



SHIFTING BALANCES AND RECALIBRATING PARTNERSHIPS: ASSESSING INDIA-US RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract:

The relationship between India and the US is a unique case in the study of international relations, as the two nation-states share many similarities, yet there are also differences that have shaped the formative years of their relationship. Over the years, relations have evolved from 'estrangement' to multifaceted strategic engagement. This article examines the evolving nature of India–US relations, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region. While the United States considers itself an Indo-Pacific power, India favours positive engagement with regional stakeholders. This article investigates the significance of the Indo-Pacific region for the security calculations of India and the US, considering the implications in light of China's rise and assertiveness in the region. It elaborates on their policies and assesses the ramifications of their partnerships on the region's security dynamics.

Keywords: India, US, Indo-Pacific, China, security.

Titulo en Español: *Cambios en los equilibrios y reajuste de las alianzas: evaluación de las relaciones entre la India y Estados Unidos en la región del Indo-Pacífico.*

Resumen:

La relación entre la India y los Estados Unidos es un caso único en el estudio de las relaciones internacionales, ya que ambos Estados-nación comparten muchas similitudes, pero también existen diferencias que han marcado los años formativos de su relación. A lo largo de los años, las relaciones han evolucionado desde el «alejamiento» hasta un compromiso estratégico multifacético. Este artículo examina la naturaleza cambiante de las relaciones entre la India y los Estados Unidos, con especial atención a la región del Indo-Pacífico. Mientras que Estados Unidos se considera una potencia del Indo-Pacífico, la India favorece un compromiso positivo con las partes interesadas de la región. Este artículo investiga la importancia de esta región en los cálculos de seguridad de la India y Estados Unidos, teniendo en cuenta las implicaciones a la luz del auge y la determinación mostrada por China en la región. En él se analizan sus políticas y se evalúan las ramificaciones de sus alianzas en la dinámica de seguridad regional.

Palabras Clave: India, EE. UU., Indo-Pacífico, China, seguridad

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1. Introduction

The United States recognized and extended diplomatic gesture towards India by raising and upgrading the American Mission in New Delhi to an Embassy on November 1, 1946.² While President Harry S. Truman wasted no time in recognizing independent India, relations between them were not always smooth since the systemic realities were difficult to ignore. India-US relations during the cold war days can be assessed as uneven yet steady. Today both the countries are mature democracies and great powers, built on a robust democratic base and relations extending into diplomatic, economic, military and other strategic dimensions. The linkages can be analysed as dynamically growing as leaders' of both these countries recognize the need to building a stable, peaceful and rule-based global order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Both the countries have their vital stakes attached to this region which represent immense opportunities along with critical vulnerabilities. Also, the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific, stretching from the east coast of Africa to the entire Indian Ocean and the western Pacific reflects the synergies of the growing prosperity along with power-politics of the present century. The subsequent sections will present a brief representation of the evolution of India-US relations and then go on to situate their dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region.

Again, one of the interesting events of the present century has been the shift in the center of gravity of international politics from Europe to the growing economies of Asia and the Pacific region. The geopolitical terminology of the Indo-Pacific takes into consideration these realities such as the economic prosperity of India, the rise of China and the change in US strategic positioning to address the traditional and non-traditional security challenges. So, Indo-Pacific is representative of both opportunities and challenges and encapsulates a shift which is not only temporal but structural, altering the balance of economy (in terms of wealth), innovation and finally influencing the international system. Along with this, the idea of the Indo-Pacific brings together two significant democracies- India and the United States, and their shared responsibility towards the freedom, peace and prosperity of the region.

2. Changing World Order and the Evolution of India-US relations

Sumit Ganguly³ while reflecting upon India's foreign policy highlights the impact of the systemic constraints along with national and decision-making factors that played a crucial role in charting the trajectory of foreign policy especially in the formative years. Dennis Kux⁴ while discussing India-US relations points to the 'unique unfamiliarity' that attributed to the lack of knowledge and misperception between both the democracies, which contributed to the early years of 'estrangement'. Again, simply attributing democracy as a factor to have acted as a unifying factor between India and the US dilutes and marginalizes the intrinsic differences in the historical path traversed by both the nation-states, their economic and social experiences shaping the culture, values and beliefs. India and the US therefore share an exclusive case where the search for a common purpose and role in international relations has not been linear, and at times contested. Today the trajectory is often shaped by their converging strategic choices, pragmatic recalibration in light of the changing geo-political realities.

The systemic compulsions of the cold war, Fabian socialism of Pandit Nehru, the political and military backing of the US towards Pakistan, skepticism over India's nuclear program and sanctions thereafter; all these led to India distancing herself from the United States

² U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian. "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: India", at <https://history.state.gov/countries/india>.

³ Ganguly, Sumit (2012): *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

⁴ Kux, Dennis (1992): *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies, 1941- 1991*, Washington D.C., National Defense University Press



and seeking support of the Soviet Union. This prolonged period of mistrust that lasted for about 45 years led to occasional fluctuations, at times hostile and on some occasions amicable.⁵

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the triumph of American liberalization and globalization, India's option for a global partner became more limited. In light of these changes at the systemic level, India and the United States sought to resolve their political differences and focused upon building closer economic ties and people to people relations. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during his 2003 address to the Asia Society in New York, referred to the India and America as "*natural allies in the quest for a better future*".⁶ Such mutual recognition signified a symbolic reversal of Cold War-era distancing to a closer post-cold war evolving partnership, the more precise articulation of which came in January 2004 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership' initiative that aimed to enhance collaboration in areas such as civilian nuclear energy, space exploration, advanced technology commerce, and missile defence systems.⁷ However, the real breakthrough in their relations came during the tenure of George W Bush as the Bush administration recognized India's strategic value, viewing it not merely as a regional actor but as a potential global power. The most transformative development in bilateral ties was marked by the seminal civil nuclear deals that initiated nuclear cooperation between them, as the Bush administration made the historic move to accommodate India's nuclear status outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework. In 2005, the Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative, a landmark agreement signed between President Bush and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, signalling Washington's willingness to support India's entry into the global nuclear mainstream. The United States and India had pursued three primary goals: firstly, to resolve longstanding issues that had hindered their strategic partnership for over three decades, secondly, to promote India's economic development and energy needs through environmentally sustainable means, and finally, to reinforce the global nuclear non-proliferation framework.⁸ This was perceived in India not just as a diplomatic victory but also an international recognition of New Delhi's status as a responsible nuclear power.

India and the USA convened the first U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue in 2010, where President Obama refereed to US-India relations as 'unique' and acknowledged India as "*a leader in Asia and around the world. It's a rising power and a responsible global power. That's why I firmly believe that the relationship between the United States and India will be a defining partnership in the 21st century*".⁹ The National Security Strategy (NSS) 2010 mentions India's role in promoting stability across the world in general and South Asia in particular. As a part of shared values with India, the United States sought to engage in a diversity of issues ranging from counterterrorism to non-proliferation to various developmental agendas such as poverty reduction, education, health and agriculture to building a secure and prosperous future.¹⁰

⁵ Ahamed, Meenakshi (2021): *A Matter of Trust: India-US Relations from Truman to Trump*, India, HarperCollins.

⁶ Vajpayee, Atal Bihari: "India, USA and the World: Let Us Work Together to Solve the Political-Economic Y2K Problem", Speech delivered at Asia Society, New York, 28 September 1998, at <https://asiasociety.org/india-usa-and-world-let-us-work-together-solve-political-economic-y2k-problem>

⁷ "India and United States Successfully Complete Next Steps in Strategic Partnership", 18 July 2005, *Bilateral Documents, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6789/India+and+United+States+Successfully+Complete+Next+Steps+in+Strategic+Partnership>

⁸ "United States-India: Civilian Nuclear Cooperation", June 2005, U.S. Department of State Archive, at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/c17361.htm>.

⁹ "Remarks by the President at U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue Reception", 3 June 2010, The White House, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-us-india-strategic-dialogue-reception>

¹⁰ "National Security Strategy", May 2010, The White House, at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf



It is significant to note that India's emergence as a key player in the region has been one of the key drivers of Washington's eagerness to foster closer ties with New Delhi. The World Bank projects India as a resilient economy and one of the fastest-growing economies with 7.2 per cent of annual GDP growth in FY 2022-23. Along with being the second highest growing economy among the G20 countries, India has immense capacity in ensuring peace and sustaining the growth of the region. India, now the world's fifth-largest economy, is projected to becoming the third-largest by the latter half of 2020s. India is also looked upon as a strategic and economic power in the region. In June 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden while hosting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that US-India relations have emerged to be 'most consequential in the world' and 'stronger, closer and more dynamic than any time in history'.¹¹

It can be contended that a wide array of opportunities and challenges had impacted upon Washington's political circle that has led to its shifting focus towards Asia. Buzan¹² identifies the major trends that led to the geopolitical restructuring of Asia. The rise of Asia was a slow and steady reality that manifested over the last decade. The foremost factors among them were the rise of China and India and the relative decline of US global power. This led to the third factor which is contestation over the idea of 'Asia' as a regional identity since diversity is the only common factor that binds all the countries in the region. Finally, with the rise of China there has also been a new balancing behaviour in Asia against China.

So, the post-9/11 strategic environment and the rise of China further propelled the US to reconfigure its Asia policy. The transformation of global realities also manifested in US global strategy as Washington was looking for an opportunity to craft credible regional partnerships that would be the backbone of American grand strategy in the 21st century. India emerged as a natural partner due to shared democratic values, geostrategic location, and mutual interests in regional stability. Cultivating durable relations with India was essential due to India's strategic location, especially her geo-politically advantageous position in the Indian Ocean. Economically, India's growing industrial base, promising scientific and technological capabilities, vast market and investment opportunities, educated and skilled youth, and credibility as a democratic, peaceful nuclear power - all this added to India's rising economic and strategic profile and an enduring India-US relations especially in the Indo-Pacific.

3. The Salience of the Indo-Pacific and India-US Engagement

The term Indo-Pacific was first coined by Karl Haushofer in his 1920s work, 'Indopazifischen Raum'.¹³ In the present century, the term was brought back to limelight by Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Address to the Parliament of India titled 'Confluence of the Two Seas'. In his oration, he conceived the idea of 'broader Asia' that is located at the convergence of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe linked 'broader Asia' to the Indo-Pacific affirming "*The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A "broader Asia" that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability --*

¹¹ Pandey, Vikas, and Soutik Biswas: "How Modi and Biden Turbocharged India-US Ties", *BBC News*, 22 June 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65982053>

¹² Buzan, Barry: "Asia: A Geopolitical Reconfiguration in the Face of China's Rise", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 77, n° 2 (Summer 2012). Paris, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), at <https://coillink.org/20.500.12592/fv8qrp>.

¹³ Pulipaka, Sanjay, and Mohit Musaddi: "In Defence of the 'Indo-Pacific' Concept", ORF Issue Briefs and Specials, 21 September 2021, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/in-defence-of-the-indo-pacific-concept/>



and the responsibility -- to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas to become seas of clearest transparency.”¹⁴ – Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan.

Indo-Pacific exemplifies the structural shift from the Euro-centric world order to Asia centric geopolitics. It is a geopolitical mental map entailing landscape of the mind that encompasses the widening of the space representing statecraft and power politics.¹⁵ So, Indo-Pacific represents the emerging geopolitical realities across the vast area that stretches from the Indian Ocean to include the central and western seaboard of the Pacific Ocean. It includes the equatorial waters of the Indonesian archipelago along with the South China Sea. Strategically, it the confluence of two oceanic lifelines that are connected through the Strait of Malacca, which is a 900-kilometre sea lane that connects Asia with the Middle East and Europe. Along with this, some of the busiest and most important sea lanes of communication and critical maritime constrictions are located in this region- such as, Malacca Strait, Singapore Strait, Bab-el-Mandeb, the South China Sea, East China Sea and the huge littoral of Bay of Bengal. It has rich flora and fauna, unexplored energy reserves and serves as excellent connectivity channels. It is embodiment of the rise of Asia, as evident in the growing influence of India and China as well as the renewed focus of Washington in the affairs of the region.¹⁶

The vastness of the Indo-Pacific is also combined with its richness as the region encompasses nearly thirty-eight countries, contributing around 62 per cent of the world’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounting for two-thirds of global economic growth. It is home to about 65 per cent of the world’s population, including 60 per cent of the global youth.¹⁷ Some of the most dynamically developing countries are located in this region including the presence of the United States of America. Therefore, it is the nerve centric of world economic growth.

One of the most remarkable factors that has led to the shift of focus in this region is the rise of China. China’s growth has been phenomenal and its influence in the region is comparable to that of the United States of America. China has gained prominence in the region after the US economy faltered in 2008-09. PRC has emerged as a global economic giant; it is the world’s second-largest economy with a GDP of US \$ 18.743 trillion dollars approximately. China’s foreign exchange reserves is more than US \$3 trillion, while its domestic savings exceeds US \$7.5 trillion annually.¹⁸ Allison¹⁹ presents an elaborate exposition of the rise of China in terms of GDP growth, consumption rate, manufacturing which are indicators of a China’s ascendance in economic terms. In 1980, PRC accounted for barely 2 percent of global GDP which rose to 18 percent in 2016 and has a projection of about 30 per cent by 2040. It reflects a transformative leap that was aided by America’s recession as PRC alone accounted for 40 percent of global economic growth, which was more than the combined growth of United States, Japan and Europe. By 2017, Beijing’s GDP had reached to 61 percent of the size of the United States

¹⁴ Abe, Shinzo (2007): “Confluence of the Two Seas.” Speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 22 August 2007, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

¹⁵ Kaplan, Robert D: “Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2009, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2009-03-01/center-stage-twenty-first-century>

¹⁶ Prabhakar, W. Lawrence S. (2016): *Growth of Naval Power in the Indian Ocean: Dynamics and Transformation*, New Delhi, National Maritime Foundation.

¹⁷ Press Information Bureau, Government of India: “Text of Vice-President’s Address at the 2023 Edition of the ‘Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue’”, 15 November 2023, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1977077>

¹⁸ “China’s Foreign Exchange Reserves up to 3.2659 Trillion U.S. Dollars at End of November”, *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, updated 7 December 2024, at https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/statistics/202412/07/content_WS6753e479c6d0868f4e8edc11.html

¹⁹ Allison, Graham T. (2017): *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.



compared to only 7 percent in 1980. Thus, the stage was set for China's rise as the economic power and consequently its power consolidation in the region.

Also, China's economic might translated into China's military capability with the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s rapidly expanding its defence power into a modern fighting force. PLA's strategic power has increased beyond the prediction of the West with significant investment in naval power, cyber warfare, space capabilities, and nuclear deterrence. China's defence budgets which is only second to the United States enables it to project power beyond its shores, particularly in the South China Sea, which China considers its natural and historically ordained area of influence. The South China Sea has drawn attention as Beijing has engaged in reclaiming islands, building artificial islands and fortified them with bases. China's 'grey zone' tactics is evident against five key US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan, Vietnam, India, the Philippines and Taiwan. The coercive tactics involves air, land and maritime activities, with parsed military activities yet heavy emphasis on operations in or near disputed spaces, reinforcing presence and testing red lines through patrols, incursions, and large-scale exercises.²⁰ China's routine incursions, military build-ups, and the setting up of bases or dual-use facilities threaten the sovereignty and the peace of the Indo-Pacific region.

China has also signalled its growing ability to contest U.S. power in the Western Pacific. In 2006, the unexpected surfacing of a PLA Navy submarine in the midst of a U.S. carrier strike group engaged in freedom of navigation operations can be regarded as more than a tactical move. It was an intentional act of strategic signalling. By confronting the U.S. Navy, the world's most powerful maritime force globally, Beijing underscored both its capability and intent to challenge what it perceives as a U.S.-imposed security order.²¹ For Beijing, the U.S. naval presence in the Indo-Pacific is not merely a balancing mechanism; it is viewed as the single greatest obstacle to realising its aspirations for regional leadership and eventual hegemony. These moves serve as a direct challenge to US naval presence and long-standing role as the security guarantor in Asia.

Therefore, in this changed geopolitical environment, the contours of India and the United States relations have transitioned from the estrangement of the Cold war days to a strategic partnership.

For the United States of America, the primacy of Indo-Pacific links American identity as an Indo-Pacific' power, which, however is no longer uncontested. Over the last few decades, the region has witnessed intensified political competition, as some scholars measure this as an undergoing 'power-transition'.²² Consequently, Indo-Pacific had emerged as America's central priority in President Donald Trump's National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017 that links Indo-Pacific to America First policy. As the 45th President of the United States, President Trump conferred the Indo-Pacific as a topmost priority in America's regional strategic calculations. The NSS asserts that the shift in Washington's focus towards the 'Indo-Pacific' is due to the increasing geopolitical competition between two competing models of world order that is underway in the region- one that is rooted in freedom and another that is repressive. The document for the first time underlines the significance of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', (FOIP) that is regarded as the central pillar of America's Indo-Pacific strategy.²³ The NSS expresses concern over Chinese behaviour in the region, where Beijing uses economic leverages, political

²⁰ "A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics", 2002, RAND Corporation, at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RBA500/RBA594-1/RAND_RBA594-1.pdf

²¹ Holmes, James R. and Toshi Yoshihara: "China and the United States in the Indian Ocean", *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, n° 3 (2008), pp 41–60, at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss3/4>

²² Lai, David (2011): *The United States and China in Power Transition*, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA.

²³ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", December 2017, The White House, at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>



influence, and coercion, military threats that manipulates regional choices and hinders American interest in the region.

Echoing similar lines, President Joe Biden declared the core ethos of America's Indo-Pacific shift since, "*The Future of Each of Our Nations- And Indeed the World- Depends on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Enduring and Flourishing in the Decades Ahead*".²⁴ Washington also recognises the need to build and work with alliances and partnerships in the region to address regional challenges, along with seizing new opportunities in the 'connected Indo-Pacific', where India's geopolitical location at the heart of the Indian Ocean, her growing economic strength, cultural ardour makes India a natural leader in the region. The United States accords India's role as a key leader in the Indo-Pacific and a partner in advancing the vision of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'.

India projects herself as a benevolent and reliable partner that envisions the idea of shared prosperity and equal rights in contrast to the intimidating attitude of any nation. India's strength emerges from her history and cultural ties with the nations of the Indo-Pacific along with her robust economic growth. New Delhi articulation of Indo-Pacific narrative is aimed to protect the freedom of navigation in the sea lanes of communication, uphold rule of law and curb the rise of any traditional or non-traditional threats. India's approach regarding the Indo-Pacific was enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018 where he talked about 'free, open, inclusive' Indo-Pacific that champions the 'common pursuit of progress and prosperity'.²⁵

India's outlook in the Indo-Pacific region is a constructive and a 'positive one', which is centred on inclusivity, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. A cornerstone of India's approach is its commitment to 'ASEAN centrality' and its belief in cooperation and collaboration to address shared challenges. This vision rests on faith in multilateralism and regionalism. India also recognizes the Indo-Pacific as a major center of global economic growth and advocates for a stable, open, and balanced trading environment, prioritizing connectivity while steering clear of destructive rivalries. While competition for economic influence is inevitable, India stresses it should never escalate into conflict. Instead, it urges both established and emerging powers to act responsibly, safeguard the region, and promote common values, mutual interests, and inclusive development.

On policy implications, New Delhi's approach towards the geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific aligns closely with its Act East Policy, and its overarching emphasis on diplomatic, political economic, military, social, environmental, common good and cultural relations with the Southeast Asian nations. India's priority for the Indo-Pacific includes the Act-East policy and SAGAR. The significance of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) as enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 lies in India's quest for rule-based world order, equality, sustainable and transparent investment, freedom of navigation and over-flight, mutual respect and peaceful resolution of any disputes that may arise in the region. The collaborative stance of New Delhi is reflected in the confluence of Indo-Pacific Oceans'

²⁴ "Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS", 15 September 2021, The White House, at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aucus/>

²⁵ "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue", 1 June 2018, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>



Initiative (IPOI) and ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which recognizes the synergies of Indo-Pacific and gears towards connecting the East.²⁶

India's initiatives in the Indo-Pacific is in tandem to Washington's aim to ensuring FOIP. So it is in both the countries' interest to recalibrate their partnership in the Indo-Pacific. President Biden's outreach to New Delhi reflected his broader approach of cultivating networks of cooperation with like-minded states through flexible coalitions. A major breakthrough in the relation was the recognition of India as a Major Defense Partner in 2016, and this was further elevated to the Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 category in 2018 which allowed for collaboration in sensitive military and dual-use technologies. Bilateral ties also includes logistical sharing in defence sectors such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA). Statistically, US-India trade in defence sectors saw an enormous rise and was more than the US \$20 billion by 2020.²⁷

The US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), one of six geographic unified combatant commands under the Department of Defense (DOD) forms the backbone of US Indo-Pacific Strategy and has its extensive presence in the Indian Ocean. Earlier known as the Pacific Command, the renaming is in light of China's maritime aggressiveness in the region along with the growing salience of India and consequently a drive towards a futuristic defence engagement with India in the region.²⁸ The USINDOPACOM forms the backbone of America's Indo-Pacific defence posture. America has been engaged in a number of joint military exercises with India in the waters, air and surface of the Indo-Pacific. Malabar exercise initiated in 1992 is one of the earliest joint exercises between the two navies and has gained the attention of the Quad countries in the recent year with Japan joining in 2015 and Australia in 2020.²⁹ The 2025 latest edition witnessed an overwhelming participation between the Quad forces that is Australia, India, Japan and the United States. It is also the sixth time that all the four navies have participated in massive drills, intelligence sharing demonstrating their ability to engage and exercise missions across the entire spectrum of the Indian and the Western Pacific Ocean.³⁰ It recognises the threat perception in the region and focuses upon calibrated response through interoperability and exchanges.

Recognizing China's dubious maritime operations in the Indian Ocean, India and the United States have engaged in multiple exercises in the waters of the Indo-Pacific. Since 2019, New Delhi and Washington have conducted Tiger Triumph, the first-ever tri-service exercise involving land, sea, and air forces, focusing on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. The exercise which is now in its fourth edition reflects an enhanced cooperative exercise and combat drills between the armed and naval forces of India and the USA targeted to achieve interoperability and logistical exchange under LEMOA. These joint exercises display seamless execution of complex operations such as Standoff and Hard Beaching and Slithering Operations

²⁶ "Question No. 1510: Mission Sagar." *Lok Sabha – Parliamentary Questions*, 28 July 2023, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, at

<https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36934/QUESTION+NO1510+MISSION+SAGAR>

²⁷ "U.S. Security Cooperation with India", 20 January 2025, U.S. Department of State, at

<https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/>

²⁸ "US military renames Pacific Command", *BBC*, 31 May 2018, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44312024>

²⁹ PIB, Government of India, Ministry of Defense: "Malabar Naval Exercises", 8 February 2021, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1696140®=3&lang=2>

³⁰ Murkowski, Victor (2025): "Guam hosts Australia, India, Japan, US forces in Exercise Malabar 2025", 20 November 2025, at <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/4339470/guam-hosts-australia-india-japan-us-forces-in-exercise-malabar-2025/>



by Special Operations Forces.³¹ India also takes part in the U.S.-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, which is a multi-dimensional exercise demonstrating a massive naval drill and intense exercise that hosts multiple symposiums, reciprocal visits, exercise planning, advanced level integration and tactical exercises, including participation of aircraft carrier battle group, submarines, unmanned aerial vehicles, reconnaissance aircraft along with special forces from all the participating countries. It is the world's largest maritime exercise that brings together thirty countries with the aim of ensuring 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. India's INS Shivalik which is multi-role stealth frigate is a natural choice for this exercise since it is responsible for securing the South China Sea and North Pacific Ocean.³²

Another prominent strategic exercise hosted by India is the Milan which is a biennial Bay of Bengal naval exercise among India, US and the navies of Southeast Asian countries. This exercise has increased in scale over the years, with the 12th edition witnessing the largest ever participation of 50 nations. Along with this, India and US engage in Yudh Abhyas (Army), Vajra Prahar (Army Special Forces), Cope India (Air Force), counterterrorism specific exercise Tarkash involving US Special Forces and India's National Security Guard troops, the Sangam exercises bringing together special force exercises between US Navy Seals and the Indian Navy's Marine Commando Force.³³

All these exercises reflect the trust-building among the defence forces and the capacity to work together in times to crisis. Such engagements not only enhance interoperability but also embed India more firmly within the broader security order of the Indo-Pacific.

India has been a key player in the Quadrilateral Security Framework, commonly referred to as the Quad. Born out of the Tsunami Core group, it serves as one of the most prominent platforms of mini lateral cooperation among the key democratic stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific- India, Japan, Australia and the US. It is reflective of Prime Minister Abe's vision of a 'broader Asia' with Japan and India coming together and *this collaboration evolving "into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely."*³⁴ - H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007.

Quad provides a wide array of opportunities to India to engage with the other countries that share similar concerns regarding the security of the region. India also ventures beyond Quad as exemplified by the bilateral and trilateral exercises. Initiatives such as Vaccine Maitri, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) aids in image building. Also, it is an opportunity for India to rise above the middle-power status and project influence beyond the Indo-Pacific.³⁵

³¹ PIB, Government of India, Ministry of Defense: "Exercise Tiger Triumph 2025 Culminates with Distinguished Visitors' Day at Kakinada, Andhra Pradesh", 12 April 2025, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2121234®=3&lang=2>

³² PIB, Government of India, Ministry of Defense: "INS Shivalik Reaches Pearl Harbour to Participate in Rim of The Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) – 24", 29 June 2024, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2029512®=3&lang=2>

³³ Kronstadt, K. Alan: "*India-U.S.: Major Arms transfers and military exercises*", Congressional Research Service, CRS Report No. IF12438, 5 December 2024, at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF12438.pdf>

³⁴ Abe, Shinzo (2007): "Confluence of the Two Seas", Speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

³⁵ Pant, Harsh (2022): "India and the Quad: Chinese belligerence and Indian resilience", at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-and-the-quad#:~:text=The%20Quad%20is%20crucial%20for,values%2C%20and%20strong%20defence%20ties.>



The Quad resonates India-US concerns for building a security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region that would be committed to open and transparent network, focussed upon ‘value-oriented diplomacy’³⁶, securing navigation routes especially the sea lanes of communication which is essential to ensuring the free flow of commodities, capital, people and knowledge. It is a flexible, purposeful framework for coordination among four maritime democracies seeking to uphold a rules-based equilibrium.

However, this is not to suggest that India-US relations is devoid of frictions. Ganguly and Mason³⁷ in their study observes a strong reluctance in the Indian counterpart to enter into any strategic cooperation that might imply an imbalance in status or lead to an unequal and hierarchic dynamics. There is also a political resistance to align to closely with the US, which can at times be regarded as a baggage of the past. In the recent years, such concerns have doubled due to President Trump’s ambivalent posture towards India. President Trump seem to be risking the robust relations spanning for more than twenty-five years at the cost to achieving short-term popularity among some of his supporters in Washington. The tariff impositions which flout the logic of economy and strategy (as China was given extension while a 25 percent baseline tariff was imposed on India), social media verbal stunts, threatening US companies that manufacture in India and appeasement towards Pakistan.³⁸ This was further propelled by President Trump’s unacceptable claims to Operation Sindoor, revealing critical fault-lines and Trump administration’s lack of grasping its impact on India-US relations. These issues can have a detrimental effect in their long-term relations, if not addressed soon.

4. Conclusion

Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical space that manifests both cooperation and contestation. The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific garners attention due to its strategic location, cultural diversity, and economic growth including connectivity links.

While arguing for the uniqueness in India-US relations, the dynamics of the 21st century needs to be focussed upon. Here too, the systemic realities acted as one of the deciders of the trajectory of India- US relations. America’s renewed focus to the East and the change in geopolitical nomenclature from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, positions India as a key partner in regional prosperity and peace.

So, it can be contended that India-US relations in the Indo-Pacific is shaped by the systemic realities of securitizing the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, if the 21st century is regarded as the ‘Asian Century’, an enduring Indo-Pacific policy would not be feasible without India’s support. Again, the diversity of the Indo-Pacific region, the varied and multiple layers of security concerns- all these factors provide for a wide array of cooperation opportunities as both the nation converge on the key issues and concerns in the region. Their primary objective of ensuring a free, open, democratic Indo-Pacific, along with respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the nations, and focus on ASEAN centrality are the core objectives on which multiple collaborative mechanisms can be built. The Quad can work as an excellent platform for diplomatic exchanges and regular meetings.

³⁶ Value oriented diplomacy is the practise of foreign policy which is devoid of any aggressive tendencies and promotes universal principles such as human rights, respect for rule of law, freedom and democracy.

³⁷ Ganguly, Sumit and Mason M. Chris: “Introduction: An Unnatural Partnership? The Future of U.S.–India Strategic Cooperation,” in Sumit Ganguly and Mason, M. Chris (ed.) (2021): *The Future of U.S.–India Security Cooperation*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1–12.

³⁸ Feigenbaum, Evan A. (2025): “Donald Trump Risks Tanking Twenty-Five Years of U.S.-India Relations”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/08/trump-tariffs-risk-us-india-relations?lang=en>



Also, some of the divergences between India and US arise from the differing ends that they seek in the region. India is more concerned with her regional security matters and bilateral issues emanating from China's unlawful activities and claims at the borders; while the United States is concerned with the global implications of the rise of China as it creates a threat perception for USA which may challenge US dominance globally.

India and the US need to mend their critical fault-lines. The leaders, especially President Trump needs to act more responsibly as cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is to the long-term benefit of both the countries. Sustained robust relations would require efforts from the leaders and a strong will from the diplomatic offices.

India- US cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has an immense potential to play a decisive role in shaping the future character of the Indo-Pacific security order. Significantly, collaboration in the maritime sector; including the growing strategic significance of the Quad, reflects the shifting strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific and highlights the urgent need for collaboration among democracies with shared interests to confront common challenges while safeguarding stability and prosperity.

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