

MP-IDSA *Background*

India-United States Maritime Collaboration

Anurag Bisen

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Summary

The Indian Navy has been playing a maritime leadership role in IOR. Ensuring maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific region is a key security imperative and one of the key objectives of India's engagement with the US. Although the US sees India as an important bulwark in its bid to contain China and supports India's lead role in the IOR, a considerable gap remains between its words and deeds. The US needs to come to terms with India's strategic compulsions. For realising a free and open Indo-Pacific, the US ought to accord primacy to India in IOR, in exchange for India's supporting role in Southeast Asia, and beyond. India, on its part, would have to walk the extra mile to shoulder its increased responsibilities in the IOR, within the ambit of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean, spread over an area of 68.56 million square kilometres, is central to India's maritime interests and concerns. India's location gives it a vantage point in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India's size, trade links and its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) link its security environment directly with the extended neighbourhood.¹ In a globalised world, these strategic economic factors impose an increasingly larger responsibility on India.² Several extra-regional nations look up to India as the first responder in a calamity, a net provider of security in the region, and seek collaborative partnerships with India in the maritime domain.³

The Indian Navy (IN) has been a catalyst for peace, tranquillity and stability in the IOR.⁴ It has been playing a maritime leadership role in the IOR due to its multi-dimensional capabilities and active presence in the region.⁵ Ensuring maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific region is key security imperative and one of the key objectives of India's engagement with the United States (US) and other partners.⁶

India and the US, the largest democracies of the world, have a strong convergence on bilateral, regional and global issues, resulting in relations that have now evolved into a strategic partnership of global significance. Defence is a major pillar of the India–US strategic partnership. The two countries conduct more bilateral exercises with each other than with any other country.⁷ The IN and the US Navy (USN) have conducted 'MALABAR' since 1992.⁸ The aggregate worth of India's defence-related acquisitions from the US is more than US\$15 billion. The two countries signed the "New Framework for India–US Defence Relations" in 2005, which was updated and extended for 10 years in 2015. In June 2016, the US recognised India as a "Major Defence Partner", enabling technology sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners.⁹ India has since been elevated to Tier I of the Strategic Trade Authorisation (STA) license, an exception that will enable interaction in advanced and sensitive technologies.¹⁰

India has also signed four enabling/foundational agreements for military cooperation with the US—the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) of 2002; Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016;

¹ "Annual Report 2011–12", Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

² "Annual Report 2009–10", Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

³ Anurag Bisen, "India–Russia Cooperation in Indian Ocean Region, Arctic and Russian Far East", MP-IDSA Policy Brief, 6 December 2021.

⁴ "Annual Report 2009–10", no. 2.

⁵ "Annual Report 2011–12", no. 1.

⁶ "Annual Report 2017–18", Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

⁷ "Brief on India–U.S. Relations", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 2017.

⁸ "Annual Report 2013–14", Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

⁹ "Brief on India–U.S. Relations", no. 7.

¹⁰ "India Moved to Tier-1 of Department of Commerce's Strategic Trade Authorisation Licence Exception", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 31 July 2018.

Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018; and, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020, thereby paving the way for seamless flow of information, greater interoperability and enhanced cooperation between the armed forces.

The IN has been actively working towards capacity building and capability enhancement of navies of friendly countries in IOR. India has been providing hardware and platforms, which includes ships and aircraft for the EEZ surveillance. The IN has also been instrumental in the development of the maritime infrastructure of friendly nations and has contributed towards developing operational and technical skills of personnel of friendly countries. Material assistance in terms of providing spares, automatic identification system (AIS) equipment, ship handling simulators, ammunition, communication equipment, coastal surveillance radars, boats, etc., to navies/maritime forces in the region has gone a long way in strengthening India's stature and bilateral ties.

India has also been expanding its outreach in the IOR by improving maritime domain awareness (MDA), and extending the operational reach of the IN through regular mission-based deployments. As part of its foreign cooperation initiatives, the IN presently carries out bilateral naval exercises with 14 navies and coordinated patrols with four, most of which are in the Indo-Pacific.

India in US Maritime Vision

Since the Shangri-La Dialogue of 2009, the US has been an active proponent of India's role as the "net security provider" (NSP) in IOR.¹¹ It has advocated the NSP status for India in IOR in many of its strategic policy articulations. The 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*¹² and the 2015 *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*¹³ are two such examples. Washington has also supported India's role in IOR during its official interactions.¹⁴ According to the US' 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR),

¹¹ In 2009, then US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates had said that "We look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond..." See Pradeep Chauhan, "**India as a Net Security-Provider in the Indian Ocean and Beyond**", Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), 29 April 2016.

¹² The 2010 report stated that "As its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond." See "**Quadrennial Defense Review Report**", US Department of Defense, February 2010.

¹³ The 2015 Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy sought to reinforce India's maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the IOR and beyond. The document saw a strategic convergence between India's Act East policy and the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, and sought to reinforce India's maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the IOR and beyond. It recommended a three-pronged approach to maritime cooperation with India: (i) maintaining a shared vision on maritime security issues, (ii) upgrading the bilateral maritime security partnership, and (iii) collaborating to build regional partner capacity and improve the regional maritime domain awareness. See "**The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy: Achieving U.S. National Security Objectives in a Changing Environment**", US Department of Defense, 14 August 2015.

¹⁴ "**Readout of Secretary Panetta's Meeting with the Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh and Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon**", Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc., ProQuest, 5 June 2012.

the two countries “continue to use their deepening relationship to build new partnerships within and beyond the Indo-Pacific”.¹⁵

The *United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (SFIP), which was approved in February 2018 and declassified in January 2021, provides an insight into the US’ assumption of India’s role in the Indo-Pacific. The document envisions that “A strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to China”. The US also wishes that “India remains preeminent in South Asia and takes the leading role in maintaining Indian Ocean security...”. Towards achieving the abovementioned desired end states, the US objective towards India and South Asia is to “accelerate India’s rise and capacity to serve as a net provider of security and Major Defense Partner...”.¹⁶

Specifically relevant to the maritime domain, in the declassified SFIP, are the US actions to “build a stronger foundation for defence cooperation and interoperability; increase cooperation on shared regional security concerns and encourage India’s engagement beyond the Indian Ocean region; build regional support for US–India common principles in the Indian Ocean, including unimpeded commerce, transparent infrastructure-debt practices, and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes; partner with India on maritime domain awareness; expand the US–India intelligence sharing and analytic exchanges for creating a more robust intelligence partnership”.¹⁷

The US sees India as an important bulwark in its bid to impede China in its tracks. It would not be incorrect to assume that India is the lynchpin of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, as a vanguard to counter China’s activities in the IOR. The elevation of the status of Quad, designation of US Pacific Command (PACOM) to INDOPACOM, and broadening the scope of the Malabar naval exercise by including Japan and Australia are some of the obvious pointers to India’s indispensability for the success of US’ Indo-Pacific strategy.

India–US Maritime Dissonance

India’s intent to be the prime security guarantor in IOR has been widely articulated over the last decade, including by former Defence Minister A.K. Antony in 2011¹⁸ and

¹⁵ **“Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region”**, US Department of Defense, 1 June 2019.

¹⁶ Its desired end state is to see that India’s preferred partner on security issues is the US and that the two countries ‘cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter Chinese influence in South and South East Asia and other regions of mutual concern’. See **“U. S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific”**, The White House Archives, January 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Former Defence Minister A.K. Antony was addressing senior officers of the Indian Navy and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) at the beginning of the three-day Naval Commander's Conference. He stated that the Indian Navy has been mandated to be a ‘Net Security Provider’ to the island nations in IOR. See **“Indian Navy-Net Security Provider to Island Nations in IOR: Antony”**, Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 12 October 2011.

then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013.¹⁹ Later, the IN in its 2015 Maritime Security Strategy pledged to undertake the task of serving as “provider of net security in the region”.²⁰

More recently, in February 2021, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reiterated India’s role as NSP in IOR.²¹ In August 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while chairing a UN Security Council session on maritime security, asserted that “India’s role in the Indian Ocean has been as a Net Security Provider”.²²

Even though the US supports India’s lead role in the IOR, a considerable gap remains between its words and deeds. This could be due to several factors, some of which have been discussed below.

Differing Visions: India has adopted an Indo-Pacific vision that is different from the US’ containment of China approach. As stated by Prime Minister Modi in 2018, India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific “stands for a free, open, inclusive region...It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it”. He further stated that “India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country.”²³

The geographic scope of India’s Indo-Pacific vision too differs from that of the US. The original US vision of the region stretched from the west coast of India to the western shores of the US,²⁴ same as the jurisdiction of the US INDOPACOM. It does not include the Western Indian Ocean and East African littoral, both part of India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific Region.²⁵ These areas fall under the responsibility of the US CENTCOM and AFRICOM, respectively,²⁶ which will require India to engage with three US commands as part of its own security and other initiatives in IOR.

¹⁹ Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was quoted while addressing a gathering after laying the foundation stone of the Indian National Defence University (INDU) on 23 May 2013 at Binola in Gurgaon, Haryana. He articulated that “Our defence cooperation has grown and today we have unprecedented access to high technology, capital and partnerships. We have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond.” See **“PM’s Speech at the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony for the Indian National Defence University at Gurgaon”**, Prime Minister’s Office, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 23 May 2013.

²⁰ **“Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”**, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2, Indian Navy, October 2015.

²¹ **“Open Seas and Respect for International Law Essential for Security for IOR: Shri Rajnath Singh”**, 4 February 2021.

²² **“PM’s Remarks at the UNSC High-Level Open Debate on ‘Enhancing Maritime Security: A Case for International Cooperation’”**, 9 August 2021.

²³ **“PM’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”**, PM India, 1 June 2018.

²⁴ See “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report”, 2019, no. 15. In the February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Indo-Pacific is defined as the region stretching from the Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean. However, the AOR of the US combatant commands remains unchanged. See **“Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”**, The White House, February 2022.

²⁵ See “PM’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”, no. 23.

²⁶ See **“US COCOM World Map”**, US Army Reserve.

Pakistan Factor: This division of IOR between three US commands not only prevents a unity of command, control and coordination from the US side, it also dilutes maritime security efforts in the region. The other irritant is that the CENTCOM, always commanded by a US Army General, unlike the INDOPACOM, which is commanded by an Admiral, is perceived to be closer and more aligned to Pakistan, both in geographical as well as relational sense.²⁷ This is illustrated by active Pakistani participation in the US-led multinational military initiatives such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in the Northern Indian Ocean.

The CMF is a 34-nation multinational maritime partnership, under the command of the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the USN Fifth Fleet, all three co-located at the US Naval Support Activity Bahrain. Its main focus areas are counter-narcotics, counter-smuggling, suppressing piracy, encouraging regional cooperation, engaging with regional partners to improve overall security and stability, and promoting a safe maritime environment.²⁸ Three combined task forces (CTFs) operate under the CMF.²⁹

These CTFs are commanded by officers of constituent nations on a rotational basis for a period of four months. Pakistan is an active participant in CTF 150 and CTF 151 with regular participation of the Pakistan Navy warship and its personnel. Pakistan has held the command of CTF 150 and 151 a record number of 11 and nine times, the maximum among the constituent nations, including the US.³⁰ Although IN is not a member of the CMF, it has been actively involved in combating maritime piracy in the region on its own and in coordination with the navies of other countries. The IN has deployed one warship continuously in the area since October 2008.³¹ India has also been actively involved in peacekeeping operations in Africa under the UN mandate.³²

Contradictory Posturing: The US has also been undertaking the Freedom of Navigation (FON) Programme,³³ consisting of complementary diplomatic and operational efforts since 1979. These assertions mean that the US does not acquiesce to the excessive maritime claims of other nations, and thus prevents such claims from being accepted in international law.

²⁷ Author's perception.

²⁸ See "[Combined Maritime Forces](#)".

²⁹ (a) CTF 150 (Maritime Security Operations outside the Arabian Gulf), (b) CTF 151 (Counter-Piracy) and (c) CTF 152 (Maritime Security Operations inside the Arabian Gulf). Ibid.

³⁰ See "[CTF Command History](#)".

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Annual Report 2017–18", no. 6.

³³ The US catalogues maritime claims and entitlements of nations around the world with respect to its understanding of international law as reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It considers attempts by coastal States to unlawfully restrict the rights and freedoms of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the sea as "excessive maritime claims" and that these are inconsistent with international law and pose a threat to the legal foundation of the rules-based international order. Even though the US has not ratified UNCLOS, for the benefit of all nations it has undertaken to challenge such unlawful claims.

The FON programme, which comes under the US Department of Defense (DoD), is also known as “FON assertions”, “FON operations” or FONOPs. The US avers that these FONOPs are undertaken in an *even-handed, principled and unbiased*, equally against *allies, partners, and competitors*. The US further claims that *FONOPs are not focused on any particular claimant, and they are not executed in response to current events*³⁴ and that “FONOPs are not about one country, nor are they about making political statements”.³⁵

An analysis of the US FONOPs against India since 1979 is illustrative. It lays bare the US claims of undertaking them in an unbiased manner equally against allies, partners, and competitors.

The US has undertaken FONOPs against India to protest against India’s regulations of: (i) security jurisdiction claimed in the 24 nm contiguous zone, (ii) prior notification/authorisation for foreign warships to enter the territorial sea, and (iii) requirement for prior consent/authorisation for military exercises or manoeuvres in the EEZ.

India figures at the fifth-highest number (against a total of 65 countries) of mentions (19) in the annual FONOP reports since 1979, at par with China. The only countries that have greater mentions are Iran (25), the Philippines (23), the Maldives (22), Cambodia and Oman (20). India’s neighbours Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are at seven each. The US allies Japan (6) and the Republic of Korea (4) figure at the bottom. The US has not undertaken a single FONOP against Australia and Canada since 1979, even though it categorises certain claims made by them as unlawful.³⁶ Similarly, even though Taiwan’s claims are identical to China in the SCS, it appears only in 11 Annual FON reports against 19 for China.

The above analysis is to demonstrate the dissonance in US’ policy towards India in the maritime domain. On the one hand, it wants to engage with India for “promoting the shared principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific”,³⁷ and on the other, it undertakes FONOPs against India on the same level as that of the foe against which it seeks alignment with India.

Broadening Scope for Collaboration

To broaden the scope of collaboration, India and the US will need to include benign aspects of maritime security such as tackling illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, providing advisories to fishermen on potential fishing zones, weather

³⁴ **“Annual Freedom of Navigation Report Fiscal Year 2021”**, US Department of Defense Report to Congress, December 2021.

³⁵ **“7th Fleet Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation”**, US 7th Fleet, United States Navy, 7 April 2021.

³⁶ **“Australia–United States Navy”**, US Navy Judge Advocate General’s Corps, United States Navy, April 2019; and **“Canada–United States Navy”**, US Navy Judge Advocate General’s Corps, United States Navy, March 2017.

³⁷ “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report”, 2019, no. 15.

and ocean state forecasting, search and rescue, oil spill response, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), ocean observations, to name a few.

India and the US have signed an MoU for Technical Cooperation in Earth Observations and Earth Sciences, further extended till November 2030. The collaboration has achieved significant outcomes such as the fundamental understanding of Indian Ocean dynamics and ocean-atmosphere interactions that affect the weather and climate, real-time forecasting of the tropical cyclones over the North Indian Ocean, sub-seasonal and seasonal predictions and improved climate forecasts, 10 days global wave forecast on daily basis and predictive capabilities for fisheries and HABs.³⁸

Underwater Domain Awareness: Another potential area of cooperation is underwater domain awareness (UDA).³⁹ The US is considered to be the most advanced country in UDA, with respect to expertise and technology, in active as well as passive underwater surveillance and detection systems. It has a global network of sound surveillance system (SOSUS) facilities designated as the Ocean Surveillance Information System (OSIS). Reportedly, the US and Japan have jointly constructed the Fish Hook undersea surveillance system to prevent Chinese ballistic missile submarines to proceed undetected from either the East China Sea (ECS) or the South China Sea (SCS) into the open Pacific Ocean to be in a position to attack the continental US.⁴⁰

India's "Deep Ocean Mission" programme, under the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), approved by the Union Cabinet's Committee on Economic Affairs on 16 June 2021, seeks to explore the deep ocean for resources and develop deep sea technologies for sustainable use of ocean resources. Some of the major components of the programme such as the Development of Technologies for Deep Sea Mining, Manned Submersible, and Deep Ocean Survey and Exploration are recommended for collaboration with the US.⁴¹

³⁸ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), USA is the partner agency with India's Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES). Five agreements are active in the field of Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs), Operational Wave Modelling and Assimilation, Research Moored Array for African–Asian–Australian Monsoon Analysis and Prediction (RAMA), Monsoon Desk, and Tropical Cyclones. See "**International Collaborations: Indo-USA**", Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India.

³⁹ The UDA is a subset of MDA. It could be said to include not only positional information about submarines but also oceanographic information from the water-surface to the seabed. UDA, to a large extent, depends on information about oceanographic parameters which may include, inter alia, bathymetry, ambient acoustic data, and bottom profiling and water column characterisation such as temperature and salinity profiles. Predictive oceanographic models based on long-term observations are also important for planning operations.

⁴⁰ Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, *The Tools of Owatsumi: Japan's Ocean Surveillance and Coastal Defence Capabilities*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 2015.

⁴¹ "**Cabinet Approves Deep Ocean Mission**", Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 16 June 2021.

Intelligence Sharing: The US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada are also part of the five-nation Five Eyes (FVEY) network.⁴² India does not have a formal intelligence sharing agreement with the US. However, with the signing of the four foundational agreements, decks have been cleared for the flow of classified information and intelligence between the two countries.

First India–US Ocean Dialogue, aimed at promoting sustainable development of the blue economy, was held in 2017.⁴³ The two countries have also held two rounds of Maritime Security Dialogue, last in 2017, in US.⁴⁴ However, subsequent editions have not been held.

Collaboration with Littorals: The US Navy also conducts Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise series, its oldest and longest-running regional exercise in the South and Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ Similarly, the USN conducts Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) exercises that began in 2002 as “Southeast Asia Cooperation against Terrorism”.⁴⁶ IN participated in the 2021 edition of SEACAT exercises with navies of 20 other Indo-Pacific nations in Singapore.⁴⁷

These exercises enhance USN’s presence and familiarity with the operating environment in the region, on the one hand, and benefit the smaller maritime nations from exposure to USN’s planning, command and control and tactical procedures on the other.

A collaborative effort on the lines of SEACAT and CARAT exercises, involving navies of the IOR littorals, between the US and Indian navies, with the latter in the lead, will not only aid and augment the overall maritime security in the region, but will also cement India’s role as a provider of net security.

⁴² See **“Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC)”**, The National Counterintelligence and Security Center, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, United States of America.

⁴³ **“Goa Hosts Inaugural India–US Ocean Dialogue Today”**, *The Indian Express*, 1 November 2017.

⁴⁴ **“Second Round of India–US Maritime Security Dialogue”**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 May 2017.

⁴⁵ Held under the US INDOPACOM and conducted by their Seventh Fleet, the CARAT exercises commenced in 1995 with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand as original partners. Brunei, Cambodia and Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia and Bangladesh (since 2011), and Sri Lanka in IOR, were added subsequently, Sri Lanka being the latest addition in 2021. The mission of the CARAT exercises is to promote regional security cooperation, maintain and strengthen maritime partnerships and enhance interoperability among the participants. The exercises cover areas such as maritime interception, information sharing, anti-piracy, anti-smuggling, combined and vessel Boarding, search & seizure (VBSS) operations at Sea. See Gregory Johnson, **“25th Anniversary of CARAT Comes to an End”**, US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), 20 December 2019.

⁴⁶ Greg Adams, **“SEACAT: A Southeast Asian Multilateral Powerhouse”**, *PAOM News*, US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), United States Navy, 8 October 2015.

⁴⁷ The multilateral maritime security exercise brings together nations, inter agencies, the international and non-government organisations and is designed to provide mutual support and a common goal to address crises, contingencies, and illegal activities in the maritime domain using standardised tactics, techniques, and procedures. See **“Indian Navy Takes Part in US Navy-led SEACAT Exercises with 19 Other Indo-Pacific Nation in Singapore”**, *News On AIR*, 13 August 2021.

Conclusion

The US' 2019 IPSR did not refer to India's role as the net provider of security in IOR. Instead, it clubbed India with the other IOR littorals to state that the US "seeks opportunities to broaden and strengthen partnerships with India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal to respond to shared regional challenges". Further, the IPSR laid emphasis on trilateral mechanisms to maximise individual contributions to regional peace and security. These included the US, Japan and Australia; US, ROK and Japan; and the US, India and Japan.⁴⁸ It is felt that restraint by India, to be completely drawn into the US fold, has apparently led to a recalibration of the US strategy.

It is also surmised that the creation of a new trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS),⁴⁹ focused on the Indo-Pacific region, as much as being a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Alliance (WASP), is also due to maintenance of a strategic autonomous stance by India.

The US needs to come to terms with India's strategic compulsions. It is the only country in the Quad that has an unresolved and contested land border with China. Additionally, examples of the US abandonment, such as from Vietnam, Syria and Afghanistan, probably do not inspire much confidence. India, therefore, has little option but to follow a balancing strategy vis-à-vis China. The US must be cognisant of these realities. Therefore, for realising a free and open Indo-Pacific, the US ought to accord primacy to India in IOR, in exchange for India's supporting role in Southeast Asia, and beyond. India, on its part, would have to walk the extra mile to shoulder its increased responsibilities in the IOR, within the ambit of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

⁴⁸ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report", 2019, no. 15.

⁴⁹ "**Background Press Call on AUKUS**", Press Briefings, The White House, 15 September 2021.

About the Author

Capt (IN) Anurag Bisen is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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