

Sailing on the Seven Seas

Indo-US Strategic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific

*Sankalp Gurjar**

The Indo-Pacific is the primary geography of the Indo-US defence cooperation. In the last two decades, both sides have deepened their strategic relationship. Maritime cooperation is the hallmark of Indo-US defence ties. India and the US are members of the Quad and American drones are bolstering India's naval capabilities. India is participating in the US-led maritime security efforts like the Combined Maritime Forces. The ties are strong to the extent where American vessels are servicing at the Indian shipyards. However, the relationship is not without its challenges too. India's scepticism about the American credibility and the isolationist turn in the US politics do present dilemmas in the relationship.

Keywords: *Indo-US Strategic Partnership, Indo-Pacific, India, United States of America, Indo-US Defence Ties, Maritime Cooperation; Naval Cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-US strategic relationship has never been better. Despite the occasional setbacks, Delhi and Washington have ensured that the upward

* Dr Sankalp Gurjar is Assistant Professor (Geopolitics and Geo-economics) at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, India.

Note: The article title draws on a song by an English electronic music band 'Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark'.

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trajectory of the bilateral relationship remains in place. The United States (US) has emerged as one of India's most important defence partners. In fact, if anything, the questions that now stare policymakers in both countries is how to accelerate their defence relationship further, and what are the possible areas of collaboration on which palpable progress could be delivered in a timely manner.

The focus of this article is on the burgeoning naval co-operation. The article begins by locating India and the US in the Indo-Pacific region and subsequently, offers an overview of Indo-US defence ties as they have evolved in the post-Cold War world. The article then moves to the specific area of naval cooperation. It discusses the Malabar naval exercises, Tsunami relief efforts, and the formation, fall and resurrection of the Quad. The next section discusses the role that American aircraft play in India's maritime security efforts. Finally, the article touches upon recent developments, such as India joining the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and the agreements between three Indian shipyards and the US Navy for repairing American warships. Questions regarding India's role in the Quad and difficult dilemmas that India has to deal with are also discussed in brief towards the end. The article also briefly considers the February 2025 visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington. However, given that these are still early days of the second Trump administration, it refrains from making any hasty assessments regarding the challenges and opportunities presented by the first few weeks of Trump 2.0.

INDIA AND THE US IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Indo-Pacific region is the primary geography of the India–US defence partnership in general, and naval cooperation in particular. In geopolitical terms, the Indo-Pacific region is primarily a maritime-oriented one, with a premium being placed on the acquisition and projection of naval power. As a result, most of the important Indo-Pacific countries are engaged in modernising and expanding their naval capabilities. For instance, China has built the largest Navy in the world in terms of numbers. Australia has entered into a defence arrangement known as AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to augment its submarine fleet.

The Indo-Pacific region is the new centre of gravity for international politics. The region brings the Indian and Pacific Oceans together, and is defined as the one stretching from the East coast of Africa to the West coast of the US. The Indo-Pacific region includes top global economies,

and major military powers such as China, Japan, India and South Korea. The region is also home to a number of serious territorial and maritime flashpoints, such as India–China border, the South China Sea, the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula. The deepening strategic partnerships between China and Russia as well as Russia and North Korea also manifests itself in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. The changing strategic configuration of power in the Indo-Pacific has necessitated the US and its Indo-Pacific allies and friends to adjust their policies, and take cognizance of the interrelated Sino-Russian-North Korean dynamics. Therefore, the region figures prominently in the global debates on international security, geo-strategy and geo-economics.

The region has witnessed intensified strategic rivalries between the US and China as well as between China and other Indo-Pacific countries like India, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines. In the Indo-Pacific, ‘a new regional arms race is already underway, with China rapidly increasing both its conventional and nuclear capabilities, and other countries in the Indo-Pacific raising their defence budgets’.¹ It is likely that, ‘the coming years will likely see more intense competition between these mutually exclusive visions of order [China’s Belt and Road Initiatives and the US’ Free and Open Indo-Pacific], setting the stage for zero-sum dynamics between China and the US’.²

For India, the Indo-Pacific region represents a new theatre of opportunities as well as challenges. For India’s strategic interests, the ‘Indo’ part of the Indo-Pacific remains a priority. India is central to the economic, political and security future of the Indian Ocean. India sees itself as a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean, and the growing naval capabilities have buttressed India’s claims to a regional leadership. However, given the deep economic interconnections and technological interdependence, as seen in the emergence of the global supply chains, undersea cables and increased trade flows, it is no longer possible to view India’s security interests only through the prism of the Indian Ocean. India has no choice but to take an integrated view, and bring the Pacific Ocean into its strategic horizons. The Indian view of the Indo-Pacific is shaped by the challenge posed by China as well as the growing political, economic and military capabilities of New Delhi.

Indian policymakers argue that a ‘very substantial portion of India’s interests now lie to the East of India, beyond the Indian Ocean and into the Pacific’.³ For New Delhi, the idea of the Indo-Pacific ‘builds on India’s Act East Policy ... and the doctrine of what we call SAGAR. SAGAR is an

Indian word for ocean, and is an acronym for Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).⁴ To this end, India needs to build adequate maritime capabilities, and the role of the US in this regard is critical. Moreover, given the substantial American naval presence in the Western Pacific and the positioning of the closest allies (like South Korea and Japan), it is also imperative to engage the US as it seeks to shape the maritime affairs of the Indo-Pacific.

The US, for its own Cold War interests, had divided the world after 1945 into different sub-regions. The separation of the Indian and Pacific Oceans was a result of this American posture. However, such clear differentiation is no longer tenable. The rapid rise of China, and the necessity to maintain American primacy in the Indo-Pacific region, is forcing the US to reposition itself. As the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy notes, 'we recognize that American interests can only be advanced if we firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific and strengthen the region itself, alongside our closest allies and partners'.⁵

For the US, India is a key strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific. Washington recognises that, 'India is a like-minded partner and leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean'.⁶ The US seeks 'to build a strategic partnership in which the United States and India work together and through regional groupings ... promote stability in South Asia'.⁷ The US is also willing to 'collaborate in new domains, such as health, space, and cyber space; deepen our economic and technology co-operation', and the objective of the Indo-US partnership will be to 'contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific'.⁸

INDIA-US DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP: AN OVERVIEW

The India-US defence relationship is key to both countries' deepening strategic partnership as well as their growing convergence and naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Indo-US naval cooperation is part of the overall bilateral military relationship, and is briefly surveyed below.

Throughout the Cold War, India and the US were 'estranged democracies'. India practiced the foreign policy of non-alignment and refused to become part of any of the Cold War alliances championed by either superpower. For its part, the US did not appreciate India's non-aligned foreign policy, and built a strong military relationship with India's staunch adversary, Pakistan. The US-Pakistan strategic relationship has remained a major irritant in Indo-US ties even today.⁹ Except for a brief period after China's invasion of India (1962), there was never a strong defence partnership between New Delhi and

Washington during the Cold War. US assistance during the period 1963–1965 was conditional on India opening negotiations with Pakistan over the issue of Kashmir.¹⁰ Moreover, the US did not supply the weapons platform that India wanted. Instead, in the aftermath of the 1965 India–Pakistan war, the US cut off assistance to both countries.¹¹

By 1971, changing geo-strategic circumstances in Asia saw India deepening its embrace of the Soviet Union while the US went along with China and Pakistan. The memories of the US' 7th fleet entering the Bay of Bengal in support of Pakistan during the Bangladesh war of 1971 still linger in India. During the early 1980s, there were discussions on India acquiring US platforms such as Tow missiles and the 155-mm medium guns.¹² However, it did not materialise. Besides, the US' supply of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan forced India to address the changing balance of power in the Indian sub-continent.

Indo-US defence cooperation kicked off in earnest in the 1990s, with the formulation of the Kickleigher proposals and the beginning of the Malabar exercises in 1992. The end of the Cold War opened up new opportunities, and India and the US sought to restart the relationship in the changing geo-strategic circumstances. The Kickleigher proposals 'envisaged US-India co-operation on land, sea, and air', and 'focused on establishing consultative mechanisms, joint training, and strategic dialogue between the two militaries'.¹³ However, in the 1990s, the American view of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir, and concerns over the question of nuclear non-proliferation complicated the India–US relationship. It was only after the intense dialogue between Jaswant Singh and Strobe Talbot in the aftermath of India's nuclear tests of 1998, and the four-day visit of President Bill Clinton in 2000 that the trajectory of the Indo-US relationship has been on the upswing constantly, notwithstanding occasional challenges and hesitations.

As of now, the Indo-US defence cooperation spans joint exercises, weapons sales and defence policy cooperation. Both sides are eyeing joint development as well as the co-production of weapons platforms in the future. Initiatives and dialogue mechanisms, such as the Defence Policy Group, High Technology Co-operation Group, Next Steps in Strategic Partnership, and Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) have helped in deepening the defence dimension of the burgeoning India–US partnership.¹⁴ The signing of the framework agreement on Indo-US defence cooperation in 2005 for a ten-year period, and its extension in 2015, indicate the growing comfort levels between India and the US. India has also been designated as a 'major defence partner' by the US.

For its part, India has signed all the four foundational agreements that enable greater military collaboration with the US. The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) was signed in 2002. Subsequently, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed in 2016, while the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was inked in 2018. An India-specific version of the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), and the Basic Exchange Co-operation Agreement (BECA) were signed in 2020. These foundational agreements work as building blocks of the defence cooperation with the US and have been signed after extensive discussions and some necessary modifications, keeping India's interests into consideration. The latest initiatives, such as the initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) and India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X), along with the 2+2 ministerial meetings (between Foreign and Defence ministers) have promised to further expand India-US cooperation.¹⁵

In terms of joint exercises, the Malabar naval exercises began in 1992, and were expanded in 2015 to include Japan and later, in 2020, Australia was brought in. These four countries (which are democracies and significant maritime powers) are working together in the Quad framework, and have been deepening their bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral cooperation to address the challenge of China in the Indo-Pacific. Indian and US armies have been exercising since 2002, and the exercises are known as 'Yudh Abhyas'.¹⁶ It was followed by Cope India, an exercise between the two air forces that began in 2004. In 2010, special forces of both countries began to exercise together and, since 2019, tri-service exercises are also taking place. India and the US are also working together in various multilateral military exercises as well such as in the Rimpac, Milan, Cutlass Express, La Perouse and Sea Dragon.¹⁷ Except the exercises Pitch Black and Red Flag, all the others mentioned above are multilateral drills in the maritime domain. Given the strategic context of India's border stand-off with China in Eastern Ladakh in December 2022, the Indian and US armies have exercised together near the India-China border and, reportedly, held a music concert as well.¹⁸

While the defence relationship has deepened in the new millennium and grown to new heights, in Indian strategic circles, there have been some concerns about the reliability of the US as a defence partner and its strategic priorities. These concerns have been accentuated due to the US' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the American support for the regime change in Bangladesh, and the rise of isolationism in American domestic politics.¹⁹ The signing of the foundational agreements also came under some criticism

in India, and doubts have been expressed whether the agreements will benefit India more, or will the US be their chief beneficiary.²⁰

As part of its foreign policy ethos, India refuses to be a junior partner in any relationship. For the sole military superpower, US, with an expansive military presence and alliance networks, it has been a learning curve to engage with India. Doubts have been raised in the US also about India's willingness to help the US in a contingency over Taiwan. Many in the US remain sceptical of India's deep defence relationship with Russia.²¹ However, despite the critical voices and deeply entrenched reluctance on both sides, India and the US have worked together, and deepened their defence and technological relationship. The best example of this is in the domain of naval cooperation which is the focus of this article. The subsequent sections of this article take a closer look at US–India naval cooperation.

CROSSING THE RUBICON: FROM THE MALABAR NAVAL EXERCISES TO THE QUAD

Indo-US naval cooperation can be seen in three broad phases: 1992–2004, 2004–015, and 2015 till present. Each of these phases are marked by the further consolidation of the Indo-US defence relationship, and took the relationship to the next step.

The Malabar exercises of 1992 was probably the first substantive defence-related engagement between the two countries since the mid-1960s. They were also in response to the rapid changes that were taking place in the world. The Cold War had ended in 1991, and India's superpower friend, the Soviet Union, had collapsed. India was also staring at an acute economic crisis, and needed to take corrective steps to rectify the situation. In the post-Cold War world, it was apparent that the US was the sole superpower, and India had to adjust its foreign, security and economic policies in response to the changing strategic environment. On the foreign policy front, India 'began engaging seriously with its South East Asian neighbours. Relations with Israel were normalized in 1992 without diluting India's traditionally close interaction with the Arab world'.²² Moreover, after 1991, India sought to 'improve its ties with the US as well as the European Union (EU). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's rise as an economic power began to be seen by the Western countries as a potential threat', and that 'India was seen as a successful and politically stable plural democracy. And now, because of its accelerated economic growth, it appeared to be a major commercial opportunity too, rivalling China'.²³

The Malabar exercises continued in the 1990s, but were suspended in the aftermath of India's nuclear tests of 1998. However, the threads of bilateral naval cooperation were picked up in 2002. India provided naval escort to the American warships that were passing through the strait of Malacca. Also, the Malabar exercises have become regularised since 2002. The next substantial engagement between the two navies came in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004.

The Tsunami of 2004, and the disaster relief efforts launched in its wake, initiated the second phase of greater collaboration and growing trust between India and the US. The Tsunami relief operations were a watershed development not just in the Indo-US bilateral context but also for Asian and Indo-Pacific security. In response to the crisis, the navies of India, US, Japan and Australia joined hands, and formed a Tsunami core group, while the Chinese Navy was absent from the scene. The four countries together 'contributed more than 40,000 troops and humanitarian responders, in addition to dozens of helicopters, cargo ships, and transport planes. These forces [were] deployed with extraordinary speed and skill'.²⁴

The Tsunami core group was the beginning of the Quad 1.0 (The Quad by now has emerged as the most important regional security group focused on Indo-Pacific security). In 2007, the four democracies with significant naval power—that 'share some values and growing co-operation in the Asia-Pacific'—came together for an 'informal meeting' that discussed 'issues of common interest'.²⁵ However, in response to the vehement and vocal Chinese reaction, the initiative was shelved for a decade, and was resurrected in 2017. However, in the evolution of the Indo-US defence relationship, the Tsunami relief efforts and the emergence of the Quad 1.0 marked the beginning of a new phase of confidence and trust.

During 2005–08, the two countries were engaged in negotiating the civil nuclear cooperation agreement, and the engagement in the nuclear domain opened doors for other sectors, including defence, security and technology. The expanding arc of the Indo-US relationship was, perhaps, best illustrated in the discussion on the acquisition of *USS Kitty Hawk*, an American aircraft carrier, for augmenting the capabilities of the Indian Navy.

Since the mid-1990s, the Indian Navy had been negotiating with Russia for the acquisition of a third aircraft carrier. India had made advance payments for refurbishing the decommissioned Russian aircraft carrier, *Admiral Gorshkov*. However, the deal kept getting delayed with significant cost overruns and, as the Indian frustration mounted, reportedly, an offer was informally made for the transfer of the US Navy's aircraft carrier *USS*

Kitty Hawk. The *Kitty Hawk* was commissioned in 1961 in the US Navy. It had seen active service in the wars ranging from the Vietnam war to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.²⁶

The offer was a result of ‘the futuristic minds within the Pentagon who understood the importance of India becoming the primary strategic partner of the United States in the 21st century’.²⁷ In fact, as per reports, for the *Kitty Hawk* deal, ‘the only condition that goes together with this “present”, is that the Indian government should buy 65 newest F/A 18E/F carrier-based fighters’, and that the ‘other condition is not voiced but implicit: Delhi should turn down the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Gorshkov*’.²⁸ However, the then US defence secretary, Robert Gates, denied that there was ever such an offer on the table for India.

The transfer of aircraft carrier does not just signal the regular buyer–seller relationship. The aircraft carriers are in operation for decades, and occupy a place of pride for any Navy. They are also the symbols of the naval capabilities and maritime power of the country that operates such aircraft carriers. The proposed transfer of the *Kitty Hawk* to India must be seen in the context of wider bilateral relations. By 2007–08, Indo-US ties had reached a level wherein the offer for the transfer of an aircraft carrier seemed no longer implausible. If anything, it perhaps looked like the next logical step in the ever-expanding Indo-US defence relationship. Even though the *Kitty Hawk* deal did not go through, it was a signal that India and the US had reached a level of comfort that was unimaginable in the 1990s, and that naval cooperation would deepen further between the two countries.

In the decade 2004–2015, India broke new ground in its ties with the US, and had worked closely with Washington on the maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean. India’s participation in the multi-national anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden was also a positive signal for India–US defence ties. The zenith of this second phase was India and the US issuing a joint statement on the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region in 2015 during the visit of President Barack Obama for the Republic Day celebrations. In the same visit, it was decided to upgrade the Malabar exercises. As a result, Japan was included in the Malabar exercises, and the bilateral Malabar drills became trilateral.²⁹

Subsequently, as the challenge of China intensified across the Indo-Pacific, Australia was invited to participate in the Malabar exercises in 2020. Thus, along with the renewed diplomatic push since 2017 to revive the Quad and collaborate to manage China’s rise, the quadrilateral naval exercises added a military dimension to the strategic coordination between India, US, Japan

and Australia. Despite the questions related to expectations from each other, and strategic priorities, the four countries have remained wedded to the Quad framework as well as to the Malabar exercises.

AMERICAN AIRCRAFT FOR INDIAN DEFENCE

Since the mid-2000s, India has acquired American weapons platforms that help in augmenting military capabilities. As per the US' Congressional Research Service, prior to 2008, US–India defence trade 'was relatively limited, involving modest US sales of naval helicopters and counterbattery radars in the mid-2000s'.³⁰ In 2007, as a result of the growing confidence between the two countries, the US provided India with 'an amphibious transport dock ship under the U.S. Excess Defence Articles program—the former *USS Trenton*, now the *INS Jalashwa*'.³¹ So far, this remains the only instance of a US warship being inducted in the Indian Navy.

Since 2008, India has acquired strategic airlifters and maritime aircraft;³² various types of helicopters;³³ Harpoon anti-ship missiles; and M-777 howitzers from the US.³⁴ India is now the largest operator of C-17s and P-8Is outside of the US. The US has been engaged primarily for advanced weapons platforms that enhance India's strategic reach in its extended neighbourhood. C-17s and C-130 Js have been used for long-range rescue missions, such as those from Yemen (2015) and Sudan (2023). In the Yemen evacuation, the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy worked together to bring trapped Indians home.³⁵

As this article is focused on naval cooperation, a discussion is warranted on the American aircraft that are boosting India's maritime prowess. The Russia–Ukraine War has underscored the need for preparing for drone warfare in sky, in the sea, as well as under water.³⁶

P-8I: Maritime Patrol Aircraft

India first purchased P-8I maritime patrol aircraft from the US in 2008. The US company Boeing manufactures these aircraft. P-8Is are designed for 'long-range, anti-submarine warfare (ASW), anti-surface warfare (ASuW), and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions' and, so far, India has a fleet of 12 P-8Is.³⁷ Inducted in 2013, the Indian Navy's fleet of P-8I has clocked 29,000 flight-hours. The purpose of acquiring P-8Is has been 'to sharpen the Navy's anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare capabilities as well as fill critical intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance roles in the vast oceans'.³⁸

India has deployed P-8I aircraft for a variety of missions, including joint surveillance efforts and defence diplomacy. In 2020 and 2022, Indian P-8I aircraft were deployed to the French base at La Reunion in the southwest Indian Ocean, and further enhanced India–France naval cooperation. As part of its defence diplomacy, India has sent these aircraft to Australia, and has also received reciprocal visits from the Australian fleet of P-8A. Furthermore, India's P-8Is have participated in the anti-submarine warfare exercises in Guam along with other Quad countries, Canada and South Korea as well.³⁹

Given the growing Chinese fleet of submarines, and their greater willingness to enter and operate in the Indian Ocean, India will have to build its maritime patrolling as well as anti-submarine warfare capabilities. In this context, P-8Is have proved to be quite effective. Interestingly, apart from their usual functions for the Indian Navy, P-8Is have been deployed at the India–China border crises in Doklam (2017) and Ladakh (2020).⁴⁰ Sensing their expanded reach and capabilities, there is a proposal to acquire six more of these maritime patrol aircraft.

MQ-9B: Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)

In February 2024, the US approved the sale of 31 MQ-9B drones for India.⁴¹ They include SkyGuardian and SeaGuardian drones. As per the reports, along with the drones, this deal encompasses Hellfire missiles, laser small-diameter bombs, embedded global positioning and inertial navigation systems.⁴² Of the 31 planes, the largest share will that be of the Indian Navy. The navy will receive 15, while the air force and the army will get 8 each.

As per the press release by the US Defence Security Co-operation Agency, 'the proposed sale will improve India's capability to meet current and future threats by enabling unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance patrols in sea lanes of operation'.⁴³ Moreover, India 'will have no difficulty absorbing these articles and services into its armed forces'.⁴⁴ The sale of these drones will 'support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States', and will strengthen the Indo-US partnership.⁴⁵ It will also enhance India's defence capabilities which 'continue to be an important force for political stability, peace, and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia region'.⁴⁶

The growing share of US hardware in India's defence basket helps New Delhi to diversify its strategic partners as well as safeguard its strategic autonomy. Along with Russia, France and Israel, the US is now an important supplier of defence products to India. The reliance on any one partner for a country's defence needs is a risky proposition and, therefore, the plurality of

defence partners is necessitated for ensuring national security. In view of the growing China challenge, India's military acquisitions from the US help in two ways: first, they augment India's capabilities to handle critical defence-related contingencies; secondly, they enhance India's interoperability with its strategic partners in the Quad, who are also at odds with China.

COMBINED MARITIME FORCES AND THE MASTER SHIPYARD REPAIR AGREEMENTS

In November 2023, it was announced that India would join the US-led initiative, Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), headquartered in Bahrain. CMF is a 'multinational maritime partnership', and seeks to 'uphold the International Rules Based Order (IRBO) by countering illicit non-state actors on the high seas and promoting security, stability, and prosperity'.⁴⁷ The 44-nation maritime partnership operates five combined task forces: CTF-150, 151, 152, 153 and 154.⁴⁸ The geographic focus area of these task forces is Western Indian Ocean (WIO) that encompasses water bodies such as the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea. India's membership of CMF may 'actualize a scenario where a senior Indian naval officer potentially co-leads one of the CMF's five combined task forces (CTF) with an American counterpart'.⁴⁹ Besides, India's CMF membership will allow it to 'build the sinews required for enhanced interoperability with other members, and especially the United States'.⁵⁰ India's membership of the CMF is part of the process of the growing Indo-US defence relationship across the Indo-Pacific.

However, in terms of interoperability and deepening the defence partnership, a significant initiative was to repair and service the American naval warships at the Kattupalli shipyard, operated by Larsen and Toubro (L&T), an Indian private sector company. Although Kattupalli has seen the US warships visiting for ship repairs since 2022, a five-year agreement was signed in July 2023. According to the US Consul General in Chennai, Judith Ravin, the agreement, known as the Master Shipyard Repair Agreement (MSRA), will 'serve to strengthen our two nations' strategic partnership, and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific'.⁵¹ The MSRA is a recognition of L&T's capabilities, and will help the Indian shipyard acquire expertise of servicing and repairing American warships.⁵²

After the L&T, in quick succession, Mazagon Docks Limited (MDL) in Mumbai, and Cochin Shipyard Limited (CSL) became the other two shipyards that signed such an MRSA.⁵³ Such agreements, and the regular

visits of American warships to Indian ports will further deepen the Indo-US naval partnership, and will perhaps pave the way for India's acquisition and joint development of naval warfare platforms, including the warships. As India seeks to develop its maritime capabilities, including in areas like port infrastructure, operations, management and ship-building, the closer engagement with the US Navy facilitated by MRSA will be a boost.

The L&T development also indicates another new feature of the Indo-US defence relationship: the increasing role of private sector defence companies, especially start-ups. As per the factsheet of the Indus-X, in June 2023, 'Hacking for Allies (H4x), the Information Technology Industry Council (ITIC), and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Hyderabad, in collaboration with additional INDUS-X stakeholders, have expressed their intent to explore opportunities to provide start-ups, with jointly defined problem sets, mentoring, and exposure in defense commercialization, business development, product refinement, technology advancement, funding opportunities, and more'.⁵⁴

Both countries have launched joint impact challenges, and it is expected that private sector companies will find tech-based, commercially viable solutions for dealing with security challenges. By February 2024, 'HydroNet, OceanComm, PierSight, Pixxel, and Sea-Gal Technologies collectively won \$ 300,000 to develop technologies on maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and undersea communications'.⁵⁵ For their work, 'AlKairos, Airbotix Technology, Prof. D. Saha and Prof. S. Ganguly, SAR Space, and Zeus Numerix will collectively receive \$ 900,000 for the same challenge topic'.⁵⁶

Apart from the ship repair and CMF, both countries are strengthening their cooperation in the white shipping domain as well. They are collaborating to enhance maritime domain awareness. India and the US are working together in the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IP-MDA) initiative, along with other Quad partners. Meanwhile, US Navy liaison officers have been posted at India's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) while Indian officers will be posted at the CMF headquarters.⁵⁷

SCEPTICISM

Despite the fast-expanding defence relationship with the US, there remains a degree of scepticism about the US in some circles in India. The signing of a trilateral defence agreement between the US, the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS), in 2021, to equip the Australian Navy with nuclear-

powered submarines is held up as an example of American willingness to deepen ties with allies. However, India is not a treaty ally of the US, nor does India host any American bases. So, will the Quad be diluted in favour of AUKUS?⁵⁸ Can India–US defence partnership ever reach such a level of joint development and the production of as complex a naval platform as a nuclear-powered submarine? It has been argued that India remains reluctant to militarise the Quad. Therefore, in May 2024, the US, along with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines formed a new quadrilateral initiative which has been dubbed as ‘Squad’, and is seen as more anti-China than the Quad.⁵⁹

In this context, the remarks by India’s then Defence Secretary, Giridhar Aramane as well as an article by former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran is instructive. In February 2024, while speaking at the second INDUS-X summit, Aramane thanked the US for its help in dealing with China along the Himalayas. He was quoted as saying that US assistance came in the form of ‘intelligence and situational awareness which US equipment and the US government could help us with’.⁶⁰ Moreover, he said that, as New Delhi is dealing with the China challenge in Eastern Ladakh since April 2020, India expects that its

friend US will be there with us in case we need their support. It is a must for us, and we have to do it together. We greatly appreciate the support and the resolve from our friends in supporting us during such an event. The strong resolve that we will support each other in the face of a common threat is going to be of critical importance to us.⁶¹

Shyam Saran, who was a key player during the nuclear deal negotiating process of 2005–08, commented on the remarks by Aramane, and wrote in *The Tribune* that,

these remarks, which appear to openly solicit US support as a supplicant in helping India cope with the continuing military standoff with China on the border, are unusual. They may not have been appropriate to the occasion and even convey, perhaps inadvertently, that India is not capable of dealing with the Chinese threat on its border on its own.⁶²

Saran further added that, the US is ‘engaged in a rivalry with China in the Indo-Pacific’, and

there is as yet no ‘hot war’ there, and the US would prefer to keep a lid on that possibility. For this to work, there must be a lessening of tensions with

China ... We should have read the runes correctly and avoided displaying our vulnerability to shifts in US geopolitical postures. This may also send a wrong message to China.⁶³

The debate about how close India should move to the US in terms of its geopolitical challenges, and what role the US should play in India's national security is likely to continue as both sides build deeper defence ties. Specifically, India will be grappling with the question of shifts in US–China ties, and their impact on India's ties with both. While the US is a very useful partner in building India's defence capabilities, can India depend on it in a major military crisis with China? If the US–China *modus vivendi* lowers the tension between the two countries, what should India do? Among the Quad countries, only India shares a land border with China, and the India–China border dispute has not been settled. If anything, the entire border has become 'live' since April 2020 and, with better infrastructure and connectivity, both armies are facing-off each other more often than in the past. Therefore, India's priorities and posture will be necessarily different from that of the other Quad countries. This reality will continue to inform the India–US defence relationship.

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND INDIA

The arrival of Donald Trump as President is set to transform American foreign policy discourse, and radically change policy direction. Within a month of taking charge, the Trump administration has opened negotiations with Russia, and steps are being taken to end the war in Ukraine. The changing policy will influence America's relationship with Europe, NATO, Ukraine and Russia. If US–Russia ties improve, it will ease pressure on India regarding its Russian relationship. The end of the war in Ukraine will also be welcomed in India. Amidst the flurry of changes ushered by Trump, Prime Minister Modi visited Washington. The visit came in less than a month after the Trump administration came into office.

The India–US joint statement released after the visit has given significant space to the defence relationship. The statement noted that both countries will extend the 10-year defence framework agreement. It will be renewed a second time. The statement added that both sides 'expect the completion of the procurement of six additional P-8I Maritime Patrol aircraft to enhance India's maritime surveillance reach in the Indian Ocean Region following agreement on sale terms'.⁶⁴ Moreover, India and the US also agreed to

‘accelerate defense technology cooperation across space, air defense, missile, maritime and undersea technologies, with the US announcing a review of its policy on releasing fifth generation fighters and undersea systems to India’.⁶⁵

In a significant move, both countries have sought to ‘to break new ground to support and sustain the overseas deployments of the U.S. and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific’, which will include ‘enhanced logistics and intelligence sharing, as well as arrangements to improve force mobility for joint humanitarian and disaster relief operations along with other exchanges and security cooperation engagements’.⁶⁶ If one goes by the language of the joint statement and optics of the visit, the signals are positive, and maritime and military partnership is likely to strengthen further under Trump 2.0.

CONCLUSION

The Indo-US strategic partnership has blossomed into one of the most important relationships for both sides in the new millennium. Both countries are key players in the Indo-Pacific, and are seeking ways to manage the rise of China. The shared threat perception and convergence of interests has brought India and the US closer together. In the past, the bilateral relationship has seen many ups and downs. However, since the late 1990s, both countries have sought to deepen their relationship. The negotiations and signing of the Indo-US civil nuclear cooperation agreement opened up ways for further consolidation and expansion of India–US relationship.

The strong defence ties, on the upswing since 2008, are central to this relationship. India is diversifying its defence suppliers, and the US seeks to tap the Indian defence market for the sale of its advanced platforms and technologies. India has signed all the four foundational agreements with the US, and engages the US in the 2+2 ministerial format also. The growing defence relationship includes joint exercises, defence sales, strategic dialogue, and a likely joint production of platforms and systems.

The naval dimension of this defence relationship is particularly strong. The defence relationship began in earnest with the Malabar naval exercises. Now, the Malabar exercises have expanded, and include all the four countries of the Quad. Since 2008, India’s acquisition of American weapons platform has gone up. The sale of P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, MQ-9B drones, and the signing of the agreements between the American Navy and Indian shipyards for repairs are three concrete examples of the strengthening Indo-US defence relationship in the maritime domain. India has joined multilateral military exercises too, in which the US is a major player. India’s quest for an aircraft

carrier, and the American capabilities in this domain remains an area where both sides could, perhaps, work together.

India is a major naval power in the WIO and, therefore, the membership of the US-led CMF opens up space for working together in the WIO. Just like the US, the Indian Navy has been conducting operations since December 2023 in the Red Sea in response to the Houthi threat to global shipping. The Indo-US defence relationship is demonstrating signs of further deepening as well as expanding into the newer domains as can be seen in initiatives like the INDUS-X and iCET. To sustain the momentum—withstanding challenges such as disagreement over the Russia–Ukraine War and the issue of Khalistanis—political will be required on both sides. Although the Indo-US defence relationship stands on its own and has a sound geopolitical basis, constraining China’s power and influence in the Indo-Pacific can, perhaps, present the strongest *raison d’être* for Washington and New Delhi to go even further.

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