advancing human rights, commitment to the international rules-based order and the recognition that there are common interests that are not zero sum.

Admiral John Aquilino, commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, on his visit to India on August 25, 2021, met with senior Indian government officials such as Chief of Defence Staff Gen Bipin Rawat, Chief of Army Staff Gen MM Naravane, Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, to further strengthen the Indo - US defense partnership. He said, "Our networks of allies and partners are our greatest strength and the centre of gravity in the Indo-Pacific. Our relationship with India is based on aligned values and presents an important model for building enduring partnerships. As we increase interoperability, information sharing and access with allies and partners across the globe, this partnership enhances our capabilities, improves our coordination and shows that we are stronger when we stand together."

Strategic experts are of the opinion that US President Joe Biden's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region will be different from the approach taken by former President Trump. The Trump administration engaged in Asia only through bilateral engagements with certain countries and did not focus on the regional architecture. President Biden has reiterated the same level of interest in the region as his predecessor but will ensure that the US makes more strategic and diplomatic moves this time over.

## Background on the US-India Maritime Cooperation

The Indo-US maritime cooperation has flourished since 1992 when the partnership in the maritime domain was accentuated in the form of the Malabar series of exercises. Formation of the quadrilateral security initiative (QUAD) with the inclusion of Japan and Australia added another dimension to the bilateral partnership. Thus, India is at the center of the Quad's

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1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/24/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-on-the-indo-pacific-region/>  
2. <https://theasiatoday.org/editorials/us-commanders-visit-to-india/>

existence. Also, there is a growing economic transactionalism between the two countries fueled by bilateral trade. For trade to flourish, India has played a vital role by keeping sea lanes open through the Indian Ocean.

Ever since the war against terror started in 2001, India has played the role of an ‘informal net security provider’, monitoring the sea lanes and trade routes of the region to encourage trade. India and the United States have also benefited from technology transfers between the two nations. Such transfers have instilled trust in India’s military capacity and also in the platforms India has been able to acquire particularly in the naval domain.

Trade interdependence between the two countries, another important aspect constituent due to which the India-US relations have flourished, is also maritime led. The two countries require a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region which will not only provide a confluence of the Indian and Pacific oceans but will be a confluence of various democracies that will ensure peace and stability in the region.

## History of the ‘Indo-Pacific’

The Indo-Pacific region has assumed great strategic and economic significance in the last decade. One of the earliest articulations of the Indo-Pacific was by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe when he spoke on the “confluence” of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007 as “the dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity” in the “broader Asia”. Since 2010, the term Indo-Pacific acquired salience within the Indian government and has since been used often by India’s apex political leadership. However, the first official recognition of the term appeared in Australia’s Defence White Paper in 2013 identifying the Indo-Pacific as the new theatre.

In 2018, the US indicated its preference for the terminology, ‘Indo-Pacific’, in its National Strategy and renamed its US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific command. In 2019, the U.S. State Department published a document formalizing the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, to be sustained among members of “the Quad” or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a partnership of four like-minded Indo-Pacific democracies led by the United-States, that includes Australia, India, and Japan, touted to take on a leadership role in the region. In the same year, the ASEAN, France and several other countries released documents indicating their visions for the Indo-Pacific.

Prior to Secretary of State Anthony J Blinken’s visit to New Delhi in July 2021, the United States reiterated its support for India’s emergence as a leading global power and vital partner in efforts to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is a region of peace, stability and growing prosperity and economic inclusion.

The Indo-Pacific strategy was created for the following reasons: a) to include India as a leading partner as previously, the Asia-Pacific did not include India; b) to highlight the strategic maritime spaces of the Pacific and Indian Ocean as one strategic entity; and c) to gather like-minded countries to counter China’s expansionist agenda and maneuvers in the region.

The Indo-pacific region is a significant and vast maritime space with the interests of many maritime players like India, Japan, France and the United States as well as several medium and small powers like Australia and Indonesia, converging. While the region faces various maritime challenges, uncertainty largely arises due to China’s expansionist agenda as well

as the perceived leadership vacuum in the region. The region does not have an overarching security institution that binds the entire region. The current competition and rivalry are also a function of the Asian and global power transitions and changing balance of power dynamics. With the rise of China, the return of a more normal nation in Japan and the reemergence of Russia, the Indo-Pacific region has become a theatre of great power competition.

## India's Indo-Pacific strategy

India has reiterated its commitment towards a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, based on a rules-based order by introducing initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Prime Minister Modi while announcing this initiative said “the objectives of the IPOI are to ensure the safety, security and stability of the maritime domain”. It enlarges the focus on the strategic maritime aspect of the Indo-Pacific and is a clear indicator of India’s willingness to address China’s maritime aggressiveness in an emphatic manner. The IPOI proposal has been welcomed by many Indo-Pacific powers and countries of the ASEAN region.

The Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, has said that the initiative was introduced to create partnerships among interested parties on several pillars ranging from enhancing maritime security, to preserving and sustainably using marine resources, building capacity, disaster prevention and management as well as collaborating on trade and maritime transport. India has undertaken certain administrative policy steps in furthering the importance of maritime security in the overall strategic architecture of the region. For instance, in April 2019, India set up an Indo-Pacific division within the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India to integrate the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the ASEAN region and the QUAD countries under the Indo-Pacific umbrella. In September 2020, an Oceania division was created in the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India to streamline the government’s efforts concerning maritime spaces. These dedicated divisions are important because China has been proactively maintaining a dominant standing in these maritime spaces and India also seeks to assert its own rules in the region.

However, despite these pronouncements and initiatives, India continues to lack a focused and coherent Indo-Pacific strategy. India has engaged on a number of issues like Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR), environmental issues, blue economy, anti-piracy, etc. But the real challenge for India is China’s growing military power and foothold in the region.

## China in the Indo-Pacific and implications for India

The major Indo-Pacific countries view China’s role and influence in the region in different ways. The US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand feel that they should focus on China’s efforts in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. For India, the focus is on power play and dominance in the Indian Ocean. The countries of the region must converge on what the focus of their Indo-Pacific strategies ought to be, if they wish to contain the growing presence and influence of China. India has traditionally played a significant maritime leadership role but since independence in 1947, continental issues have gained greater salience and India has abandoned naval and maritime aspects as a strategic priority.

But the rise of China, its aggressive military and geopolitical stances in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean has prompted many countries to view India as a balancing factor. These countries expect India to play a major role in ensuring a secure maritime environment and effectively deter and restrain China in its expansive activities in the region. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific framework provides India with enormous opportunities to partner with like-minded

countries and major stakeholders in the region.

India needs to change its security strategy to include threats coming from maritime spaces as well as its land borders. So far, a threat from China has primarily come from its land borders but this scenario is going to change in the coming years.

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean is a part of the determinant agenda to emerge as a key player in the Indian Ocean region. It feeds into China's larger objective of becoming a global maritime power. The PLA Navy's growing strength means it is shaping up to be a formidable force to be reckoned with. This is complimented by China's growing maritime ties with the number of countries in the IOR and increasing naval presence in the region. Even though the Indian Navy has been able to deal with Chinese maneuvers in the region as of now, the scenario will be significantly different in the coming years. India needs a well thought out strategy to counter the Chinese influence and participate in securing a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

India also needs to be clear on its overall strategy for maritime security. So far, India has adopted the sea control strategy but there may be a need to move to sea denial strategy. Discussions on this are required at the highest levels of government. Inter service rivalry and maritime capacity development are serious issues that must be addressed if India wants to play a proactive role in the region. Since the Galwan conflict, India is once again likely to have a continental focus and ignore maritime capability requirements. This is reflected in the small budgetary allocation made to the Indian Navy for strengthening its maritime capabilities. Data on its ship building capacity, the port handling facilities, capacity of ports, ease of connectivity and the size of its merchant fleet, etc show that there are shortcomings that must be addressed to effectively create a maritime strategy for India.

In early 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a speech in Mauritius spoke about initiating partnerships with like-minded countries in the region like the United States, Australia and Japan. These partnerships include security dialogues, military exercises and defence related exchanges. This changed approach highlights an acknowledgement from the Indian government of the fact that India faces serious capacity constraints in managing the Indian Ocean by itself, especially given China's dominance; and needs such partnerships to defend the region. India has concluded logistic agreements with a number of countries including the US, Japan, France and Australia. These initiatives have extended India's maritime outreach and strengthened overall maritime security cooperation. Thus, New Delhi is likely to continue its regional engagements but may also step up its bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and other minilateral partnerships as well. Strategic partnerships with other key countries, especially the financially more capable countries such as Japan may be critical for India to further its Indo-Pacific Strategy in the coming years.

## **US-India collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region: Reimagining the maritime outlook**

Indo-US collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to ensure maritime security in the following ways: a) Direct bilateral defence and security cooperation; b) Dedicated diplomatic efforts to create critical deterrence against the Chinese in the Indo-Pacific region; c) Joint maritime domain capacity building and support to smaller nations and islands.

The US and India's strategic interests and threat perceptions are now quite well aligned. There is growing US-India cooperation in the bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral arenas in the form



of the Malabar exercises, increasing weapon sales, logistics agreements, maritime patrols, etc. This partnership has been facilitated by the growth of India's network of security cooperation with other US allies, bringing India into a club of likeminded countries in the region.

**Enhanced bilateral defence cooperation** between Washington and Delhi has helped build deterrence capabilities against any possible Chinese aggression in the region. The two countries must act together to convince Beijing that its goals for regional dominance will be better served by acting within the system than outside of it. At the moment, Beijing's aggressive behaviour, especially in the South China Sea is seen as a threat to entire global community.

**Direct security cooperation between India and the US in the Indo-Pacific region** can be seen through increased partnerships and joint initiatives in maritime domain and capacity building. There is a focus on information sharing. India uses the SeaVasion platform developed by the US Department of Transportation as also the Indian Navy is taking part in US led, Japanese led, Australian led maritime security dialogues. The four countries are developing a shared set of definitions, rules, norms to monitor the maritime domain. Also, India is engaging in the Indian Ocean region by supporting the maritime domain awareness capacities of small states. India is now funding radar and other support initiatives for Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Bangladesh, and Rwanda, linking the radar networks back to the Indian Navy's Indian Ocean Fusion Centre in Delhi and then sharing the data with relevant countries. The US is taking similar efforts in South East Asia through the American Security Initiative.

Search and rescue operations, countering illegal fishing and piracy and keeping a watch on China – all these activities can be made possible using low-cost remote sensing satellite technology and cheap radar.

**Creating critical deterrence against the Chinese in the Indo-Pacific region:** India and the US need to develop and establish a long-term diplomatic strategy on Beijing and ensure that smaller states in the region are capable of monitoring their own borders the same way India and the US. They must also ensure that these countries can keep a check on China in the same way India and the US do by strengthening their overall capacity building.

The only way that like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific region can hope to deter Chinese aggression is to build up resilience of smaller neighbours together in a grand coalition. Partnerships in the region can take place through a tight network of trilateral, quadrilateral, multilateral, issue specific initiatives – on infrastructure, on investment, on maritime security, on cyber security, etc. The goal should be to wrap the region so tightly in a coalition of like-minded issues that China finds it better off to work within the system than outside of it.

**US-India engagement with Island nations:** Islands often get caught up in the major power competition between the US, China, India, Australia and other countries. They often have external legal and diplomatic influence.

Thus, it will be beneficial for countries like the US and India to leverage the network of islands in the Indo-Pacific region to monitor and respond to the activities in the Indian Ocean that they will not be able to do from their coasts. The US and India must secure access points on island territories, both in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean to be able to monitor China's activities and deter their bad behaviors in the region.

Thus, the US and India must build their diplomatic linkages with the islands in the region, and at the same time provide them with capacity building and training exercises to make them resilient to environmental disasters and external attacks like piracy etc. The India and the

US have already stepped up their approach to island nations in the Indo-Pacific waters but a continued collaboration in the form of capacity building exercises is needed.

**Infrastructure development and connectivity in the region: Leveraging their shared comparative advantage:** The US and India should also work together to bring about infrastructure development and connectivity (physical infrastructure and digital connectivity) in the Indo-Pacific region. These issues have not been under discussion since the budgetary allocation made by the US and India for infrastructure development is not sufficient to counter or match up to the investments China is making in the region. Many countries in the region in the Indo-Pacific hope to counter China without thinking about another alternative option, making it impossible to resist Chinese pressure to work together on some connectivity projects. To address this, the two countries can get into public private partnership arrangements in which both countries can pool in equal money from public and private sources. Such initiatives can help strengthen the overall capacity of the smaller countries in the region a digital connectivity gains more salience.


The US and India should leverage their shared comparative advantage on issues like digital connectivity, smart city initiatives, green energy transformations etc. and invest in these sectors. The biggest issue for the US and India remains the lack of real alternatives to China's state-led physical infrastructure development initiatives. India's Act East Policy has not culminated in any long-lasting engagements and has not brought in any future projects. Japan has filled the gap, as the only alternative to Chinese infrastructure in most of South and South East Asia. The US and India need to incentivize their private companies to provide alternatives to Chinese infrastructure as well.

**Leveraging the Quad:** The Quad has not been institutionalized yet and it is unlikely that there will be any formal expansion of the Quad. The US and India must leverage the Quad in its current form and focus on specific Quad-based initiatives –on three areas established by working groups – a) network maritime security, b) infrastructure investment and c) global health. The US and India must work with a coalition of like-minded countries to further cooperation in the region in these areas of focus. The US and India must put forth a stance welcoming other like-minded country to participate and collaborate in Quad-led activities in the above-mentioned areas, without formally having to join the Quad.

There is a likelihood that a grouping like South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand (already a part of Quad Plus) could not become part of a larger strategic grouping in the post covid scenario. So just like the Quad, there could be any number of minilaterals with like-minded partners that may come together to ensure rule-based order to ensure a free, open and exclusive Indo-Pacific. The US and India must leverage these countries to ensure peace, stability and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

These are some areas in which the US and India can collaborate in the Indo-Pacific region in their attempt to reimagine the maritime outlook and build stronger partnerships for a better future.





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