The “Indo-Pacific”—New Regional Formulations and New Maritime Frameworks for US-India Strategic Convergence

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This article argues three things. First, it argues that at the conceptual level there has been a strategic rediscovery of a maritime regional framework, the Indo-Pacific. Second, it argues that at the policy level there is a significant regional security convergence, a degree of strategic balancing, between India and the United States in this Indo-Pacific. Third, it argues that at the causal level there is a common maritime challenge from China faced by India in the Indian Ocean and by the United States in the Pacific Ocean, a common Indo-Pacific strategic challenge which is generating this significant US-India naval convergence. In order to deal with such matters, the article looks at the strategic discourse employed around the concept of the Indo-Pacific, and the related maritime assets deployed in the Indo-Pacific by the United States and India.

Introduction

In June 2012 the Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith publicly stressed at the high-level Shangri-La Dialogue the importance of a term, which is the subject of this article:

As some now say . . . the Indo-Pacific. Whatever the label . . . The implications of the historic shift to the Indo-Pacific continue to unfold . . . between key players – such as China, India and the United States . . . The Indo-Pacific has risen as a region of global strategic significance including the growth of military power.
projection capabilities of countries in the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean spanned by the South East Asian archipelago is emerging as a single strategic system.\(^1\)

Analysis of the “Indo-Pacific” is importance as involving a concept which generates policies, a strategic framework of reference in the making for Ashley Tellis:

The Indian Ocean is going to be increasingly integrated with the Western Pacific. In fact, the concept of “Indo-Pacific” is not as fantastical as one would have thought a decade or two decades ago, because . . . economics and politics will combine to push a much tighter integration of these two ocean spaces than before.\(^2\)

This article picks up on such comments and pinpoints three related themes concerning what Tellis described elsewhere as “the diplomatic, economic, and security architectures of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical space.”\(^3\)

The first theme to be discussed is the strategic rediscovery of what one Indian commentator called “the wider Indo-Pacific region.”\(^4\) This spatial perspective combines the Indian and Pacific Oceans, especially the eastern Indian Ocean and western Pacific, with the South China Sea as a further overlap. From this comes the second theme, Indo-Pacific regional security convergence, a degree of softer strategic balancing by India and the United States (US) in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This is driven by the third theme, Jae-Hyung Lee’s sense of “China’s expanding maritime ambitions in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean;” in other words a common Indo-Pacific maritime challenge emerging from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to India in the India Ocean and to the United States in the Pacific Ocean.\(^5\) Hence Raja Mohan’s talk that “the rapid expansion of Indian and Chinese naval capabilities and the United States’ own search for maritime partners have lent a special significance to the expanding cooperation between New Delhi and Washington in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.”\(^6\)

In order to deal with these three themes, this article looks at the, often China-centric, strategic discourse employed and the maritime assets deployed by India and the United States in the Indo-Pacific. This wider Indo-Pacific discourse is reflected among commentators, analysts, military figures and politicians in both India and the United States; and is reflected in the wider range of materials cited in this article.

**The Indo-Pacific as a “region”**

Punch in “Indo Pacific region” on *Google Scholar* and we find that marine biology studies generate a myriad of related links, including many concerning the Blue Nosed Indo-Pacific Dolphin. Typical was this search, carried out on December
12, 2011, in which the first article link indicated was Randall’s 1998 article “Zoo-
geography of Shore Fishes of the Indo-Pacific Region”! However, in terms of geo-
political studies, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean have generated their own
terms: the Indian Ocean Region and the Pacific Region. They appear as separate,
albeit adjacent, regions.

In reality, regions are less fixed. Geography has become more conceptually
grounded in recent years, classical geopolitics (“position” as physical location
in a region) overlaps with critical geopolitics (“position” as perceptual aspirations,
hopes and fears in a region). The stakes are high argues former Ambassador Chas
Freeman:

Since the end of the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the
world’s most dynamic geopolitical zone. Shifting balances of power there are
reshaping international perceptions . . . the Indo-Pacific region is the world’s
new economic center of gravity and that balance of power within it is evolving
. . . The Indo-Pacific region is now the fulcrum of global geopolitics.7

Regionalism has been affected by the insights from international relations (IR)
constructivism in which Peter Katzenstein argues that “regions are, among other
things, social constructions created through politics . . . cognitive constructs that
are rooted in political practice.”8 It is striking to find the Australian ambassador
to India, Peter Varghese, arguing in similar terms about “this new construct of
the Indo-Pacific;” which “connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby under-
lining the crucial role that the maritime environment is likely to play in our future
strategic and defence planning . . . Today, it makes more sense to think of the Indo-
Pacific.”9

Political practices in the Indo-Pacific involve institutional frameworks and
inter-state operations that mesh the two oceans together, where an Indo-Pacific
maritime region is now being shaped through the conceptualization of the
region and the related strategy to then operate in that region. The latter (Indo-
Pacific strategy) represents making the former (Indo-Pacific concept) operational:
tangible deployment of assets and practical arrangements made, in this case,
between India and the United States in the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific. It is
the argument of this article that US-India formal agreements and informal under-
standings are being constructed and carefully calibrated in the Indo-Pacific, with
China considerations very much in mind (and in deployment patterns), even if not
in official speech. India-US naval cooperation across the Indian and Pacific oceans
reflects a sense of an Indo-Pacific maritime region in which to organize, but which
also further facilitates that regional conceptualization.

A telling comparison is with the 1980 to 1990s period. This witnessed a
noticeable Rimpseak centered around “the discourse of ‘Pacific Rim,’” with
attendant economic opportunities and institutional arrangements like the
Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC), and talk of the 21st century being “the Pacific Century.” In comparison, the 2010s period is now witnessing an equally noticeable Indo-Pacificspeak emerge centered around a “discourse” of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one coherent framework, with attendant security considerations and arrangements emerging, and with evocation in India and the US of the 21st century as being the “the coming Indo-Pacific century.” In such a discourse on region, the Indo-Pacific illustrates “intersecting ... maritime narratives” and “maritime mental maps” in play for India, and the US (and also China), intangible concepts which generate tangible maritime deployments in the Indo-Pacific. Australian voices, perhaps unsurprisingly, given Australia’s own Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean location, have been also quick to pick up on this emergence of Indo-Pacific rhetoric and strategies. Voices from Singapore and Indonesia, states that also look towards the Indian and Pacific Oceans, have also picked up on this “reconceptualising” shift.

This Indo-Pacific framework is not a new creation. Rather, it a rediscovery of what Karl Haushofer once called the Indopazifischen Raum “Indo-Pacific region/ space” in his geopolitical ruminations in the 1920s and 1930s. It is significant that he made a point about “the geographic impact of the dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China, which ... are geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs” of the western Pacific and Bay of Bengal, offshore island arcs through which they are now both actively and competitively deploying. These maritime waters are what another geopolitical strategist Nicholas Spykman considered in 1944 as the “circumferential maritime highway which links the whole area together in terms of sea power.” This also brings another geopolitical strategist to mind, Alfred Mahan and his stress on seapower considerations in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Such geopolitical considerations now bind these two Oceans together in operational and deployment terms for the US and India, as can be seen in their official statements and wider commentarial analysis. Consequently, “the strategic communities in India and the US are increasingly reverting to the use of a new phrase ‘the Indo-Pacific’ in their analyses and discourses covering Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific regions.”

On the US side, specific US defence doctrine now talks of how US “security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific ... into the Indian Ocean region.” In terms of command structures, one long-standing reflection of this Indo-Pacific strategic arc has been the US Pacific Command (PACOM), based at Hawaii, whose jurisdiction and field of operation stretches from the Pacific Ocean into the Indian Ocean, including the entire Indian coastline and the base of Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean. This was why PACOM Commander Robert Willard pointed out that “I think it’s important to keep the balance between the Pacific and Indian
Oceans in perspective as, in this global environment, there is more and more interaction [across and between the two oceans] occurring.”19 The Indo-Pacific has been embedded in PACOM jargon, for example in their co-sponsorship of the *Indo-Pacific War Game*, hosted by the US Naval War College in March 2012.

Emerging strategic links with India underpin US perceptions of the region. This is why it is PACOM that co-chairs the US-India Military Cooperation Group along with India’s Integrated Defence Staff. Hence, the US Senate Committee on Armed Services judgement in summer 2011 that “with regard to the Indo-Pacific region, the committee notes that combined naval exercises, conducted between the United States and India, have become a vital pillar of stability, security, and free and open trade, in the Indo-Pacific region.”20 This was the reason for the testimony also in February 2012 to the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee by Nancy Powell, ambassador-designate to India: “we see India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region.”21 It also supported evocation in July 2012 by Senators John Cornyn and Mark Warner, co-chairs of the Senate India Caucus, about the bilateral relationship’s “expanded opportunities to conduct joint military exercises, and contributing to security in the Indo-Pacific region.”22

Indo-Pacific formulations are being used by the US government. At the State Department, the challenge was explained in 2012 by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell:

> In terms of operational concepts, the linkage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and how to think about that, and how to design strategy and operations and training routines that reflect these new strategic realities is really the challenge of the next phase of American strategy.23

Here, William Burns, Deputy Secretary of State, had noted that “India’s strong presence across the Indian and Pacific Oceans is a source of comfort [for the US] and affirms its potential as a net security provider in the maritime domain. Toward this end, the United States is interested in working with India . . . as we explore future maritime security cooperation.”24 His superior, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, pushed forward an Indo-Pacific vision in the Obama administration: strategic formulations for “two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian—that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy.”25 Strategic rethinking around Indo-Pacific regional conceptualization generated practical imperatives in her mind to “translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept.”26 Making the concept operational involved closer links with Australia in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans: “we are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one.”27 It also involved Clinton’s stress on closer relations with India: “we are expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is.”28 Similar moves were apparent at
the Department of Defense. Leon Panetta’s talk in June 2012 of US “rebalancing” was an Indo-Pacific one: “we will expand our military partnerships and our presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. Defense cooperation with India is a linchpin in this strategy.”

Two US decisions in 2011 illustrated this growing Indo-Pacific rationale for deploying assets. First was the announcement that the US would be placing littoral combat ships at Singapore, from where they could be deployed northwest up the Strait of Malacca into the eastern Indian Ocean (Bay of Bengal) or northeast into the South China Sea and into the western Pacific. Second was Obama’s trip to Australia in November 2011, which brought his talk of “new opportunities to train with other allies and partners, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean,” in other words, across the Indo-Pacific. The practical reflection of such talk was agreement to strengthen the US presence at Darwin on Australia’s northwestern coast—a power projection jump “Indo-Pacific nexus” point onto the western Pacific (including the South China Sea) and the eastern Indian Ocean (including the Strait of Malacca). In Indonesia, itself facing both the Indian and Pacific oceans, the Darwin announcement was judged as part of a “rebalancing of power in the Indo-Pacific region . . . in a move that could alter the security contours of the Indo-Pacific.” In a similar manner, Indian commentators like Ashok Malik reckoned that the Darwin announcement reflected how “the game for the Indo-Pacific—the geographical intersection and strategic confluence of the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans—is afoot.” The Darwin announcement was quickly noticed, and criticized, in China. One Australian scholar saw these Darwin arrangements as part of an emerging US “Indo-Pacific war plan for fighting China.”

The discussions in March 2012 about basing US P-8 surveillance planes and drone planes in the eastern Indian Ocean (at Australia’s Cocos island) for operation over the South China Sea were another example of Indo-Pacific strategic thinking shaping tangible deployment of assets, and was quickly noticed in India as pointing to “the fusion of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea into a single strategic theatre.” The Congressional Research Service report in March 2012 considered that these moves reflected an “underlying . . . broader geographic vision of the Asia-Pacific region that includes the Indian Ocean.” This indicates, in other words, the Indo-Pacific.

Within the wider Washington policy community, particularly those of a robust IR realism orientation, a similar Indo-Pacific emphasis is now noticeable. There is an emerging sense, as James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara put it at the US Naval War College, of “the Indo-Pacific theater as a seamless operating area.” Elsewhere at the Naval War College came Andrew Winner and Peter Dombrowski’s analysis of “United States maritime strategy and implications for the
Indo-Pacific Region." At the American Enterprise Institute, Michael Auslin has discussed the “conceptualization” of a “broader Indo-Pacific;” the “Indo-Pacific commons” and “the struggle for power in the Indo-Pacific.” Concerning such struggles, the Center for a New American Security reckoned on “a new American grand strategy, one that increasingly leverages relationships with like-minded countries [like India] to share the burden with the United States of managing China’s rise;” in which “as India and other centers of power also emerge, the region itself is transforming from an Asian-Pacific to an Indo-Pacific region.” At the Heritage Foundation, Walter Lohman judged “the greatest challenge to American leadership in the Indo-Pacific region: the rise of China.” India-US cooperation underpinned Twining’s Indo-Pacific sense of region. Auslin’s prognosis of stronger alliance-making between the US and India, was such that, as he admitted, “from China’s point of view, my Indo-Pacific strategy may be seen as containment.”

Robert Kaplan’s analysis of the publicly proclaimed US “pivot” to Asia was replete with Indo-Pacific contextualization:

The United States … is attempting to pivot its focus to the geographical heart of the global economy: the Indian and Pacific oceans … China is an altogether dynamic society that is naturally expanding its military and economic reach in the Indo-Pacific region … Make no mistake, the Indo-Pacific is in the midst of an arms race that complicates the security of the region’s sea lanes. Were the United States not now to turn to the Indo-Pacific, it would risk a multipolar military order arising up alongside an already existent multipolar economic and political order … U.S. military power in the Indo-Pacific is needed not only to manage the peaceful rise of China but also to stabilize a region … Clinton’s diplomatic overture to Myanmar and Obama’s plan to rotate 2,500 Marines through Australia are symbolic of the political and military effort to distribute U.S. power throughout the Indo-Pacific.

As to the South China Sea, Kaplan reckoned that “an Indo-Pacific without a strong U.S. military presence would mean the Finlandisation by China of countries in the South China Sea.”

A similar Indo-Pacific emphasis is also noticeable in Indian leadership circles. The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) recognized “the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific combine to the Pacific-Indian Ocean region.” This led the former Chief of Naval Staff (2004–6) Arun Prakash to argue for “having the ‘Asia-Pacific’ label replaced by the term ‘Indo-Pacific.’” In terms of command structures, one reflection of this trans-oceans sense of region is India’s Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC) situated at Port Blair in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, the chokepoint stretch between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. As such, FENC is a
bridge between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Indonesian commentators see the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as playing a key role in ensuring security and US-India convergence, in “initiating the Indo-Pacific corridor.”

Such a sense of overlapping Indo-Pacific maritime space underpins the biannual Milan exercises run by FENC since 1995. By 2012 the Milan exercise had grown to involve 15 participants from across the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Pacific Ocean, in the shape of Mauritius, Seychelles, Maldives, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Philippines, and Australia. China has never been invited, but keeps a careful concerned eye on this development. Another example of cross-oceans deployment can be seen in the annual India-Singapore Simbex naval exercises carried out in the Bay of Bengal since the 1990s, and in the South China Sea since 2005. In the last decade, the Indian navy has regularly deployed powerful five-ship flotillas across the Bay of Bengal, down the Strait of Malacca and eastern Indian Ocean rim, across the South China Sea and into the western Pacific. Other deployments have gone from the eastern Indian Ocean into Oceania and the south Pacific. India’s now regular presence in the South China Sea has at times generated friction with China, as exemplified in the summer of 2011 where India’s oil deal struck with Vietnam, and the visit of INS Airavat to Vietnam brought Chinese comments about India trespassing into Chinese-claimed waters.

Indo-Pacific formulations are now being used by the Indian government. Nirmala Rao, India’s Minister for External Affairs, emphasized to an American audience in December 2011: “we also have an increasing convergence of interests with the United States ... linked to the Indo-Pacific region.” A month later she noted how “in the broader Indo-Pacific region India is working with the US ... to address traditional and non-traditional security challenges. One such challenge is maritime security.” Similar sentiments on India-US links were then expressed by the Foreign Secretary, Ranjan Mathai, in February 2012: “our partnership is important for building a stable, prosperous and secure Asia-Pacific region—or, as some here have begun to call it, the Indo-Pacific.” Later that month, Arackaparambil Antony, the Defence Minister, noted the current “relevance of the Indian Ocean-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific” in Great Power relationships.

Within the wider Indian policy community, a similar Indo-Pacific emphasis is now noticeable. The former Foreign Secretary, Shyam Saran, was particularly clear on this in the autumn of 2011; “over the past year, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ has gained currency in strategic discourse in India.” The former Chief of Naval Staff, Suresh Mehta told the Indian Maritime Foundation in 2012 of “particularly strong maritime connectivities between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, and consequently, the term Indo-Pacific would find more relevance.” Among such strategic analysts, Harsh Pant talks of how, geopolitically, “tectonic
plates are shifting in the Indo-Pacific.” For Nitin Pai, it is a maritime call; “in the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific ... the Indian Navy’s presence in East Asian waters is a good example of such a capacity ... to project power in the Indo-Pacific.” Raja Mohan has been a powerful Indian voice in this perceptual-strategic shift. He argues that although “traditionally the Pacific and Indian Oceans have been viewed as two different and self-contained worlds,” nevertheless “a number of developments have begun to compel a more integrated view of the Pacific and Indian Oceans ... The traditional clear distinctions, then, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are beginning to blur.”

Strategic opportunities are noticed by Indian commentators; for Sakhuja, it is a question of regional security in which India’s “strategic alliances” and “the maritime interoperability with the Indo-Pacific region will be India’s enduring and visible leverage of power.” Specific quasi alliances and specific threats involve both oceans. If we return to Raja Mohan, he analysed India’s security convergence with Australia in 2011 in specific Indo-Pacific terms. He similarly deployed such terms for India’s strategic convergence with the US: “the United States is now seeking a strong security partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific;” and that “as the American and Indian navies ... work together in the waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the traditional differentiation between these two theatres is likely to rapidly disappear.” Indo-Pacific conceptualization reflects very tangible strategic concerns, which is why for Ajai Shukla, “fear of an increasingly aggressive China provides an opportunity for India to develop the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific.’”

From concept come actions and Saran’s sense how China’s “more assertive posture of the past couple of years had triggered a rapid and continuing build up of countervailing coalitions in the strategic Indo-Pacific theatre.” Two such emerging coalitions involve both India and the US. One coalition is the India-US-Australia triangle. The other coalition is the India-US-Japan triangle. Each triangle comes complete with its associated Indo-Pacific rhetoric. Within this Indo-Pacific theatre there is a parallel Chinese challenge to the US in the western Pacific and to India in the Indian Ocean, both of which are now to be examined.

**Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean**

As China’s blue water navy has taken shape, it is not surprising to find the Chinese navy starting to appear in the Indian Ocean since the 1990s. The consequences have been noticeable: “Beijing’s recent appearance in the northern Indian Ocean has effectively unified the Indo-Pacific strategic space in a way that strengthens New Delhi and Washington’s already converging interests.” As the US concedes some ground to India’s rise in the region, it is China that now poses the only real challenge to India’s otherwise growing role in the Indian Ocean.
Navy’s Maritime Doctrine, announced in 2004, explicitly highlighted “attempts by China to strategically encircle India” and warned of Chinese encroachment into “our maritime zone.”\(^70\) The then Chief of Naval Staff (2006–9) Sureesh Mehta called for “countering the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region.”\(^71\) Indian comments on news of China’s sea trials for its refitted aircraft carrier in August 2011 were that “the carrier will add a new dimension to a burgeoning Chinese navy, which could provide a major challenge to India in its backyard, the Indian Ocean.”\(^72\)

Encirclement is the specific word often bandied about in India to describe this perceived threat from China, the so-called “string of pearls” strategy being pursued by Beijing.\(^73\) The argument from ex-Chief of Naval Staff Prakash was simple and clear. He warned that as “China has provided sufficient indications of her plans for ‘containment’ of India,” it “should come as no surprise to us if in the next few years PLA Navy ships and nuclear submarines are put regularly into harbours like Chittagong, Sittwe, Hambantota or Gwadar in our immediate neighbourhood, in pursuit of their grand design.”\(^74\) India has taken particular exception to China’s financial underpinning of Pakistan’s development of Gwadar as a deep water port, a development which also potentially offers the Chinese navy long range berthing rights for the future.\(^75\) Since 2009, the fact that Chinese naval units regularly stop at Gwadar before completing their deployment into the Gulf of Aden is a pointer in Indian eyes to such future developments.

China’s presence has extended still further out into the western parts of the Indian Ocean, with Indian analysts arguing that “China’s island strategy in the Indian Ocean [is] breaching India’s sphere of influence,” and Sarabjeet Pamar describing it as Beijing’s “islandic hop-scotch.”\(^76\) Chinese visits to the Maldives in 2001 by Zhu Rongji, and in 2011 by Wu Bangguo increased Indian suspicions.\(^77\) Hu Jintao’s visit to the Seychelles in 2007 brought concerned comments from India, as did news in December 2011, following the visit of the Chinese defence minister, of future resupply and recuperation facilities being offered by the Seychelles to China.\(^78\) India’s dispatch of one destroyer to patrol the Gulf of Aden in October 2008 was overshadowed by the subsequent dispatch of two Chinese naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden, and some disquiet in Indian circles. Chinese naval penetration further south among other Indian Ocean island and littoral states has become noticeable. Mauritius has long been within India’s sphere, in part because of its Indian-majority population, yet China’s diplomatic presence has been noticed there by New Delhi.\(^79\) India’s privileged security links with Mozambique, including its 2006 Defence Cooperation Agreement and agreed patrolling of Mozambique waters, are also being brought into question by China’s growing presence in Mozambique.

Not only does this Chinese penetration of all quadrants of the Indian Ocean provide a degree of maritime encirclement of India’s coastlines and challenge
Indian hopes for pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean, it also surrounds the US stronghold at Diego Garcia. Thus, “the PLAN could under certain scenarios develop something closer to the presence and power-projection capabilities necessary to contest the Indian Ocean . . . as a peer competitor to India or the United States in the Indian Ocean.” This common challenge is why the US is welcoming India’s growing role in the Indian Ocean. The US 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review accepted that “as its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond.” India is following a two-fold approach in response to this challenge from China. First, India is increasing its own presence in the Indian Ocean. Second, India is also pushing forward its presence (the Quadrennial Defense Review’s “and beyond”), into China’s equivalent, the South China Sea and into the western Pacific alongside the US and Japan, much to China’s concern. It is to the Pacific, and Sino-US competition there, that we can turn.

Sino-US competition in the Pacific Ocean

Sino-US competition in the Pacific Ocean is centered geopolitically on the western Pacific. Competition and friction in China-US military relations were noticeable in the way various maritime issues erupted during 2009 to 2012. These included the USS Impeccable Incident of March 2009, the cutting of military-to-military links during 2010–11 (in the wake of US arms sales to Taiwan), diplomatic spats over their respective “interests” in the South China Sea in 2010, US military exercises in the Yellow Sea in September 2010; US joint “activities” in the South China Sea with Vietnam in 2011, as well as more explicit US joint exercises elsewhere around those waters with the Philippines in 2011 and 2012. Chinese suspicions were evident of US balancing against it. The initial attempts by the Obama administration to inject greater engagement into their relations with China, which resulted in perhaps some neglect of India in the first couple of years of his presidency, were replaced by greater robustness towards China and a renewed diplomatic charm offensive towards India. In effect, this renewed the strategic logic underpinning the preceding Bush presidency outreach to India.

At a general level, China’s drive for a blue water navy with offshore oceanic-capabilities is bringing it out away from its earlierrestricted brown water coastal deployment. In geopolitical terms, China’s increasing naval strength is bringing it up against the “first island chain” (diyi daolian), identified in the 1950s by Dean Acheson and Douglas MacArthur as the US “forward defence perimeter,” running from Japan though the Ryukyus and Taiwan down to the Philippines. These concerns were why the PACOM chief Robert Willard warned the Senate Armed Committee in 2011 that China “does seek to restrict or exclude foreign, in particular, U.S., military maritime and air activities in the near seas—an area that roughly...
corresponds to the maritime area from the Chinese mainland out to the first island chain.”84 In 2010, the deployment of Chinese naval units through and beyond the Ryukyu island chain in March (North Sea Fleet) and April (East Sea Fleet) was a significant step forward in such a Chinese drive beyond the first island chain. June 2011 saw further Chinese deployments through the first island chain, their naval units passing between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako.

PRC sources have argued that “to make a breakthrough into the chain is also the first step for Chinese Navy to achieve its blue dream;” given that “the first island chain has long acted as the first protective screen for the US maritime hegemony in the region . . . to prevent Chinese Navy from going blue and enhancing its clout in the Pacific waters.”85 The PRC perspective is geopolitically-nuanced, “the island chains in the western Pacific cannot [be allowed to] block China from entering the open waters . . . the US must allow China space.”86 For PRC-based scholars like Zhang Zenmu, the US was attempting “containment of China’s sea power from expanding out onto the Western Pacific,” in which “China’s command of the sea is currently limited by the ‘First Island Chain,’ a sea zone established by the United States.”87 Zhang considered this US position as unsustainable in the long run since China’s own maritime drive would change the balance of power, leaving a situation in which “China would control the eastern and western sides of the First Island Chain.”88 Amid these Chinese naval deployments in 2010 to waters east of Taiwan, PRC figures argued that “Taiwan, however, seems to be one of the more corroded [geopolitical] links in this island chain;” and that “the U.S. political elite should no longer view Taiwan as part of its sphere of influence in the western Pacific or as a strategic lever against China.”89

Further out, deeper into the western Pacific, is another geopolitical zone of encounter between the US and China. Here, running south from Japan are the Japanese-held Bonin Islands, and the US-held Northern Marianas, Guam, Palau and the Carolines. They are what China calls the “second island chain” (di’ér daolian). The appearance of Chinese submarines in the waters off Guam (US sovereign territory) in December 2004 generated immediate US concerns of Chinese naval deployments creeping to these further lines. This is the longer-term challenge in US eyes; what the Pentagon considers as “Beijing’s desire to protect and advance its maritime interests up to and beyond the second island chain.”90 In 2009, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullin, publicly warned “I am concerned about . . . their [China’s] clear shift of focus from a ground-centric force to a naval- and air-centric force that seems to, now, push off-island, if you will, beyond the first island chain and out to the second island chain.”91

Meanwhile, on its immediate southern flank, China claims various rights over most of the South China Sea, an area identified in 2009 by some PRC figures like Dai Bingguo as a “core interest” (hexin liyi) to be secured through its maritime
forces. As a counterpoise, in 2010 the US raised the South China Sea matter at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as a matter of US “national interest,” much to China’s ire.

China’s claims in the South China Sea, and its growing deployment of strength and assertiveness, were again raised at the ARF in 2011 by the US (and India) as a threat to its own freedom to navigate and deploy in what it considers to be international waters. The discovery of Chinese nuclear submarine facilities at Sanya in 2009 caused concern in US (and Indian) circles. In a practical vein, the US has also (like India) been reinforcing naval links with South China Sea states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. The US also (like India), continues to actively deploy into the South China Sea for unilateral and bilateral exercises of strength, as with the friendly visit to Vietnam of the nuclear aircraft carrier USS George Washington in 2010 and 2011, as well as the USS Blue Ridge in 2011. US concerns with Chinese claims in the South China Sea have strengthened US cooperation with India in the approaches to it, namely the Strait of Malacca and in turn the wider Indian Ocean.

### Indo-US cooperation in the Indian Ocean

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, India’s political alignment with the Soviet Union, coupled with its distrust of US arrival at Diego Garcia in 1971, left the US and India as “estranged democracies.” The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 removed that particular Cold War impediment, and gave way during the 1990s to the gradual growth of US-India security cooperation. India’s rise is seen in Washington as being in US interests; democracy and anti-terrorism being two explicit planks of common interest, and with mutual concerns about China as implicit but apparent. As one Indian analyst put it; “a strong relationship with the United States not only balances off China but forces Beijing to behave in a way that is more acceptable to Indian interests.” The same logic, and benefits, also applies to the US.

Maritime cooperation between India and the US was flagged with the initiation of the bilateral Malabar naval exercises in 1992. This was also flagged with the downgrading of the Diego Garcia issue as a bone of contention between them. Admittedly, in the wake of India’s nuclear test explosions, the Malabar exercises were suspended from 1998–2001. However, US-Indian military cooperation rapidly revived post-9/11. From April–September 2002, India formally took over from the US navy in escorting US ships though the Strait of Malacca into the Bay of Bengal, thereby freeing the US navy up for deployments further westwards against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Repetition of such cooperation was envisaged for the future by another commentator, Iskander Rehman, who speculated on an “Indo-Pacific Future”: 
In the unhappy event of a Sino-US conflict breaking out in the Western Pacific, India could be eventually called upon to provide a stabilising, flanking presence west of the Malacca Straits, ensuring the safety of sea-lanes of communications while American naval strength is concentrated elsewhere. It is through such initiatives, which focus on shared concerns and perceived threats, that the Indo-US strategic partnership will reveal its true potential.


In this setting of renewed security convergence, the US-India *Malabar* naval exercises were renewed in 2002. These exercises progressed from small scale basic passing manoeuvres among naval vessels and replenishment-at-sea drills in 2002, to larger scale anti-submarine (China-centric?) exercises in 2003, with mutual deployment of aircraft carriers from both sides in 2005 serving as a visible demonstration of mutual combined power projection potentiality. The *Malabar-2* exercises held in September 2007 were important for two reasons. First, they were not held in the western zone of the Indian Ocean, as previously was the case with the *Malabar* exercises. Instead, they were held in the eastern zone, in the Bay of Bengal. Second, they involved a greater range of participants; in which elements of the Japanese, Australian and Singapore navy joined the main Indian (eight warships, again including the aircraft carrier INS Viraat) and US (thirteen warships, including the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk) elements. Bilateral US-India Malabar formats were followed in October 2008 in the Arabian Sea, and again there in April 2010. Indian commentary was plain enough on the significance of *Malabar 2010*: “it became clear the two countries [India and the US] would further cooperate in the Indian Ocean to counter the rise of China in the years to come.” The *Malabar 2012* exercises were held in the Bay of Bengal in April 2012.

Smaller scale, but equally widely located *Salvex* exercises have been held between the US and India navies since 2005. They have ranged over the Arabian Sea (in 2005), Bay of Bengal (in 2011), and as shall be seen in the Pacific (in 2012). It is to Indo-US cooperation in the Pacific that we can turn.

**Indo-US cooperation in the Pacific**

The significance of the September 2007 US-India naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal was that it formed *Malabar-2*, called -2 because *Malabar-1* exercises had been conducted in the western Pacific earlier that year in April 2007 between US and Indian naval units. Such India-US *Malabar* naval exercises
have also involved the Japanese navy in 2007, 2009, and 2010; all were conducted in western Pacific waters near the “forward defense perimeter” (US) or “first island chain” (China). The Malabar 2011 exercise remained a bilateral exercise between the US and India, Japan being unable to attend as originally planned due the disasters (natural and nuclear) that had struck it in 2011. Malabar 2011 took place in the western Pacific, east of the Luzon Strait, and involved the American Seventh Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge as well as five powerful Indian warships. It generated Chinese media comment on Malabar 2011 being an “anti-China military block.”

India has also been drawn further into other US-led operations further afield in the Pacific. Indian officers participated with the US navy in the Habu Nag amphibious landing simulation exercises for the East China Sea in September 2010, to Chinese concern. The Indian Navy accepted the invitation to send observers for America’s Valiant Shield exercises off Guam in 2006. Indian naval officials joined US naval personnel in Hawaii for the Salvex exercises in Hawaii in February 2012. It is of some significance that whereas India was invited as an official observer to the US-organized Rimpac naval exercises off Hawaii in 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010, China was not. Rimpac 2012 saw direct Indian military participation juxtaposed with continuing Chinese absence, although China does look set to be invited to Rimpac 2014. US commentators on Rimpac 2012 noted its Indo-Pacific character: “we’re starting to look at the Indian and Pacific oceans as a single theater, if you will, and that clearly underscores the importance of India.”

Other elements of India’s armed forces have been sent into the Pacific. In September 2006, India flew in officers and soldiers to Hawaii for Operation Yudh Abhyas “Preparing for War,” bilateral bi-annual cooperation repeated in Hawaii in 2008 and Alaska in 2010. Operation Cope Thunder similarly saw Indian Air Force units flying across the Pacific in February 2004 to take part in joint exercises with American units in Alaska, which were followed up in its successor the Red Flag exercises there in 2008.

Although India’s arrival in Pacific Asia is generally not officially described or admitted in China-related terms, Indian commentators are ready, rightly enough, to see its China-related rationale:

In this great game, competition and rivalry with China has become a significant component. . . . A critical review of India’s Look East strategy as part of her overall foreign policy in Asia reveals that one of the important objectives behind this strategy is to play a new balancing game against China in the Southeast Asian and the Asia-Pacific region.

Such a balancing game involves closer cooperation with the US, with their respective naval assets a significant mechanism for practical cooperation. In looking east, “the key to the Indian Navy’s new engagement of Asia lies in its
assessments of and interactions with the US and Chinese navies.”\textsuperscript{102} The assessment of China by India reflects Stephen Walt’s \textit{balance of threat} logic (with its criteria of aggregate power, offensive military capabilities, geographical proximity, and perceived offensive intentions); and from that a significantly higher level of cooperation with the US navy than with the Chinese navy.

American politicians have been vocal in welcoming India’s arrival in the western Pacific. For Obama it was simple in 2010; “we want India to . . . ‘look East,’ we want India to ‘engage East’ . . . the United States and India can partner.”\textsuperscript{103} Similarly, for Secretary of State Clinton, it was a question in 2011 of converging security interests:

India straddling the waters from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean is, with us, a steward of these waterways. We are both deeply invested in shaping the future of the region that they connect . . . The United States intends to collaborate with India . . . and high on this list should be maritime security.\textsuperscript{104}

The explicit stated aspect of this envisaged maritime security was the threat from piracy and jihadist destabilization of sea-routes, but the implicit unstated aspect was keeping the South China Sea open from Chinese domination, and generally constraining China’s blue water naval expansion in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Indian commentators saw Clinton’s speech as showing that “Washington is aspiring for a closer maritime partnership with the Indian Navy in the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca and finally the Pacific Ocean.”\textsuperscript{105} Both India and the US pushed in December 2011 for maritime security to be discussed at the East Asia Summit, and for international law to be applied in the South China Sea, code word for their similar criticisms of China’s position.

\textbf{Conclusions}

What this article has shown is what Indian and American commentators like Hemant Singh and Karl Inderfurth have jointly recognized:

Keeping pace with this ongoing shift in economic and strategic clout, the regional nomenclature is changing from East Asia to the Asia-Pacific and now to the Indo-Pacific . . . the Indo-Pacific as an inter-linked and integrated geo-political and geo-economic space from India to the Pacific.\textsuperscript{106}

Both the Indian and US leaderships evoke closer cooperation across such Indo-Pacific maritime reaches. In their 2010 \textit{Joint Statement} the US and Indian leaders referred to how India and the US had a “shared vision for peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and the Pacific region.”\textsuperscript{107}
To repeat, in terms of security, the explicit issue is the challenge from transna-
tional international terrorism, but the implicit issue remains the state-level chal-
lenge of China.

Relations between the US and Indian navies are now close, a firmly embedded
part of their wider military-security relationship, itself part of their still wider pol-
itical relationship. Admittedly India still is shying away from some elements. On
the one hand, India sent a temporary liaison officer to PACOM headquarters in the
wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, but yet almost a decade after its first
broaching by Washington, New Delhi is still to post a mid-level officer on a per-
manent basis to PACOM. India remains ready to officially stress “our desire for
strategic autonomy ... India is too large a country to be dovetailed in alliance
type relationships.”108 Thus, “at the very point defense interoperability assumes
the trappings of quasi-informal military alignment New Delhi tends to reflexively
shrink from such engagement.”109 India-US cooperation remains extensive but ad-
hoc. New Delhi remains averse to signing a Communication Interoperability and
Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMoA) that would facilitate regularized
tactical communications system interoperability, and it has also stepped back from
initialing a mutual Logistics Support Agreement (LSA). The result is that “prac-
tical arms-length collaboration with, as opposed to integrating within ... appears
to be the ceiling to such bilateral defense cooperation.”110

Moreover, both India and the US are involved in some engagement with
China, and do not want to restrict their relations with China to just an antagonistic
balancing against it. Both India and the US continue to say that their own coop-
erative convergence with each other is not aimed at China. However, that is
perhaps to be expected, since any such announcement could antagonize China
all the more. In strategic terms, as a concept and policy, hedging includes an
element of engagement, exemplified in the March 2012 announcement of a Mar-
ritime Dialogue mechanism between India and China, which involved Indo-Pacific
issues in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

Hedging though also includes balancing. This can be with regard to internal
strengthening (building up your own strength), which is precisely what the US is
doing in the western Pacific and what India is doing in the Indian Ocean. Mean-
while, as a concept and as a policy, hedging also includes external balancing,
which is what in a China-centric fashion India and the US are doing with each
other on the maritime stretches of the Indo-Pacific. However, such insurance
elements of US-India balancing is not hard balancing (John Mearsheimer’s offen-
sive realism) in the explicit containment Cold War sense where the Soviet Union
was the named foe for the US. Rather, it is a post-Cold War softer balancing of
understandings and arrangements of an implicit rather than explicit nature—but
external balancing it is on the part of the US and India in the Indo-Pacific, their
zone for strategic convergence.
Notes


For example Singapore’s then Senior Minister, Goh Chok Tong’s talk that “with India’s rise it will be increasingly less tenable to regard South Asia and East Asia as distinct strategic theatres interacting only at the margins,” “Reconceptualising East Asia,” January 27, 2005, http://www.isasnus.org/events/addresses/1.htm.


Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), p.38. UK military planners also referred to the Indo-Pacific theatre of operations in the fight against Japan, which covered both the Bay of Bengal and the Western Pacific.


Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”.

Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”.


Anindya Bakrie, “US Pivot to the Region has Changed the Game,” Jakarta Globe, January 3, 2012. Also Vibhanshu Shekhar, “Rising Indonesia and Indo-Pacific World,” Issue Brief (ICWA), September 26, 2012 for Indonesia-related “discourse on the Indo-Pacific,” in which “the new geo-political construct [Indo-Pacific] constitutes a much more integrated unit of analysis, when compared to rather huge and unwieldy classification of Asia-Pacific.”


“China’s Aircraft Carrier Begins Sea Trials,” *Times of India*, 10 August 2011.


Rajat Pandit, “China’s Stepped up Moves in Maldives Worry India,” *Times of India*, October 10, 2011.


For example, Li Hongmei, “India’s ‘Look East Policy’ Means ‘Look to Encircle China’?,” *People’s Daily*, October 27, 2010.


Li, “Can We Manage Without Carrier?,” *People’s Daily*, April 22, 2010.


Zhang, “Back to Yalta,” p.54.


Sandeep Dikshit, “Hillary’s Leadership Call to India not Aimed at Pakistan,” The Hindu, August 9, 2011.


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