

# Re-shaping India-United States Defence Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

by Hemant Krishan Singh and Richard M. Rossow



It is time for the United States to recognise that the Indian Ocean is the next frontline of world geopolitics and the emerging arena for a new “great game”. China’s aggressive inroads into the Indian

Ocean through military bases, port leasing and predatory economics present an imminent strategic challenge as these advances will result in an Indo-Pacific that is less free, less open, less secure and less prosperous for the United States and India.

In the midst of a global power flux, revival of strategic competition, rampant regional rivalries and concerns about the future of a liberal order, India and the United States are well positioned to shape the future together in ways that sustain the interests of both countries.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi meeting the President of the United States of America, Mr. Donald Trump, at the White House in Washington D.C., on June 26, 2017. Source: MEA

The U.S. National Security Strategy describes India as central to America’s Indo-Pacific strategy and an essential component of Indo-Pacific security architecture. This recognition also underscores the

### IN THIS ISSUE

## “Re-shaping India-United States Defence Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”

### Authors:

**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh is Director General, Delhi Policy Group, New Delhi.**

**Mr. Richard M. Rossow is Senior Adviser & Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.**

DPG Policy Brief is produced by the Delhi Policy Group, an independent and autonomous, not for profit think tank which focuses primarily on strategic issues of critical national interest.

In keeping with the growing dynamism of India’s foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India’s broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India’s rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues. DPG does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2018 by the Delhi Policy Group (DPG)



**Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh**

need to meet the core challenge of China's economic and military assertiveness and its manifest desire to create a Sino-centric Asian order. The collapse of ASEAN unity since 2012 has significantly eroded ASEAN centrality in regional security architecture, the more so as China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of conflict.

U.S. efforts to deepen its engagement in the Indian Ocean Region must not merely be intended to draft India into the existing Asia-Pacific security architecture, but also to recognise the growing strategic salience of the Indian Ocean itself. To make an Indian Ocean Region that is as prosperous as East Asia, the United States needs to join hands with India and work more closely with countries in the region to develop a security architecture that underpins free and open trade, preserves sovereignty and is designed for a century in which the Indian Ocean will remain a vital connector of the global economy.

As matters stand today, the United States does not have a robust, consistent footprint in the Indian Ocean. From India's security perspective, the U.S. has virtually opted itself out of central Asia and has only marginal commitments in the Indian Ocean. From America's perspective, India must also progress pending proposals to augment and deepen the defence partnership.



*Malabar 2018: Naval Aviation contingents. Source: Indian Navy.*

Based on the foregoing, we offer the following recommendations for a revamped U.S. vision of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific".

### Enlarge

- The United States needs to understand that India's security interests lie both to its West and East. While America is still trying to turn the clock back to regain lost strategic space in East and Southeast Asia, China is already driving into the Indian Ocean where it aims to establish an overwhelming

presence. There is need for a holistic look at challenges in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

### Engage

- If India is indeed to be a central pillar of the U.S. vision for the Indo-Pacific, it must be more deeply consulted in the development of a U.S. strategy which reflects the interests of both strategic partners. This requires a nuanced broadening from a predominantly East Asia focus driven primarily by U.S. alliances and historical legacies to a "whole of the Indo-Pacific approach" which draws on shared interests to achieve shared objectives.
- The United States and India need to jointly evolve a common strategy that takes into account the challenge China presents in the Indian Ocean as also the need to preserve the role of ASEAN in regional security. A possible three-tier security architecture can be considered:
  - An East Asian tier centered around U.S. alliances;
  - An ASEAN-centric central tier buttressed by a web of Trilaterals and the Quad; and
  - An Indian Ocean-centric tier alongside India (and Australia), where the United States commits to a greater coordination of defence assets, including Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Humanitarian Assistance/ Disaster Relief (HA/DR), and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.



*Malabar 2018. Source: Indian Navy.*

## Expound

- The inability to articulate a wide range of specific actions through a standalone policy proved to be a central weakness of the “Pivot” or “Rebalance” under the previous U.S. administration. Recent pronouncements of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo offer a good start but the United States needs to be more specific on how the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy will alter U.S. presence and partnerships throughout the region. The U.S. and India, along with other Quad partners, also need to elaborate a detailed architecture for regional economic engagement, connectivity initiatives and multi-layered regional security architecture. Any such framework of enhanced India-U.S. (and particularly Quad) cooperation will certainly evoke a strong response from China. Policy makers and strategic communities in Quad capitals must try and mitigate this coercive challenge if the reborn Quad is to enjoy continued traction.

## Conclusions: The Defining Role of United States-India Defence Ties

It is inevitable that despite broad convergences, United States-India relations will continue to face challenges in both the diplomatic and economic domains. It is thus important for both strategic partners to recognise that intensifying discussions on defence cooperation have already led to a much deeper appreciation in Washington of India’s concerns and interests both to its East and its West. The United States must now put forward a clear vision on how the three commands covering the Indian definition of the Indo-Pacific (INDO-PACOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM) can work together on issues of defence cooperation with India.



*The 2018 edition of the Malabar Exercise underway near Guam in the Pacific Ocean. Source: PTI Photo/ Rediff.*

The ten-year framework agreement on bilateral defence cooperation renewed in 2015 already provides the platform for strengthening defence ties from a strategic perspective, while preserving each country’s strategic independence. Recent steps taken by the U.S. administration as well as the Congress to bolster India’s Major Defence Partner status have further incentivised efforts by both sides to keep pace with the evolving security scenario across the Indo-Pacific, especially in the Indian Ocean.

Strengthening maritime domain awareness mechanisms, synergising ISR assets, enhancing anti-submarine warfare capability, improving the efficacy of our novel cooperative mechanism (the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative) and concluding interoperability agreements (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement- COMCASA, and Bilateral Exchange and Cooperative Agreement - BECA) need to be vigorously pursued.

Finally, if there is one big idea that merits consideration as a symbol of India-U.S. defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, it is the enlargement of Malabar into a two-phase exercise next year: the first involving INDO-PACOM in the eastern Indian Ocean, and the second engaging CENTCOM in the western Indian Ocean. This will provide a qualitative boost to mutual confidence in the defence partnership, and show Indian policymakers that the Indian Ocean is, indeed, part of Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

The forthcoming inaugural meeting of the United States-India Ministerial 2+2 Dialogue (September 6, 2018) provides a historic opportunity to lay the foundations of balanced and upgraded bilateral defence and security relations that deliver mutual reinforcement and preserve a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

\*\*\*

### Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, First Floor, India Habitat Centre  
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003  
Phone: +91 11 48202100  
Website: [www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)  
Email: [dg@dpg.org.in](mailto:dg@dpg.org.in); [dgooffice@dpg.org.in](mailto:dgooffice@dpg.org.in)

**DPG POLICY BRIEF**  
**Volume III, Issue 14**  
**August 2018**