

# Enhancing Interoperability and Strategic Convergence

India–US Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)  
Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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*The strategic partnership between India and the United States has increasingly focussed on joint Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) efforts in the Indian Ocean Region. Cemented by India's 2016 designation as a 'Major Defence Partner', this collaboration now includes joint military exercises, port visits and disaster relief missions. Given the Indo-Pacific region's importance due to its population and key shipping routes, improved military interoperability and logistical coordination are crucial for tackling climate-related disasters. India's strong HADR capabilities and capacity-building, along with the strategic support of the United States, have enhanced their bilateral and multilateral cooperation, vital for addressing regional challenges and maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific.*

**Keywords:** India; United States of America; HADR; Interoperability; Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

## INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed growing strategic convergences between India and the United States of America, especially post the India–US nuclear

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deal signed in 2008, leading to a stable and strong partnership between the two countries. Rooted in key areas like defence collaboration, humanitarian relief, climate concerns and regional security, the two nations have evolved into strategic partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, since the US designated India as a 'Major Defence Partner' in 2016,<sup>1</sup> the bilateral relationship has expanded to include various aspects, highlighting their shared commitment to regional security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through initiatives like bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises, port visits, Combined Maritime Forces (CMFs) deployments and disaster relief operations. These efforts are aligned with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative as well as the US vision of the Indo-Pacific and aims to enhance military interoperability while addressing logistical challenges and countering Chinese influence in the region. The objective of this article is to examine how the multi-stakeholder HADR engagement between India and the United States can enhance interoperability, thereby maximising the potential of this highly significant partnership.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is home to over a third of the world's population, hosts key international shipping lanes and facilitates the transport of 80 per cent of maritime oil shipments, making it crucial for global connectivity and vital fisheries. However, the region also sees an increasing rise in climate-related disasters which are also linked to global climate change and this is why these initiatives are becoming increasingly crucial areas of benign/HADR cooperation in the IOR and within the larger Indo-Pacific region.

HADR operations illustrate a nation's commitment to the region, improve access, showcase capabilities, promote coalition-building and new partnerships, and enhance military interoperability in a less threatening context, effectively blurring the lines between 'soft' and 'hard' power activities.<sup>2</sup> These initiatives are becoming increasingly crucial areas of military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While HADR should primarily remain a civilian activity, armed forces are often utilised to complement existing relief mechanisms due to their logistical capabilities.<sup>3</sup> The 2004 tsunami showcased India's effective strategy of providing aid through the deployment and administration of 'five simultaneous rescue, relief and reconstruction missions as part of Operation Gambhir (Indonesia), Operation Castor (Maldives), Operation Rainbow (Sri Lanka), Operation Madad (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu coast) and Operation Sea Waves (Andaman & Nicobar Islands)'.<sup>4</sup> Due to their proximity and rapid response, India's maritime assets were the first to reach the affected nations, demonstrating

India's swift and capable response and highlighting the valuable role of its armed forces as a benign force asset.

Both the United States and India have substantial experience and expertise in responding to humanitarian emergencies domestically and internationally. Military exercises such as the Tiger Triumph exercises, the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and organisations like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) go hand-in-hand for furthering the cause of increasing interoperability in the region between the two partner states which could enhance the efficiency of these initiatives, especially in the expansive Indo-Pacific region.

### INDIA: FIRST RESPONDER AND NET SECURITY PROVIDER

Being a resident power in the Indian Ocean, India's primary goal in its relations with neighbouring countries is to promote security and stability, while also facilitating capacity-building and capability enhancement in the IOR and in the broader Indo-Pacific region. Primarily, the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) manages these efforts within the IOR and beyond, coordinating with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), other central government bodies, regional states and civil society organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Because of its sub-continental size, strategic geographical location and susceptibility to disasters, India has maintained its forces in a state of readiness to provide assistance at short notice.<sup>6</sup> As a preferred security partner in the region and a leading provider of security for its maritime neighbours, India pursues its goal of fostering a free, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> This objective is embodied in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SAGAR policy, which focuses on ensuring a 'safe, secure, and stable Indian Ocean Region' and highlights the importance of enhancing economic and security collaboration with maritime neighbours and island nations. This commitment was reiterated during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, where Prime Minister Modi launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).<sup>8</sup> India has leveraged its regional strengths to lead in two key areas: Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, and Maritime Security.

Following the 2004 tsunami, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) developed a comprehensive Disaster Management Framework (SCFMD), leading each country in the region to establish a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). To implement the SCFMD, three regional centres were established: the SAARC Disaster

Management Centre (SDMC) in New Delhi, the SAARC Meteorological Centre in Dhaka and the SAARC Coastal Management Centre (SCMC) in Male.<sup>9</sup> However, as the SAARC grouping has been defunct for a while, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) grouping has developed its own functionalities to handle the HADR and climate resilience initiatives in the region.

While the Indian Armed Forces are not specifically tailored for HADR, it leverages its inherent strengths such as mobility, adaptability, scalability and interoperability to effectively respond to such crises. However, challenges like inadequate information sharing and incomplete situational awareness hinder efficient collaboration in HADR operations. In response, the Indian Navy has established the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to facilitate better coordination and information exchange ensuring a more cohesive maritime domain awareness in the region. In addition, the Indian Navy's Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and its IMEX exercise are noteworthy for fostering interoperability and regional cooperation among littoral state navies to address security and maritime challenges, especially in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.<sup>10</sup>

Within the IOR, India has initiated its HADR mechanism through several measures which involve capacity-building and capability enhancement—disaster management initiatives, training, joint patrols, equipment supply, maritime security, infrastructure development and search and rescue (SAR) missions.

### **HADR EXERCISES AND MISSIONS**

India's extensive humanitarian assistance initiatives encompass a wide array of collaborative operations, exercises and missions across diverse countries and challenging circumstances. The annual joint HADR exercise 'Chakravat' is a combined effort involving all three branches of the armed forces, paramilitary forces, disaster response organisations, academic institutions and international organisations; along with eight partner countries.<sup>11</sup> Key operations such as Operation Neer in the Maldives (2014), Operation Maitri for earthquake rescues in Nepal, assistance during Cyclone Roanu in Sri Lanka (2016), earthquake relief in Indonesia (2018) and flood aid in Madagascar (January 2020), along with the supply of vaccines under Vaccine Maitri during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore India's commitment to global humanitarian assistance.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Operation Dost (2023) highlighted India's readiness to extend assistance following the earthquake in

Turkey. Additionally, India's HADR efforts include various bilateral exercises such as Surya Kiran with Nepal, Mitra Shakti and SLINEX with Sri Lanka, Ekuverin, Dosti, Ekatha and Operation Shield with the Maldives, and joint exercises with Seychelles, like Coastal Vigilance and Varuna, which focus on maritime security, search and rescue and anti-piracy efforts, alongside the Siam Bharat exercise with Thailand.

India has also executed numerous HADR missions, including Operation Karuna, which delivered HADR supplies to Myanmar after Cyclonic Storm Mocha in May 2023 and during historic operations like Operation Cactus in the Maldives (1988) and delivering post-tsunami aid in 2004. More recent missions, such as Operation Rahat in Yemen (2015), Operation Ganga in Ukraine (2022) and Operation Kaveri in South Sudan (2023), further illustrate India's continued dedication to crisis assistance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian armed forces also demonstrated their role in defence diplomacy by supplying oxygen, medical equipment and other aid globally.

### CAPACITY-BUILDING AND CAPABILITY ENHANCEMENT

With respect to creating capacities and capabilities in the region, India has allocated US\$ 150 million in Defence Lines of Credit (LoCs) to Sri Lanka for acquiring various military hardware, including patrol boats and surveillance aircraft.<sup>13</sup> India also provides extensive training for the Royal Bhutan Army personnel in Bhutan<sup>14</sup> and the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF).<sup>15</sup> India had signed an MoU on disaster management in August 2022 and has also been aiding in modernising the Maldivian Coast Guard by providing additional patrol boats.<sup>16</sup> For Seychelles, India deploys personnel to assist in the training and development of the Seychelles People's Defence Forces (SPDF) under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scheme and has supplied military equipment such as patrol vessels, Dornier aircraft and Chetak helicopters.<sup>17</sup> In 2014, the *INS Tarasa* patrol vessel was transferred to the Seychelles Coast Guard.<sup>18</sup> India is also a major defence exporter to Africa, supplying cost-effective military equipment to countries like Seychelles, Mauritius and Mozambique.

### MULTILATERAL HADR INITIATIVES IN THE REGION

India has participated in several multi-stakeholder HADR initiatives, including the India–Sri Lanka–Maldives Trilateral Maritime Cooperation, BIMSTEC,

the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). As a key member of BIMSTEC, which was established in 1997 and revitalised post the tsunami of 2004, India has played a pivotal role in enhancing regional disaster management collaborations. This includes hosting disaster management exercises (DMEX) in 2017 and 2020,<sup>19</sup> establishing a Centre for Weather and Climate and organising a range of workshops on disaster-warning systems in 2018.<sup>20</sup> Another multi-agency HADR exercise organised for BIMSTEC member states, the PANEX-21 was held during 20–22 December 2021, as a call for enhanced coordination to better address future natural and man-made disasters.<sup>21</sup> Although current efforts focus on government and military participation, there is increasing attention centred on involving a broader range of stakeholders, including the private sector.

Table 1 shows the various HADR initiatives undertaken by India in the past.

**Table 1** HADR Initiatives by India

Category	Year	Name	Details
Annual Joint HADR		Chakravat	Combined
	2004	Operation Gambhir (Indonesia), Operation Castor (Maldives), Operation Rainbow (Sri Lanka)	Indian Ocean Tsunami Relief
	2006	Exercise HABUNG	India–US naval exercise
	2014	Operation Neer	Maldives
Key Operations	2015	Operation Maitri	Rescue after earthquake in Nepal
	2006	Operation Sukoon	Evacuation of Indian nationals from Lebanon
	2011	Operation Blossom	Evacuation of Indian nationals stranded in Libya
	2015	Operation Rahat	Yemen (Evacuation of people during political unrest)
	2016		Cyclone Roanu in Sri Lanka

	2018	Operation Samudra Maitri	Earthquake relief in Indonesia
	2020	Operation Vanilla	Flood aid in Madagascar
	2020		Cyclone Idai in Mozambique
	2020		Oil Spill in Mauritius
	2021-2022	Vaccine Maitri	Supply of vaccines during COVID-19
	2022	Operation Ganga	Ukraine (Evacuation during Russo-Ukraine conflict)
	2023	Operation Karuna	Cyclonic Storm Mocha in Myanmar
	2023	Operation Dost	Earthquake assistance in Turkey
	2023	Operation Kaveri	South Sudan

Source: Reports from Press Information Bureau, Government of India.

## US INTERESTS AND PRESENCE IN THE REGION

The United States has consistently upheld its strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region and has been a key provider of HADR operations to the area. The extensive resources of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) enable it to respond to numerous disasters; having undertaken 36 missions across 15 countries between 1991 and 2019, addressing earthquakes, tsunamis, tropical cyclones and major floods.<sup>22</sup> The US Indo-Pacific Strategy released in September 2021, also addressed providing humanitarian assistance, enhancing pandemic response and supporting healthcare initiatives through cooperation with partner countries by building regional resilience.<sup>23</sup> This approach includes strengthening capacity-building measures in South Asian and Pacific Island nations, focusing on infrastructure, maritime security and critical response capabilities to support regional stability and humanitarian efforts.

The 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) released by the Joe Biden administration identified India as a crucial partner in strengthening bilateral ties and protecting US interests in the Indo-Pacific, particularly to counter China's aggressive actions in the IOR.<sup>24</sup> The document also acknowledged India's significance in maintaining open economic sea lanes and its role in the QUAD, which remains focused on cooperative areas like climate change and technology.

The US focus on the Indo-Pacific also stems from the challenge presented by the People's Republic of China (PRC) leveraging its increasing economic and strategic footfall in the region.<sup>25</sup> The US aims to counter the undermining of human rights and international law as well as to defend shared interests and values of US allies, that are a result of the frequent coercive actions by the PRC against other countries in the region. Between 2002 and 2019, China's HADR efforts were primarily focused on the northern Indian Ocean, as this region allows for easier mobilisation of its capabilities.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, China's HADR strategy is closely linked to its geopolitical ambitions, often combining relief efforts with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiatives in its neighbourhood.<sup>27</sup> Along with frequent military and non-military presence in the region, China is also involved in building infrastructure projects, capacity and capability enhancement in the region, such as the naval base in Djibouti, infrastructural support in Ream naval base in Cambodia and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka.<sup>28</sup> This geographical proximity and logistical capacity of China, reinforces its ability to wield more influence in the region along with HADR capabilities such as China Rescue Team operations and medical ships for international emergencies.<sup>29</sup>

### **MAPPING THE INDIA–US HADR COOPERATION IN THE REGION**

The India–US bilateral defence cooperation, which is regarded by both nations as 'an anchor of global security', has developed over time through the establishment of institutional frameworks, agreements and various initiatives.<sup>30</sup> In 2016, India and the US signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) which made way for logistical support between the armed forces of the two states.<sup>31</sup> This logistics support agreement has made way for deepening of naval engagements more than other services, in enhancing military interoperability by establishing common standards and systems. LEMOA grants both countries access to each other's designated military facilities for refuelling and replenishment mainly covering port calls, joint exercises, training and HADR. Along with LEMOA, three other agreements, i.e., General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) (2002) and its extension ISA in 2019, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (2018) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence (BECA) (2020) have buttressed the commitment towards military and logistical interoperability between India and the US. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2024, the US and India agreed upon a new maritime

cooperation agreement, enabling the US Navy to use Indian ports as logistics hubs. This agreement builds on previous logistics and information-sharing pacts that have strengthened the security partnership of both nations in the Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup>

India being a resident power in the region, has the leverage of strategic presence and capability to spearhead its humanitarian mission, which the US lacks. The limited engagement of the US within the IOR makes India a capable partner to cooperate in constructing a climate-resilient Indo-Pacific region. India and the US have forged several avenues towards building a sustainable, stable and secure Indo-Pacific. Both states work together to enhance avenues towards humanitarian assistance and building capabilities in the region. On a bilateral basis, in addition to the foundational agreements, India and the US have since initiated several initiatives in the HADR segment.

### EXERCISE TIGER TRIUMPH

In March 2024, the joint India–US tri-service HADR amphibious exercise, Tiger Triumph, began on the eastern seaboard.<sup>33</sup> Launched in 2019, the exercise focused on enhancing interoperability for HADR operations and refining SOPs to ensure efficient coordination between the armed forces of both the nations, involving ships, helicopters, landing crafts and various military units, with the goal of improving humanitarian response times in disaster-affected areas.<sup>34</sup> Given the region's frequent natural disasters, such interoperability is crucial. The inaugural HADR exercise between the Indian Navy and the US Navy's 7th Fleet, named HABUNAG, commenced in 2006 following the 2004 tsunami.<sup>35</sup> Initially conducted as a Table Top exercise, its 2010 iteration took place aboard US Navy ships near Okinawa, Japan, featuring participation from a tri-service delegation comprising officers and personnel.<sup>36</sup> These exercises also offer valuable opportunities for both militaries to understand each other's strategic perspectives and have expanded in scope and complexity over time.

India and the US are advancing their strategic partnership on multilateral fronts by collaborating with other nations, particularly through active participation in the QUAD and IORA. These efforts highlight their shared commitment to disaster risk management and regional security. Additionally, joint HADR exercises like RIMPAC underscore India's focus on enhancing interoperability and cooperation with allied nations.

## QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) formed by India, the US, Australia and Japan after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, was established to create a framework for HADR operations in the region. India is a key pillar in the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, where it is acknowledged as a net provider of security and preferred security partner for its maritime neighbourhood.<sup>37</sup> The QUAD grouping has developed a coordinated disaster response mechanism, leading to the signing of the 'Quad Partnership on HADR in the Indo-Pacific' in May 2022 and subsequent guidelines in September 2022.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the Quad Malabar exercise which began as a bilateral effort between India and the US, has now developed into a major multilateral exercise between the four major navies of the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) initiative also uses innovative technology to provide real-time maritime activity information to partners across the region.<sup>39</sup>

## INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA)

As a key member of the IORA, India's involvement is crucial, while the US, as a dialogue partner, has made a positive initial commitment to addressing regional challenges such as climate change, maritime security and food security. In FY 2021 and FY 2022, the US administration announced over US\$ 800 million in investments for IOR countries to tackle challenges like climate change, maritime security and food security, while also committing more than US\$ 2.2 billion for global health programmes in FY 2022, including responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup> India currently holds the position of Vice Chair of the IORA and actively engages in and hosts various capacity-building events organised by the association. India heads the disaster risk management area which is one of IORA's eight key focus areas. In this capacity, India has provided fisheries policy training to officials from Somalia and Yemen and published Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Guidelines for IORA in November 2019.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, India hosted delegates from several countries, including Bangladesh, Kenya, Somalia, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Australia, Singapore and the ASEAN Secretariat, who participated in India's 4th Annual HADR Exercise in Chennai in August 2019.

## RIMPAC

The Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) is the largest biennial maritime exercise and India is one of its participants. The exercise is a comprehensive operations and training initiative focused on improving interoperability and fostering trust among the navies of allied nations. Led by the US Navy, the RIMPAC-24 edition involved around 29 countries.<sup>42</sup> The international maritime exercise provides a valuable training platform while promoting collaborative relationships essential for safeguarding sea lanes and ocean security. From the Indian side, *INS Shivalik*, an indigenously built, 6,000-tonne guided-missile stealth frigate and an Indian Navy P-8I aircraft participated in the exercise.<sup>43</sup>

## ASEAN

India has played a prominent role in leading various multi-stakeholder initiatives in the field of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), particularly within the frameworks of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ADMM Plus. Additionally, India is an active participant in the ASEAN Regional Coordination Centre (RHCC). Complementing these efforts, the US and ASEAN have strengthened their relationship by establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), reflecting the deepening commitment of the United States to the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>44</sup>

## CDRI

Launched by India in 2019, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) functions as a multi-tiered entity, that practices a multi-sectoral approach to disaster risk reduction and resilient infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> The initiative focuses on creating an accessible network of early warning systems to aid countries, particularly the least developed and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in cost-effective risk reduction. From 2022 to 2024, India and the US co-chaired the CDRI Governing Council and Executive Committee, working together to promote a global disaster-resilient infrastructure. As of 23 April 2024, the US has transferred its co-chair role to France while India remains the permanent co-chair of the Governing Council.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the various bilateral and multilateral cooperative initiatives, India and the US, through USAID, are collaborating on the India–US Triangular Development Partnership (TriDeP), a three-year

programme aimed at advancing mutual goals in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>47</sup> This partnership is supported by the Statement of Guiding Principles (SGP) on Triangular Cooperation for Global Development Agreement, initially signed in November 2014, which emphasises the importance of India–US cooperation for global stability and prosperity. The agreement, extended until 2026 with a Second Amendment in July 2021, broadens the scope of joint capacity-building activities and introduces a mechanism for regular monitoring.<sup>48</sup> Under this framework, both countries will continue offering capacity-building support to partner nations in areas such as agriculture, trade, health, renewable energy and disaster preparedness.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the geostrategic location and presence of India, along with US cooperation and commitment throughout the IOR, ensures a logistical continuity towards coordinating collective responses to HADR and climate resilience issues. The growing strategic convergence between the two countries underscores the deepening partnership rooted in shared values and mutual interests. Over the past two decades, this relationship has evolved into a robust partnership, with significant strides in areas such as defence collaboration, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief (HADR), climate resilience and regional security—particularly in the Indo-Pacific and IOR. As the US has a limited geographical reach in the IOR, working together with India complements each other's capabilities and capacities of handling HADR and climate resilience issues. Initiatives like the Triangular Development Partnership and support for regional groupings underscore their shared commitment to stability. Through joint military exercises, multilateral engagements and institutional agreements such as LEMOA and BECA, India and the US have enhanced interoperability, logistical coordination and rapid response capabilities. These collaborative initiatives complement India's SAGAR policy and the US's Indo-Pacific vision, emphasising a free, open and inclusive region that also serves to counter China's predatory practices in the IOR and leverages multilateral platforms for inclusive partnerships.

India's role as a resident power and net security provider in the IOR, combined with the US's resources and strategic reach, positions the partnership as a cornerstone for regional stability. The emphasis on multi-stakeholder HADR collaboration highlights the potential to further align efforts, improve crisis response and strengthen infrastructure resilience, showcasing the partnership as a model of cooperative leadership. The mutual commitment

of both states to a secure and resilient Indo-Pacific, has established a strong framework for enhancing military interoperability and logistical efficiency. Moving forward, continued partnership and engagement in HADR will be crucial for addressing emerging challenges and maintaining stability in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

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