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Rebalancing with India



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Following the Indian Prime Minister's US visit, India emerges as a credible partner in Washington's desire to enlist it in balancing the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific

A Chinese surveillance ship tailing the 100,000-tonne US aircraft carrier, *John C. Stennis*, conducting the joint Malabar naval exercise in the Western Pacific with Indian and Japanese warships, brought to the fore the deep schisms that now characterise the larger Indo-Asia-Pacific expanse.

The Indo-Asia-Pacific littoral has emerged as a flashpoint with China's military forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its claims of sovereignty over almost the entire South China and East China Seas, sparking disputes with its neighbours such as Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter informed a House Armed Services Committee hearing on the 2017 defence budget that the Pentagon was "constantly evaluating" Beijing's stance in the South China Sea, citing China's creation and militarisation of artificial islands in the Asia-Pacific region as behaviour that isolated it.

Key Points

1. The U.S. has been keen on leveraging its strategic partnership with India for enlisting it in balancing the rise of China in the larger Indo-Pacific domain
2. Modi signalled the start of a new phase in India-U.S. relations, affirming that strong links can anchor peace, prosperity and stability "from Asia to Africa and from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific"
3. The Asia-Pacific littoral has emerged as a flashpoint with Beijing's claims of sovereignty over almost the entire South China and East China seas sparking disputes with its neighbours
4. The writer has previously noted (*CLAWS Journal, Winter 2012*) that the widening unrest in the Asia-Pacific may eventually compel the validity of a military front on the lines of NATO, founded in 1949 in response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union
5. China's military posturing challenges the U.S., viewing as it does Washington's policy of "pivot" to Asia as an American attempt to curb Chinese influence across the region

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

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“We’re constantly evaluating our relationship with China and China’s behaviour, including the South China Sea, where, I emphasise, we have very serious concerns about their aggressive militarisation there,” Carter said.

Malabar has been conducted almost yearly since 1992 by the Indian Navy (IN) and the US Navy (USN), alternatively off India and in the Western Pacific, but the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) became a permanent partner from the 19th edition of these joint drills held last year off India’s eastern seaboard. Japan’s involvement was objected to by China, which raised the issue even more vigorously when the combatants of the IN, JMSDF and the John C. Stennis Strike Group held their sea phase of Malabar 2016 between June 14 and 17 in the Pacific Ocean that Beijing regards as its territorial waters. The harbour phase of the exercise, which is designed to enhance dynamic cooperation among the participant Navies, was held from June 10 to 13 at the US Fleet Activities Sasebo naval base in southern Japan.

“...we are now starting to see the benefits of Malabar being a trilateral exercise,” noted Capt. Jason Gilbert, the US Naval Attaché to India. “Interoperability is crucial, because if we ever have to work together in a real-world scenario, we will have had the necessary training and preparation to the point where our operations become second nature.”

Perceived to be equipped with high-technology radio signal gathering and processing systems, the surveillance ship of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) that shadowed the Malabar event was the same Dongdiao-class (Type 815) vessel that had trailed RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) 2014, the world’s largest international maritime warfare exercise hosted biennially in and around Hawaii and southern California by the US Pacific Fleet. Curiously, China, on an invitation from the US, had participated for the first time that year in this multinational exercise that has been conducted since

1971, having sent a missile destroyer, missile frigate, supply ship and hospital ship. Chinese officials had maintained then that their scout vessel was within its rights to operate in the region.

By conceding, and not impeding, Beijing’s right to conduct electronic surveillance from within Hawaii’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the US was seeking reciprocity from China so as to dissuade it from obstructing vessels in waters off its coast.

China has, nevertheless, confirmed its participation in RIMPAC 2016, the 25th edition taking place from June 30 to August 04 and involving 45 ships, five submarines, more than 200 aircraft and 25,000 personnel from 27 nations. RIMPAC provides a training opportunity that helps foster collaboration in ensuring security of the maritime commons.

Beijing views Washington’s pursuit of its policy of “pivot” as an American attempt to curb Chinese influence across the region and embolden countries to brazen out China on the maritime disputes. Also termed “rebalance”, the strategy enunciates relocating 60 per cent of the US’ naval assets – up from 50 per cent today – to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020.

China is just as intent on raising its profile in the region, as this energy-hungry export-driven economy that is heavily reliant on raw material and fuel imports seeks to buttress its suzerainty over the regional Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) that are critical to the survival of the entire Asia-Pacific community. It is towards this that it has been creating and militarising the reefs from dredged sands to further its access to marine resources, and has also been extending its blue water presence through the establishment of a major surface fleet and nuclear submarine base on Hainan Island in the South China Sea and through deploying precision cruise and advanced ballistic missiles that can target all current US bases and naval forces in the region.

It is within its “rebalance” initiative that the US looks to Indian support, both political and military. Both sides have underscored the strategic significance of their defence ties and also highlighted the growing strategic convergence between the US “rebalance” and India’s “Look East-Act East” policy, which seeks to intensify New Delhi’s role in an Asia that is at the epicentre of the historic transformation of the world today.

As a demonstration of the operational reach and commitment to the “Look East-Act East” policy of this growing Asian economic, military and geo-political power, a formidable armada of the IN’s Eastern Fleet had steamed out of its base at Visakhapatnam on May 18 for a two and a half months’ deployment to the highly sensitive South China Sea and its littoral. It was this deployment, comprising two home-built guided missile stealth frigates, a fleet support ship, and an indigenous guided missile corvette, that participated in Malabar 2016.

The IN affirmed that in addition to showing the flag in this “region of vital strategic importance to India”, its Eastern Fleet squadron will also make port calls at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, Subic Bay, in the Philippines, Busan in South Korea, Port Klang in Malaysia and Vladivostok in Russia, apart from Sasebo in Japan. The deployment will also conduct PASSEX (Passing Exercise) with each of these host Navies, the aim being to strengthen bilateral ties and enhance naval interoperability.

Apart from the trilateral Malabar exercise, Beijing was also affronted by the first ever trilateral dialogue hosted in June 2015 by India with Japan and Australia to discuss maritime security and freedom of navigation. The US desires joining this group, with USPACOM (US Pacific Command) Commander, Adm Harry B. Harris, stating during his India visit in March that Washington’s addition into this dialogue would underscore the unity of the four countries, or “quad” as he termed

them, behind the international rules-based order that has kept the peace and which was essential to all.

India conducts more military exercises with the US than with any other country and is participating this year in two that are being held there, including RIMPAC. In April/May, a dozen Indian Air Force (IAF) aircraft, including two US-bought Boeing C-17 Globemaster III transporters, took part in Red Flag, the US Air Force’s premier air-to-air combat training exercise with its allies. India returned after a gap of eight years to this exercise, held at Alaska’s Eielson Air Force Base.

The US, in turn, had participated in the International Fleet Review (IFR) of the Indian Navy on India’s east coast in February where 50 countries were represented and which saw a turnout of 24 foreign and 75 Indian warships, 45 Indian maritime aircraft, including the Boeing P8I, and 22 Navy chiefs, apart from over 4,000 international naval officers and men. “United Through Oceans” was the motto and underlying theme of the IFR, signifying that while the world was divided by geography, it was unified by the seas. There was repeated emphasis that the oceans were the great blue ‘commons’ that not only linked the global community, but granted it unfettered access. Visiting Chief of US Naval Operations, Adm John Richardson, had reported good progress in talks on the joint development of India’s next-generation aircraft carrier. This, potentially, the biggest military collaboration between the two countries, would involve design and construction of a carrier with combat capabilities superior to its Chinese counterparts.

Speakers at the concurrent International Maritime Conference, on the theme, “Partnering Together for a Secure Maritime Future,” expressed concerns over the security challenges in the East and South China Seas. But Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Professor Ye Hailin predicted that this “dispute”

would escalate if competitive issues overrode cooperative solutions. He argued that, given the overlap among the actions and policies of parties, the situation in the South China Sea may deteriorate with the possible risk of serious conflict due to collision of differing interests.

The return of the Asia-Pacific to the centre of world affairs has been the great power shift of the 21st century. This century will doubtlessly be shaped by events transpiring in this vital region that embraces the Pacific, the largest and deepest ocean basin covering over 155 million sq km and straddling 30.5 per cent of the Earth's surface. Half the world's yearly maritime trade worth \$5 trillion traverses this economically integrated region that spans some of the busiest international sea lines and nine of the 10 largest ports. Its 4.2 billion inhabitants speak over 3,000 different languages and constitute 61 per cent of the global population.

The 36 regional nations they dwell in are culturally, socially, economically and geographically diverse, and constitute two of the three largest economies as well as 10 of the 14 smallest. These nations also have seven of the world's 10 largest standing militaries and five of the world's 45 declared nuclear states. Five of the nations are allied with the US through mutual defence treaties. The Asia-Pacific also holds dense fishing grounds and potentially enormous oil and natural gas reserves, though at present it is a net importer of fossil fuels. This expansive region had till late enjoyed general peace and prosperity for almost 70 years since World War II. Such stability led to the convergence of economic and commercial interests in the region, driving the creation of such regional groupings like the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967, and the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, formed in 1989.

Two new approaches for accelerating economic growth in the littoral have been spawned by the

changing dynamics in the region, one led by the US that excludes China, and the other by China that excludes the US. Washington is helming the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that aims to harmonise regulations, promote private investment, and boost trade to a level of \$10 trillion a year in imports by 2020 in the Pacific rim countries. Aside from the US, 13 countries – Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, New Zealand, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam – are joining the regional treaty.

On the other hand, China has envisaged the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), an Asia-focussed multilateral development bank funded by governments and private capital for meeting the projected \$8 trillion infrastructure investment requirements for Asia over the next 20 years. The 57 countries named by AIIB as prospective founding members include most Asian and European Union nations, Brazil, South Africa and seven of the potential members of the TPP. Among them are India, the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Israel, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Korea, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his address to the joint session of the US Congress on June 08 to respond demonstratively to US President Barack Obama's keenness on leveraging the US' strategic partnership with India for enlisting it in balancing the rise of China in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. Signalling the start of a new phase in India-US relations, Modi affirmed that strong links between the two democracies could anchor peace, prosperity and stability "from Asia to Africa and from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific". "This can also help ensure security of the sea lanes of commerce, and freedom of navigation on seas," he added, acclaiming the partnership as an extraordinary relationship, and the US, an indispensable partner.

The Prime Minister's allusion was clearly to China, which is also keen on furthering its interests in the IOR under the framework of its Maritime Silk Route (MSR). The MSR entails development of a string of ports, essentially encircling India, such as the one at Myanmar's 2,471-acre Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) that too is being set up by a Chinese consortium, the Hambantota and Colombo Port City projects in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar in Pakistan, apart from a military logistics base in Djibouti to apparently service its warships engaged in counter-piracy operations near the Gulf of Aden. Beijing also unsettled the Asia-Pacific in 2013 when it sent its *Liaoning* aircraft carrier (ex-Soviet *Varyag*) across the South China Sea, escorted by two guided missile destroyers and two advanced missile frigates. China called it a "scientific and training mission", but it was evident that the carrier force was testing the waters Beijing claims sovereignty over.

India's vast 7,615-km coastline abuts onto the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, and one of its island enclaves, Andaman & Nicobar, is closer to Myanmar and Thailand than to the Indian mainland. With 66 per cent of global oil, 50 per cent of global container traffic and 33 per cent of global cargo trade passing through the IOR, which stretches from the Persian Gulf to the west to the Malacca Straits in the east, the IN is tasked with securing the sea lines for global maritime movement.

India finds a dire need to keep pace with developments in its littoral, with the steady build-up in undersea combat capabilities by Pakistan to its west and by China to its east and south, both neighbours with which it has been at war in the past. With one of the largest fleets of attack submarines comprising four ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), six nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and 53 diesel-electric submarines (SSKs), Beijing is close to deploying a powerful sea-based nuclear deterrent through long-range nuclear-armed submarines. Five Type 094 Jin Class SSBNs may eventually be built,

each armed with 12 JL-2 missiles that can deliver one-tonne nuclear warheads at a range of 4,320 nautical miles (8,000 km).

In an unprecedented move last year that alarmed India and other countries in the region, China sent one of its new Type 093 Shang class fast attack nuclear submarine on a three-month mission across the Indian Ocean. Beijing's claim that the deployment was in aid of anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia was contested by New Delhi, which argued that no country uses nuclear submarines to combat pirates. It was, however, a choreographed presence by China to validate its interests in the IOR through which it declares that it transports \$1.5 trillion worth of goods, including petroleum. The Indian Ocean accounts for half the world's container traffic and 70 percent of its petroleum shipments, according to a recent US Naval War College-sponsored study, noting that it had replaced the North Atlantic as the central artery of world commerce.

The presence of Chinese submarines at the Colombo and Karachi ports too has sparked concerns in India, against the backdrop of a recent White Paper of the PLAN that articulates China's new military strategy to enhance its Navy's duties for the first time to "open seas protection" far from its shores. China is also selling submarines to both Pakistan and Bangladesh. In a deal worth \$5 billion, Beijing will sell four modified Type 41 Yuan class SSKs to Islamabad and transfer technology for the construction of four more in the port city of Karachi. The Pakistan Navy already operates five French submarines, three of them Agosta 90Bs (Khalid class) purchased in the 1990s and two older Agosta 70s (Hashmat class) from the late 1970s. Two Type 035G Ming class SSKs worth \$203.3 million will be delivered by China to Bangladesh by 2019. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says a base is being established for these first submarines in her country's Navy that will build up the Service as a "three-dimensional" force.

Modi's repeated references in his US address to India's commitment to freedom and democracy served as a reminder that his country offers Washington a like-minded partner in an increasingly unsettled region, and that it provides Asia with a model for development and progress more compatible with American values. This was his fourth visit to the US in the two years he has been in power, not having gone so many times as Indian Prime Minister to any other country, even as this US Administration prepares to give way to a new one next January. Besides, his engagement with Obama at the White House was the seventh between the two leaders, Obama too being the first US President to have visited India twice during his tenure.

Committing to forge deeper cooperation with India that he calls a 21st century centre of influence, Obama believes that with India assuming its rightful place in the world, the two countries have a historic opportunity to make their relationship "a defining partnership of the century ahead". Secretary of State John Kerry too maintained that the US may now do more with India on a government-to-government basis than with virtually any other nation. Indeed, Modi was interrupted throughout in his address by applause from US law-makers who increasingly see in India a democratic counterweight to China in the Asia Pacific.

"In this world full of multiple transitions and economic opportunities, growing uncertainties and political complexities, existing threats and new challenges, our engagement can make a difference by promoting cooperation, not dominance, connectivity, not isolation, respect for global commons, inclusive, not exclusive, mechanisms, and, above all, adherence to international rules and norms," declared Modi in his address to the US House. "India is already assuming her responsibilities in securing the IOR."

It is largely to its seaborne trade that China owes its spectacular economic transformation: the 61 per

cent of its population living in extreme poverty in 1990 shrank to only 4 per cent by 2015. One study reckons that of the four billion tonnes added to global seaborne trade between 2002 and 2014, Chinese imports accounted for 94 per cent of the increase in iron ore volumes and 35 per cent in coal volumes, while Chinese exports accounted for 60 per cent of the expansion in container trade.

Though the US has sought to be neutral, it is conscious of the need for freedom of navigation for all countries. It, hence, finds it imperative to raise its already formidable profile in the Asia-Pacific. Its numerous military bases in the region include 17 in Japan and 12 in South Korea, while it also has a presence in Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, Guam and Singapore, and on the British-controlled Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia.

Washington is also seeing threats emerging in the Asia-Pacific from the increasingly restive and assertive North Korea, which, in the larger context, is signalling a shift in the balance of power in the region. Pyongyang has backed its tirades with provocative nuclear tests and missile launches, its latest twin tests on June 18 of the Hwasong-10 missile, known internationally as the Musudan, being described by its leader, Kim Jong-un, as "the sure capability to attack in an overall and practical way the Americans in the Pacific operation theatre". Four earlier tests had resulted in failure of the intermediate-range ballistic missile believed to be capable of reaching the sovereign US territory of Guam and even mainland US. China, however, is one country that backs North Korea and also has the capability of reining in this neighbouring dictatorship with which it shares a 1,416-km-long border. Undivided Korea had, in fact, been a vassal state of China from the 17th century through the Sino-Japanese War of 1895-96, the territory having been divided into North and South in 1948.

China's military posturing challenges the US, which has been a Pacific power for more than two

centuries, ever since Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark sailed down the Columbia river with their Corps of Discovery to the Pacific northwest region of North America in 1805. Today, the USPACOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR) covers more of the globe than any of the other five geographic combatant commands of that country and controls the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps forces within its jurisdiction to pursue American national security objectives. USPACOM is supported by multiple-component and sub-unified commands, including US Forces Korea, US Forces Japan, US Special Operations Command Pacific, US Pacific Fleet, US Marine Forces Pacific, US Pacific Air Forces and US Army Pacific. With allies and partners, the command stands "committed to enhancing stability in the Asia-Pacific region by promoting security cooperation, encouraging peaceful development, responding to contingencies, deterring aggression, and, when necessary, fighting to win".

To consolidate this mandate, a sum of \$249 millions was recently budgeted for new military construction on US-administered Guam, where its Apra Harbour Naval Station and Andersen Air Base are located. This island territory, due south of Japan in Micronesia, in the Western Pacific, is being readied as a strategic hub for the Western Pacific, with US Marines being relocated there from Okinawa.

Under a 2011 agreement between the US and its key Asia-Pacific partner, Australia, the Pentagon is establishing a six-month rotational presence of an air-ground task force of 2,500 Marines to Darwin. The Marines will conduct bilateral training exercises with the Australian Defence Force (ADF). They will also deploy to partner countries for multilateral security cooperation activities to demonstrate US commitment to its allies in the region and help improve their ability to respond to disasters and other crises in the region. The US Navy will also forward deploy four littoral combat ships in Singapore's Changi Naval Base by 2018.

An agreement finalised by Defence Secretary Carter with the Philippines on his visit there in April will allow Washington to build facilities at five Filipino military bases. The two countries have been strategic partners since World War II and the Philippines hosted major American military bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base. But yielding to national sentiment, Manila had ousted the US forces from its territory in 1991. The five bases will resurrect American presence across the island nation.

The bone of contention in the littoral has been the various island enclaves, not of much value in themselves, but the hold on which would offer the 12-nautical mile (nm) territorial seas and the 200-nm Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). China is developing its artificially created island chain in the South China Sea into a network of air and sea capable marine citadels fortified with missile batteries, deep-water jetties, airstrips and radar stations. Beijing has also stationed anti-ship cruise missiles on the disputed Woody Island in the Paracel Islands chain, which it has occupied since 1974 when Chinese troops seized a South Vietnamese garrison. The US, which estimates China to have reclaimed 3,000 acres of land since the beginning of 2014, was also concerned by the April 18 landing of a Chinese four-engine turboprop Y-8 maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft on the Chinese-made Fiery Cross Reef, in the Spratly Islands chain. Beijing explained it as an airlift of three severely ill civilian construction workers, but the Pentagon wondered why a civilian aircraft could not have been used instead.

China and Japan have contesting claims over the uninhabited group of islands called Diaoyu by China and Senkaku by Japan, which has potentially vast gas and oil fields off its shores. Both countries are striving to avert a flashpoint, mindful of their entrenched commercial ties that have resulted in two-way trade reaching \$303 billion in 2015, China being Japan's biggest trading partner. China's other

competing claims in the region involve those with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei that each claims parts of the Paracel and Spratly Islands chains, and with the Philippines over the Scarborough/Panatag Shoal in the Philippine Sea that abuts onto the South China Sea.

The strategic complexity that has resulted in the Asia-Pacific has been confounded by illicit trafficking of people, resources, weapons and drugs. China's belligerence is also pushing the threatened poorer economies towards an arms race they can ill afford. With the region having become a cauldron of trepidation, the littoral states are hiking their defence expenditure at the cost of more pressing social exigencies. The Philippines' defence budget is \$3.8 billion, while its external debt is \$77.7 billion.

The US' military relocation in the Philippines will, to a degree, balance the tilt in power in the region. Carter's visit also heralded a massive show of firepower in a joint simulated assault exercise that unleashed six missiles from the Lockheed Martin M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). This rocket system can target enemy installations 3,000 km away, as well as support troop and supply concentrations. Though there is yet no proposal of its deployment to the Philippines in the case of armed conflict over the South China Sea, the US Marine Corps Pacific Commander, Lt. Gen. John Toolan, reportedly indicated, "I think we will be more than happy to share." US allies too are making overtures to Manila, with Australian troops joining the US-Philippine joint exercises, and Japan dispatching a submarine and two destroyers on a goodwill mission to a Philippine naval base.

China interprets these developments as an American intent to "militarise" the South China Sea, a term the US has previously used to denounce Chinese advances in the region. Beijing insists that any dispute in this maritime domain should be resolved by countries in the littoral and not by outside powers.

The China leg of Carter's Asian tour was cancelled over scheduling difficulties, but the decision was evidently motivated by US concerns over Beijing's weaponised artificial islands. It is not unlikely that the US may open or expand bases in the three island territories of Saipan, Tinian and Rota in the US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in the western Pacific that lie beyond the Chinese Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) reach of 3,000 to 5,500 km.

The escalating tensions in the region have led the Philippines to file a landmark arbitration case against China before the international tribunal in The Hague. The verdict on this case, filed in January 2014, is expected any time now, the court adjudicating on the extent of Beijing's maritime entitlements under the Law of the Sea Convention. China lays claim to the Scarborough Shoal, an outcrop off western Philippines that was once used as a firing range by the US military and which was annexed by Beijing in 2012 by expelling Filipino fishermen. China has announced its intent to reject any unfavourable ruling on the issue, upholding what it claimed was its right to the seas and deeming this right non-negotiable. The Law of the Sea grants countries the 12-nm territorial sea and 200-nm EEZ from their coastline.

New Delhi is mindful of Washington's keenness to marshal India as the power that can tilt the strategic balance by checking Beijing's maritime assertion. Ultimately, all three countries will define the strategic nature of maritime influence. India has emerged as the regional superpower and views the IOR that it dominates as its theatre of influence, just as China is seeking a similar role in the Western Pacific. Though India has no disputes in the IOR, its Navy already maintains a stronger force, on conventional warfare, than Russia, France or the UK, and is poised to emerge as the third strongest, after the US and China, in the coming years.

Before embarking on his US visit, Prime Minister

Modi set priorities to further implement the *Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions*. “As strategic interests continue to converge in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions, both President Obama and Prime Minister Modi have highlighted maritime security as a key area of cooperation,” affirms the ‘vision’ charter. “Naval engagements, such as the Malabar exercise, improve the cooperation of US and Indian maritime forces and contribute to both sides’ ability to counter threats at sea, from piracy to violent extremism; these engagements also present opportunities to engage with other partners.”

In furtherance of their joint strategic vision, India and the US have in principle agreed to conclude a Logistics Support Agreement that will allow their militaries to access the ports and naval bases of either for stopovers, refuelling, repairs or victualling. They have also agreed to conclude a commercial shipping information agreement that would help their Navies work together to defend their territories and to promote and protect global commerce. Though India was not involved in the Gulf War, it had, in 1990, permitted US warplanes to use Indian refuelling facilities, despite a strong reaction from Iraq that deemed the move “unacceptable from a friendly country like India”. But strident political opposition forced the then minority government to revoke its decision soon after US military aircraft flying from the Philippines to the Gulf began landing in Mumbai, Agra and Chennai as the UN deadline neared for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. As a co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), India had opposed Washington’s involvement in regional disputes and had maintained close ties with Baghdad, but granted permission to the US on “humanitarian grounds”.

New Delhi today does not desire to be seen as too partisan and it certainly does not desire the situation to precipitate into war. Its stance will likely be compelled by realism as it is circumspect about China’s vaulting ambitions, as also about

the crosshairs of conflicting interests in this region of immense geo-strategic import. Besides, it faces another dimension of threat from China’s recent deal with Pakistan that will assist Islamabad in developing a remote sensing satellite for launch by June 2018. The satellite will monitor the progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that Beijing is investing \$46 billion in and which will link western China to the Pakistani port city of Gwadar to provide China direct access to the Arabian Sea. It will besides help Pakistan strengthen its border security and surveillance. India has objected to the corridor’s passing through neighbouring Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) ever since the project was kicked off by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Islamabad last year.

Obama strongly believes that Pakistan – which had Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden mysteriously living on its territory for five years – should act determinedly against terrorist groups operating from its soil and help spare India the “inexcusable terrorism” that it has endured for so long. Yet the US State Department in February approved the sale of \$700 million worth of eight dual-capable Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter jets – suitable for conventional and nuclear missions – despite opposition from some Congressmen and India. The deal eventually fell through with US reluctance to subsidise the sale, while Islamabad has threatened to procure Chinese or Russian fighter aircraft instead.

However, in April the US Department of Defence awarded a contract to Bell Helicopter to manufacture and supply to Pakistan nine AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters worth \$170 million under its foreign military sales funds. Islamabad has requested 15 of these helicopters, 32 T-700 GE 401C engines, and 1,000 AGM-114 R Hellfire II missiles. Washington has claimed that this equipment will aid Pakistan in its counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations in South Asia, without upsetting the military balance with India. But following Modi’s

visit, there is a widening view within the US Congress that Pakistan is not committed to the war on terrorism.

While India has of late become the biggest buyer of US weaponry, Washington had in the last decade shown that it could blockade supplies of crucial spares even in weapon systems not directly sold by it to India, but in which it had some involvement. Almost half the Indian Navy's sole air strike force of British Aerospace Sea Harriers had been grounded when the US restrained the UK from supplying any spares as it had imposed sanctions on India following its 1998 nuclear tests. The aircraft had been designed in the late 1970s as an Anglo-American development of the British Hawker Siddeley Harrier, and it was actually the British variant that India had purchased, yet the UK yielded to the American directive.

Washington similarly intervened in the case of the Westland WS-61 Sea King for the Indian Navy, these helicopters having been British licence-built versions of the American Sikorsky S-61 helicopter of the same name, built by the UK's Westland Helicopters. Curiously, in 2003, it offered to directly sell the vital spares for both the Harriers and Sea Kings to India. It then dispatched a team of high-level officials and weapons manufacturers for a sales pitch, but top Indian naval officials expressed wariness over newer sanctions.

Around the same time, the US, which had previously "agreed" to India's \$1.1 billion deal with Israel for three Phalcon AEW&C (Airborne Early Warning and Control) Radar Systems, blocked the sale because of rising tensions between India and Pakistan. It had deemed it "wrong" to sell such intelligence technology to India, given the tensions along its border with Pakistan. It later granted sanction, saying tensions had eased. There is also the view that the Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and Lockheed

Martin F-16IN Super Viper lost out on India's \$12 billion tender in 2011 for 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) because of Indian concerns about the US' overly restrictive export policies, and US Congressional compulsions vetoing India's deployment of an American frontline fighter in a theatre of conflict. The loss of this coveted contract led US Ambassador to India Timothy Roemer, to step down.

Despite all its manoeuvrings, China too at times portrays a more accommodative stance towards India. In July 2015, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced Beijing's desire for maritime cooperation and dialogue with India and other South Asian countries to allay their concerns over increased Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean, including docking of its submarines in different ports in the region. China expressed willingness to contribute constructively to peace and stability in the IOR. Hailing the cordiality between Xi and Modi, the ministry affirmed that India-China relations had been strengthened in recent years. "We maintain good communication and coordination on major international issues," it specified. "We also believe that in the globalised era, the security of the Indian Ocean is in the common interest of all countries."

This writer has previously noted that while the Asia-Pacific was earlier driven by commercial interests, the widening unrest in the sea lanes that are the lifeline of this region may eventually compel the validity of a military front on the lines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Much in the manner in which China's growing might is being perceived today, the 28-member grouping had been founded in 1949 in response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union, with its prioritised purpose having been to deter Soviet expansionism. NATO had codified cooperation in military preparedness among the allied signatories by stipulating that "an armed attack against one or more of them... shall be considered an attack against them all".

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Though the Asia-Pacific countries are keen on safeguarding their territorial interests, they are, at the same time, anxious not to let the regional conflicts flare up into Asia's next war. However, to lay the foundations of overall peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific, a NATO-like security structure would need to be inclusive, having China within its ambit. "There is no multilateral organisation like NATO in the region," noted Carter when he was US Deputy Defence Secretary. "And in the absence of an overarching security structure, the US military presence has played a pivotal role over those last past 60 years, providing nations with the space and the security necessary to make their own principled choices."

A NATO-like platform may not evolve soon, but appears inevitable in the light of the rising volatility in the region. The similarities between now and at the time of NATO's creation cannot be lost. Notwithstanding the fact that the US and China have very high stakes in their relationship – their two-way trade alone touched \$598 billion in 2015 – unlike the state of the Cold War that had riven Washington and Moscow between the end of World War II and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

At times, the consideration eludes the various powers that the Indo-Asia-Pacific is big enough for all of us.

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