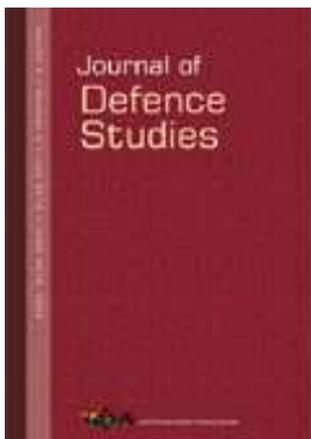


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High End in the Pacific

Envisioning the Upper Limits of India–US Naval Cooperation in Pacific-Asia¹

*Gurpreet S. Khurana**

The article argues that India and the United States are poised to strengthen their bilateral strategic convergences, not only in the Indian Ocean but also in Pacific-Asia that lies eastwards of the Malacca Straits, and wherein India's geo-strategic stakes as well as its military-strategic footprint are likely to increase in the coming years. This would progressively enhance the complementarities between their navies in the western Pacific and its contiguous seas, thereby enabling substantive naval cooperation towards ensuring security and stability in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Introducing the theoretical concept of 'geo-strategic frontier', the article examines the various factors at play and conceives the likely future scenarios of 'high-end' India–US naval cooperation in Pacific-Asia, in the short-, medium- and long-term timeframes.

The United States (US) Navy's document of 2016, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, says, 'For 240 years, the U.S. Navy has been a cornerstone of American security and prosperity.'² If India maintains the course charted by the maritime vision³ of its current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to become a resurgent maritime power, the case would be similar for the Indian Navy, even if a few centuries behind the US. If so, it would be fair to say that towards meeting their overarching national objectives, as India and the US seek to optimise their strategic

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convergence in the maritime-configured Indo-Pacific region,⁴ the key lies in naval cooperation.

The election of Donald Trump as the US President in November 2016 led to much uncertainty regarding the future trajectory of India–US strategic relations. However, the meeting between the two heads of governments during the Indian Prime Minister’s visit to Washington, DC in June 2017 largely dispelled all apprehensions. The joint statement indicated the desire of both sides to further strengthen defence ties and maritime security cooperation.⁵ Notably, ahead of the visit, the US approved the sale of 22 Predator-MQ-9B Guardian maritime surveillance drones to India, the only country outside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that may operate these high-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).⁶ It may, therefore, be assumed that the current salience of India in the US national-strategic calculus and foreign policy would persevere—and possibly, even strengthen further—notwithstanding transient deviations in the overall trajectory of bilateral relations.

In the past few years, much scholarly research on India–US naval cooperation has been confined to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). There are good reasons for this. First, India’s primary areas of maritime interest lie in the IOR. Second, until recently, India’s strategic outreach to the eastern part of Indo-Pacific has been rather subdued.⁷ However, there are indicators that India’s policy towards its extended eastern neighbourhood is changing. Among the clearest indicators, for instance, is the reinvigorated ‘Act East’ policy of India’s Narendra Modi-led government.

In the light of the rather seminal eastward shift in India’s foreign and security policies, it becomes necessary to assess the fundamental factors leading to this shift. Such an assessment would be helpful to envision the ‘high end’ of India–US naval cooperation in the Pacific stretch of the Indo-Pacific region, namely, the Pacific rim of Asia and its littoral seas encompassing the western Pacific (or Pacific-Asia). This article attempts such a prognosis based on a set of conceivable scenarios. Given the trends that indicate that India–US strategic convergence is likely to strengthen further, such a scenario-based approach is applied at two levels. The first set of future scenarios in the short term is premised on the present environment and current level of convergence. The second level addresses the scenarios in the medium and long term timeframe, which may be driven by enhanced strategic imperatives, necessitating

India–US naval cooperation to go beyond what is considered ‘high end’ today.

PACIFIC-ASIA IN INDIA’S STRATEGIC CALCULUS

Area of Maritime Interest

It may be more appropriate to begin with how Pacific-Asia figures in India’s national maritime-strategic calculus. India’s geographical areas of maritime interest are well articulated in its latest maritime security strategy document of 2015.⁸ As shown in Figure 1, Pacific-Asia lies well within India’s areas of maritime interest. Undeniably, the IOR is the most important area wherein India’s critical maritime and overseas interests lie, and, therefore, this area is of primary importance for India’s maritime security.

While Pacific-Asia is the secondary area of interest, India’s vital economic and geopolitical interests lie in this area; and, therefore, regional stability and adherence to a rules-based order, including freedom

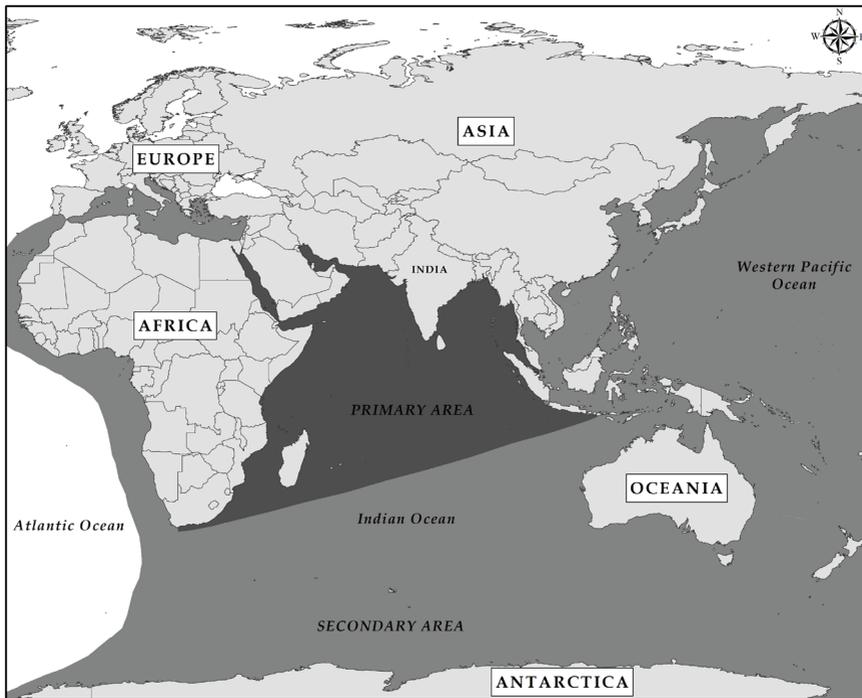


Figure 1 India: Areas of Maritime Interest

Source: Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, n. 7.

of navigation (FON), is very important for it. This has translated into the joint statements between India and various other countries—such as the US, Vietnam and Indonesia—on upholding international law and norms of conduct in the South China Sea. In the India–US joint statement released during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the US in September 2014, the two sides reaffirmed ‘their shared interest in preserving regional peace and stability (including)...safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.’⁹

Concept of ‘Maritime Security’

The aforesaid articulation of the geographical areas of India’s maritime interest, however, does not present the holistic picture of its maritime security imperatives. For this, one needs to first comprehend the very concept of ‘maritime security’ as perceived by India, and its regional neighbours, which differs much from the Western conceptualisation. Unlike in the developed West, Asian countries continue to be confronted with possibility of state-on-state military conflicts. Therefore, the concept of maritime security is not limited to ‘good order at sea’ in terms of responding to non-state security challenges. For India specifically, for instance, China poses a major military challenge, which is demanding increasing attention of New Delhi due to the growing presence and activities of China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the IOR. The dictum of strategy demands that India’s response to this insecurity cannot be confined to the IOR, namely, its own primary area of maritime interest. It translates into an increasing imperative for India’s strategic attention to China’s ‘backyard’, namely, the latter’s primary area of maritime interest that encloses Pacific-Asia, including its contiguous seas.

Concept of ‘Geostrategic Frontier’

The aforesaid imperative leads to the coinage of the concept of ‘geostrategic frontier’. Such frontier encloses a geographical area in the regional neighbourhood wherein a country must play a role more than being merely a ‘passive’ security actor. It refers to a space wherein the country should be able to influence events for ensuring its own national security against traditional military threats. It is a very critical area, since it also provides strategic depth to the country.

Traditionally, India’s ‘geostrategic frontier’ has largely coincided

with its primary areas of maritime interest. However, there are ample indicators that these frontiers are now expanding eastwards beyond the IOR (see Figure 2). As mentioned earlier, India's policy reorientation from 'Look East' to 'Act East' is among the key indicators. This has manifested in a reinforcement of its politico-diplomatic and defence ties with countries of the Pacific rim, ranging from Singapore and Indonesia to Vietnam and Japan. India's military-strategic reorientation includes its increasing naval presence east of the Malacca Straits and the incorporation of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) in the India-US Malabar exercises since 2014.¹⁰ Among the other notable indicators is the augmentation of Indian Navy's capacity to influence events in the western Pacific. In February 2015, the Indian government accorded approval to build six indigenous nuclear attack submarines (SSN) for its navy.¹¹ Owing to their virtually unlimited endurance and high underwater speeds, SSNs are optimal for distant operations, such as in the western Pacific.

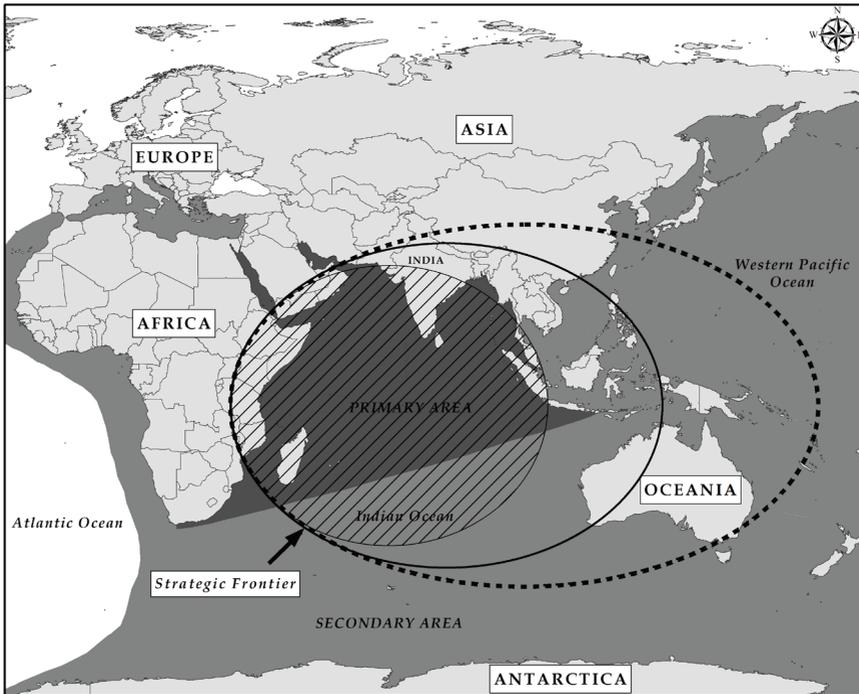


Figure 2 India's Expanding Geostrategic Frontier

Source: Author.

India's policy reorientation eastwards is unlikely be limited to its military-strategic objectives. It may also be driven by a number of other objectives, such as economic engagement with the countries of Pacific-Asia. But the military-strategic objective is an important one. It aims to offset China's growing strategic presence in the IOR, and also caters for India's need to diversify its military-strategic options in the possible event of a Chinese military aggression across the land border—in which case, India may need to resort to horizontal escalation at sea, including in the western Pacific.

Desired End State

The eastward dilation of India's 'geostrategic frontier' is not without a clear conception of a 'desired end state' (specifically decided outcome). Such conception is essential since the last thing New Delhi would want is to create instability in Pacific-Asia through an increased India–China rivalry. On the contrary, India would like to contribute to a benign environment in the area that is conducive for furthering its own economic and other interests. To further such an endeavour, New Delhi appears to be willing to partner with any regional country or non-resident power—including China and the US—that holds similar stakes in regional security. India's enduring national policy of 'strategic autonomy' itself is 'hardwired' to this objective of stability in the Indo-Pacific region, and accords New Delhi independent and multi-vectored strategic options to choose its partners sans treaty obligations.

India's multi-vectored and independent foreign policy also bestows enhanced military-strategic options, including partnership with the regional countries and non-resident powers. However, such options at the higher end of the escalatory spectrum are only meant for worst-case scenarios. Unless India is pushed, it would be satisfied merely by achieving a credible deterrence against China. As mentioned earlier, New Delhi's national-strategic approach to Pacific-Asia is largely driven by much broader interests and objectives. A credible 'strategic deterrence'¹² would enable India to secure these interests and objectives in Pacific-Asia, thus maintaining 'business-as-usual' economic and other partnerships with the regional countries.

INDIA–US STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE IN PACIFIC-ASIA

India as a ‘Net Security Provider’

The vision of India as a ‘net security provider’ (NSP) was first articulated in 2009 by Robert Gates, then US Defence Secretary.¹³ The objective of this vision was implicit, but clear. It was meant to have India as an emerging major regional power with congruent strategic interests to share the burden of regional security in the Indo-Pacific region. The spirit of the articulation, therefore, may be similar to the concept of a ‘Thousand Ship Navy’ (TSN), enunciated in 2005 by the US Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Mike Mullen, that called upon navies to unite for addressing mutual maritime security concerns.¹⁴

Since 2009, the ‘NSP’ concept began to be used increasingly by the Indian leadership. In May 2013, former Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, emphatically endorsed the concept. He said, ‘We have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned...to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.’¹⁵ The phrase ‘immediate region’ may be interpreted as referring to the IOR; and while contextualising India’s areas of maritime interest, the word ‘beyond’ clearly refers to ‘Pacific-Asia’.

The US articulation of ‘India as an NSP’ is certainly helpful in endorsing India’s role in Pacific-Asia. Even though it carries no legal connotation, it does reinforce the legitimacy of India’s ‘Act East’ policy among the Pacific rim countries, enabling India to intensify its partnerships with them and to enhance its security profile in the area.

The ‘China’ Factor

For the past decade and more, the ‘China factor’ has been stated to be the key catalyst of India–US strategic convergence.¹⁶ Both Indian and American official statements affirm that that India–US naval cooperation is meant to respond to the emergent maritime security threats in the Indo-Pacific region and is not directed against any particular country. This is validated by substantive evidence, including the inherent character of India’s foreign policy. A 2011 report by a US-based think tank says, ‘The [India–US] partnership...will almost certainly never develop into an “alliance,” given India’s core foreign policy goal of maintaining its “strategic autonomy.”’¹⁷ In 2012, an Indian analyst went to the extent of

arguing that ‘containment of China would result to serious strategic and economic implications for India’,¹⁸

Nonetheless, the China factor bringing the two countries together is not lost upon analysts. The US report of 2011 adds:

The U.S. should pursue robust strategic and military engagement with India in order to encourage a stable balance of power in Asia that prevents China from dominating the region and surrounding seas...India’s growing political, economic, and military strength would signal a solidarity that could help deter Chinese military aggression and temper China’s ambitions to revise borders in its favor.¹⁹

It may thus be in order to aver that the India–US strategic convergence is not aimed at a strategic containment of China, but rather to ‘manage’ China’s ‘rise’. This view was best represented by the 2005 statement of then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Tokyo. She said that the US relations with India, as with its other allies and partners in the region, are all-important in creating an environment in which China is more likely to play a positive role, rather than a negative one, thereby moderating its assertive actions.²⁰

As recently as in April 2017, amidst the uncertainties on approach of the Trump administration towards Asia, Ashley Tellis echoed these views, though in context of the IOR. In his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, he recommended that the US should make all efforts to make India militarily self-reliant in the IOR, which would accrue substantial dividends for the US in terms of preserving America’s primacy against the challenge posed by China.²¹

The ‘North Korea’ Factor

Ever since 2004, when the Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan revealed a clandestine nuclear proliferation network based in Pakistan, and involving China, North Korea and other countries,²² India and the US have developed a strategic convergence on this issue. In the case of North Korea specifically, Pyongyang has since long continued its nuclear and ballistic missile programme unabated, leading to the current crisis in Pacific-Asia. Ostensibly, Beijing was earlier ‘unwilling’, and is now ‘unable’, to rein in its ally over which it has always wielded substantial levers. The situation has been aptly described by an analyst citing Albert Einstein, who had once said, ‘The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.’²³

North Korea's current intent and activities represent not only a 'clear and present' threat for America—as James Mattis, the US Defence Secretary described it²⁴—but is also a major security concern for India, particularly considering the potential for Pyongyang's ballistic missile technology to proliferate in the Indo-Pacific region. Notably, as the interception of the North Korean ship *MV Ku Wol San* in 1999 revealed, Pakistan was a major recipient of such technology,²⁵ which has severely complicated the security environment in South Asia today.

However, the reaction of the Indian government to the recent serious developments involving North Korea has been muted. This may be mainly due to its own status as a 'de facto' and not 'de jure' nuclear weapon state (NWS). Notwithstanding its impeccable record in terms of nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation, India may be reticent to issue a statement to avoid adverse global reactions, and attendant implications for its efforts to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). The case is very similar to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) that was launched by the US in 2004. Without formally joining the coalition, India could only articulate a broad support for PSI, even while the Indian Navy was permitted to join the US Navy in visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) exercises. Another case in point is India's guarded reaction to the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540 passed in 2004, which sought to delegitimise transportation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) on sea-going vessels. Even though New Delhi supported the 'spirit' of UNSCR 1540, India could not formally endorse the resolution since it made a special exception only for the countries that were party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and India was not 'in the tent'. Even though the NPT issue continues to constrain India's public articulation on North Korea, much has changed for India, and primarily with US support. India is now within the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and things could change further with its entry into the NSG. This would make the already strong India–US convergence on these issues more visible.

Rebalancing the 'Rebalance'

Since the past three years, India's invigorated 'Act East' policy has found resonance in the US policy of 'Rebalance to Asia'. Essentially, the key objectives of the US 'Rebalance' were to secure America's stakes in Pacific-Asia and to manage China's rise. The latter objective was clearly convergent with India's own national strategic ends.

At a press briefing held in March 2017, Susan Thornton, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, stated that President Donald Trump is likely to articulate his own formulation of the US 'Pivot' or 'Rebalance' to Asia, if at all.²⁶ This was interpreted by the media as the US 'Pivot was over'.²⁷ However, it is amply clear that the US stakes in Asia will not diminish in the foreseeable future. As a noted US analyst commented:

America's commitment to Asia is not new. We had presence in Asia even before we had a west coast and the region continues to grow in importance to the US, politically, economically, and strategically, with every passing year...America's focus on Asia as a national security priority has been a bipartisan constant since the end of the Cold War and the centrality of the US alliance system in Asia—as in Europe (NATO)—has been a bipartisan constant since 1950s.²⁸

Hence, the issue here is not of the US commitment to Pacific-Asia, and thus its continued strategic convergence with India, but only the ostensible hesitation of the Trump administration to have a 'declaratory' foreign policy for Pacific-Asia. The key objectives of the erstwhile 'Rebalance' are, therefore, likely to persevere.

Notwithstanding the above, the US military strategic approach to Pacific-Asia is still unclear. For many months after October 2016, for instance, the US Navy was not permitted to continue with its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea, despite formal requests from the US PACOM (Pacific Command).²⁹ PACOM recommenced the FONOPS around the Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands only in end May 2017.³⁰ In July 2017, the US upgraded its military ties with Taiwan.³¹ However, such measures may largely be meant to pressurise China to rein in North Korea, rather than indicative of a continuity of US military strategic commitment to Pacific-Asia.

If the US maintains its military strategic approach to Pacific-Asia as hitherto, or becomes more assertive against China, India-US strategic convergence of the 'Rebalance' period would persevere. On the other hand, if the US scales down its military involvement in Pacific-Asia on account of a reformulated 'Rebalance' policy, Washington may expect its allies and partners to do more to 'take the slack' in Pacific-Asia in terms of managing China's rise. This would strengthen India's strategic convergence further, with an enhanced obligation upon India to scale-up its role not only in the IOR but also in Pacific-Asia.

In either case, the inclination of the Trump administration to review its 'declaratory' foreign policy for Pacific-Asia would serve to reduce polarisation in the region. It may also be helpful to change the inaccurate perceptions of Pacific-Asia countries that the central aim of India–US strategic collaboration is to 'contain' China. Such a change in perceptions may strengthen multifaceted relationships of Pacific rim countries with India without the added dilemma of having to choose between the India and China.

FUTURE SCOPE OF NAVAL COOPERATION IN PACIFIC-ASIA

Based on the aforementioned India–US strategic convergences and the overall trajectory of bilateral defence and security ties, the potential scope of India–US naval cooperation in Pacific-Asia may be conceived through indicative scenarios at two levels. The first set of scenarios pertains to the short-term timeframe, and is based on the present environment and the current level of strategic convergence.

Short-term Scenarios

1. *Assistance for force protection*: The US naval forces are involved in a major maritime conflict in the western Pacific. Since the US Navy's force allocation is strictly based on response to such major contingencies, it is overstretched to meet other low-end requirements, such as force protection. The Indian Navy escorts the US commercial shipping transiting the South China Sea. It may be recalled that in 2002, the Indian Navy had undertaken an escort mission for the US high-value ships across the Malacca Straits when the US forces were tied down with Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.³²
2. *Anti-access/area-denial assistance*: During a maritime conflict involving the US and China in the western Pacific, the US seeks operational assistance of Indonesia and India. The scenario plays out in consonance with the testimony by Ashley Tellis before the Senate Armed Services Committee, wherein he recommended that the US 'encourage and assist allies and friends to develop anti-access and area denial "bubbles" of their own in (relevant) areas...Indonesia could control access through the Lombok, Sunda, and Malacca Straits, with India joining in the last mission as well.'³³
3. *Enforcement of North Korea sanctions*: The North Korean regime has upped the ante with its nuclear tests leading to a major instability in the area. As a result, the UN Security Council has promulgated

enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter³⁴ under the sanctions regime, these measures involve inspection of all sea-going vessels entering and leaving North Korean ports for prohibited material. The US and Indian navies coordinate their UN enforcement operations against North Korea.

4. *Capacity building for regional stability*: The rationale for the US assistance to India to become militarily self-reliant in the IOR—as recommended by Tellis—is taken forward by India and the US jointly to Pacific-Asia. Given the increasing asymmetry between the military power of ‘rising’ China and its smaller neighbours, it is realised that India–US cooperation is essential to balance the large military asymmetry prevailing in the area through capacity building of south-east Asian maritime security forces. India and the US discuss such an endeavour, which is in sharp contrast to the Chinese arms sales that is accentuating military imbalances in the IOR. This leads to the US bolstering Taiwan’s military capability,³⁵ while India offers the highly sophisticated BrahMos supersonic anti-ship missile to Vietnam.³⁶ While such collaboration entails a whole-of-government approach, the endeavour is effectively spearheaded by the Indian and US navies in their respective countries. This effort substantively moderates China’s politico-military assertion in endorsing its maritime territorial claims in the China Seas.
5. *Strategic signalling to China but avoiding ‘overkill’*: The India–US Malabar naval exercises have been useful for both navies to develop interoperability and for ‘strategic signalling’ to China. In 2014, India expands the scope of Malabar to include Japan in the exercise, thereby reinforcing the signalling to China.³⁷ A few years later, India co-opts the navies of Australia and Singapore in a large-scale Malabar exercise in the South China Sea. This leads to protests from China, projecting the development as an emerging ‘maritime pentagon’ in the Indo-Pacific. It is reminiscent of the five-nation Malabar exercise held in September 2007, which had caused anxieties in Beijing.³⁸ This time, however, China does not restrict its reaction to diplomatic protest. It undertakes a massive deployment of its Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia in the exercise area. Since the existing Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in Pacific-Asia applies only to warships, the situation becomes tense due to the high potential of military escalation. This has the consequential effect of heightened insecurities among the Pacific rim countries.

To avoid crossing China's 'redlines', India and the US revert the Malabar to the bilateral level. In lieu, the two countries agree to deepen their naval cooperation further to achieve the substantive strategic and operational value, without symbolic encumbrances of a 'quadrilateral' or 'pentagon'. India and the US also reach out to strengthen respective bilateral naval partnerships with Japan, Australia and other Pacific rim littorals.

Collective Security: The Key Factor

The aforesaid scenarios indicate that in the current environment, the scope of India–US naval cooperation in Pacific-Asia in the short term is rather limited. Premised on the fact that India's geostrategic frontier is expanding eastwards into the western Pacific, the Indian Navy would need to maintain a permanent presence in these waters. This would itself result in a quantum enhancement in the scope of India–US naval cooperation to cater for the projected scenarios into the medium and long term.

In the short-term timeframe, an India–US 'collective security' arrangement may be inconceivable in New Delhi; and even the US administration may not expect this from India. However, it may not be prudent for India to foreclose this strategic option for the longer-term timeframe. For its appraisal, the key question that needs to be answered is whether India can defend its vital interests in the western Pacific against a possible military opposition, for instance, one caused by China. This question is highly pertinent considering events in 2011 when China objected to India's oil exploration in Vietnamese maritime zones.³⁹ Around the same time, reportedly, Beijing also sent a message through the Indian warship *INS Airavat* sailing in the South China Sea that it could potentially challenge FON of Indian warships in the area.⁴⁰

India's apex naval leadership at that time asserted that the Indian Navy was capable of defending its legitimate interests in the western Pacific.⁴¹ Possibly, the Indian Navy has a suitable classified strategy and operational plan for an adverse eventuality created by China, but to any analyst with some experience of naval operations, it does not seem feasible in the present circumstances. For any surface-based naval mission, 'sea control' is an essential prerequisite. However, in the foreseeable future, India is unlikely to be able to establish sea control in the western Pacific on its own. India may have planned to develop indigenous SSNs for distant missions as brought out earlier, but these SSNs cannot possibly

respond to the entire spectrum of the escalatory situations that may lead to an armed conflict. Besides, it will take possibly more than a decade before the first indigenous SSN is inducted into the Indian Navy.

Medium and Long-term Scenarios

Assuming that the global order is not likely to undergo a major transformation in the foreseeable future, in the coming years, India–US ‘collective security’ arrangement may become an imperative for both sides, in either of the two possible scenarios.

Scenario 1: Medium-term Time Frame

A military standoff between India and China across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) escalates into a full-fledged armed conflict, much before the Indian Navy acquires the capability to influence events in the western Pacific. As in the past, New Delhi is reluctant to enter into a ‘formal collective security’ arrangement with any major power, but is pushed into entering into such a security agreement with the US.

The US assistance helps the Indian Navy to achieve escalation dominance against the PLAN in the South China Sea, thereby enforcing status quo across the LAC. However, the maritime conflict has caused a seemingly irreparable damage to the economies of both China and India, shaving off a sizable proportion of their gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates. The other Pacific rim countries—mostly export-dependent economies—have also been adversely affected due to increased war-risk premiums imposed upon the shipping transiting the conflict zone. The industrial capacity of China and Japan is severely hit as the tankers carrying crude oil have been the key targets during the conflict.

Scenario 2: Long-term Time Frame

The Modi government’s ‘Act East’ foreign policy and other domestic policy reforms fructify making India emerge as a strong regional power. The US National Intelligence Council report of 2012, titled *Global Trends 2030*,⁴² and the more recent study by India’s Niti Aayog⁴³ indicate that by 2030, India will emerge as a major global economic power. This leads to a substantial enhancement of India’s comprehensive power, resulting in the dilation of its primary area of maritime interest to the western Pacific in tandem with the dilation of its ‘geostrategic frontier’.

Under such circumstances, India–US naval cooperation in the western Pacific becomes necessary to moderate China’s assertive proclivities,

in accordance with the vision articulated by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005. The substantial enhancement of China's comprehensive national power (CNP) and its regional influence—including through its Belt and Road initiative—has led to its large-scale militarisation of the islands and other features in the South China Sea. Also, the military imbalance in Pacific-Asia (in China's favour) has become more conspicuous, further encouraging China to assert its maritime territorial claims.

After the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan*, North Korea has enhanced its sea-denial capabilities significantly. Its belligerent moves are no longer limited to demonstrations of nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and now seem to be spilling over into the maritime domain in a major way, threatening not only South Korea and Japan but also other regional countries and the international seaborne commerce in the western Pacific.

To secure its dilated maritime interests in Pacific-Asia, India needs to partner with like-minded powers like the US to maintain a benign security environment in the western Pacific, much like the leading European powers have traditionally maintained a robust trans-Atlantic partnership with the US to maintain tranquillity in the maritime realm of the western hemisphere.

Deductions

Even while these scenarios represent futuristic solutions, the two navies must comprehend the current imperatives and work towards the 'common denominators' of these scenarios. In both scenarios, India would need to forge a more robust military engagement with the US, with or without a formal treaty. This implies that the Indian Navy and the US Navy would need to prepare for conducting 'combined'—and not merely 'coordinated'—naval operations.

An institutional mechanism for sharing military-strategic assessments may be an appropriate starting point. This could be used to develop a shared preparedness to exploit China's doctrinal voids at the military-strategic level. Information sharing could also be done at the operational level—informally, if not through a written agreement—such as exchange of 'non-white' shipping information.

For undertaking 'combined' operations with the US against a military opposition, India still needs to go a long way towards developing interoperability, and validating such operational compatibility during

the Malabar series of naval exercises. It is pertinent to mention that India's policy of 'strategic autonomy' is not a 'limiting factor', and would not constrain New Delhi to undertake such operations to preserve its national security. Much is yet to be achieved on communications, space imagery and logistics interoperability issues as negotiations continue on implementing the foundational agreements. Furthermore, the navies of the two countries would need to evolve a framework for combined rules of engagement. This could be a major challenge but not something that cannot be achieved.

CONCLUSION

At present, there are limits to optimising the full potential of India-US naval cooperation in Pacific-Asia, as indeed in the rest of the Indo-Pacific region. The limits are largely due to divergences of perception on either side. Possibly, the US believes that such partnership can yield substantial dividends for India in terms of its geopolitical and even national security objectives. As a quid pro quo, the US expects India to be more closely aligned to its national policies and objectives. The US belief on the dividends for India may be true, and its expectations may be legitimate.

India, on the other hand, seems to be weighed down by a major apprehension: possibly, by meeting America's expectation, New Delhi would be compelled to renounce its long-standing multi-vectorised foreign policy and enter into a military alliance with the US as its 'junior partner'. This apprehension cannot be taken lightly since such multi-vectorised policy is rather closely intertwined with the satiation of India's larger national developmental objectives, which go much beyond national security.

There is, thus, a conflict between America's 'expectation' and India's 'expediency'. Nonetheless, the dichotomy is more of a transient 'glass ceiling' than a substantive and enduring barrier to develop India-US naval cooperation to its fullest potential. In the coming years, a much stronger convergence is likely to emerge in Indian and US naval approaches to the affairs of Pacific-Asia, where India's strategic footprint would have increased to a substantial degree to be a worthy partner to the US. Such alignment of interests may be driven by one of the two future possibilities.

One scenario could be China ramping up its military assertiveness against India across the land borders, possibly in the medium-term timeframe, much before the latter has developed a credible strategic

deterrence against it, or the requisite capability to influence events in the western Pacific. This could compel India to adopt an offensive posture in Pacific-Asia seeking US military support, and thus do America's bidding, albeit reluctantly. This could be very detrimental to all stakeholders, including India and the Pacific rim countries; with China among the worst affected. This scenario would be less desirable even for the US as India would then become more of a liability than a support.

An alternative future scenario would be for the long-term timeframe, when India has been able to largely achieve its national developmental objectives through diversified global balancing of its economic and security engagements. This would see India having enhanced not only its comprehensive power but also its stakes in Pacific-Asia in a manner that would expand its primary area of maritime interest to the western Pacific, rather than merely its strategic frontiers. This would provide it the ability to challenge China or any destabilising factor in the region in concert with the US maritime-strategic objectives in Pacific-Asia, thereby leading to invigorated India-US naval cooperation. Undeniably, this would lead to the 'desired end state' of a 'multipolar Asia', not only for India but also the US.

NOTES

1. The use of the term 'Pacific-Asia' is deliberate. It refers strictly to the part of Asia and adjoining seas lying east of the south-east straits. The term 'Asia-Pacific' is unsuited here since many analysts enclose the eastern Indian Ocean within it.
2. *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), US Navy, January 2016, available at http://www.navy.mil/cno/docs/cno_stg.pdf, accessed on 25 June 2017.
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4. The term 'Indo-Pacific' refers to the maritime space stretching from the littorals of East Africa and West Asia, across the Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean, to the littorals of East Asia. The author was among the first to use the term in an academic paper, published in January 2007. See Gurpreet S. Khurana, 'Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007, pp. 139-53.
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 11. Rajat Pandit, 'Government Clears Construction of 7 Stealth Frigates, 6 Nuclear-powered Attack Submarines', *The Economic Times*, 18 February 2015, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/government-clears-construction-of-7-stealth-frigates-6-nuclear-powered-attack-submarines/articleshow/46282586.cms?intenttarget=no>, accessed on 25 June 2017.
 12. The concept must not be confused with 'nuclear deterrence'. It operates at the national-strategic level and includes nuclear deterrence. The effort to develop strategic deterrence seeks to synergise and leverage all elements of national power—diplomatic, economic, informational and military—as well as the nation's global influence. Gurpreet S. Khurana, *Porthole: Geopolitical, Strategic and Maritime Terms and Concepts*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2016, p. 186.
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