

# US Security Strategy for Asia Pacific and India's Role

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## Abstract

*Following a changeover in the US corridors of power after the election of Donald Trump as President of the US, America's allies and partners are concerned about the US's willingness to sustain its leadership role and security commitments in the Asia Pacific region. China's rising military power and the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP); considering the economic leg of the 'rebalancing strategy.' This development has further contributed in increasing regional anxieties. Viewed through the lens of Neoclassical realism, the paper argues that the US emphasis on India's role within Asia Pacific is a consequence of consistencies in the US strategic priorities that value India as a regional counterweight to China's growing influence while also preserving the US dominance within the region. The paper analyses how the Indo-US relations have progressed from President Obama to President Trump despite the vastly different styles of leadership and asserts that the overarching pattern of the Indo-US strategic relations has not changed in any significant way. India will continue to play a central role in the US security strategy for Asia Pacific and the benefits accrued will in turn contribute towards the expansion of its own geo-political influence within the region.*

**Keywords:** US Security Strategy, Asia Pacific, India, Look East Policy, China, US.

## Introduction

The early 1990 was a period that has not only marked the end of the Cold War but also the commencement of India's 'Look East' policy, which eventually became the bedrock of its broader Asia Pacific strategy. The

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same year, a re-examination of the US relations with India was also on the cards. India's reluctance to get involved in the super powers rivalry, the US began to reassess the strategic utility of India. Until such time, India's manifest or latent strategic utility remained limited in the eyes of the US foreign policy makers. The critical mutual perceptions underwent a gradual transformation following the Soviet collapse and the reorganisation of the Indian economy away from autarky, paving the way for it to emerge as a valuable partner for the US. China's rise as an economic and military force in Asia Pacific also prompted India to harness its relations with the US as a strategic hedge in its dealings with its East Asian neighbour.

In 1995, the Clinton administration identified India as one of the 10 big emerging markets. The term "Big Emerging Markets" was coined by the Clinton administration for a group of 10 countries including India that were seen by the US, having the potential to affect the global economic output in considerable ways.<sup>1</sup> The next year, Paul Kennedy published a research while heading a team of researchers from the Yale that indicated the nine developing countries with the greatest focus within the US foreign policy. These nine countries were believed to play a prominent role in the challenges of the 21st century.<sup>2</sup> India was identified as one of these countries and therefore had begun to occupy an important position in the US policy and strategic circles. An early step in this direction was taken in 1995, by then Commerce Secretary, Ronald Brown's visit to India in order to capitalise on the prospects for economic engagement.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, the Agreed Minutes on Defence Relations was also signed, which marked as beginning of a new era in the Indo-US relations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery E. Garten. "The Big Ten: The Big Emerging Markets and How they will Change Our Lives," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1997-07-01/big-ten-big-emerging-markets-and-how-they-will-change-our-lives>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Chase, Emily Hill and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal States and US Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb, 1996, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/algeria/1996-01-01/pivotal-states-and-us-strategy>

<sup>3</sup> Ranbir Vohra, *The Making of India: A Historical Survey* (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 2001), 288.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of Defence, *Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship*, June 3, 2015, <http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2015-Defense-Framework.pdf>

In addition to the shifting structural and domestic circumstances, the leadership on both sides played a major role in resetting the terms of engagement. While Prime Ministers Nirosimha Roa and Manmohan Singh had taken the initiative to reorient the Indian foreign and economic policy, President Bill Clinton facilitated the Indo-US rapprochement. Having initially adopted a hardliner policy approach towards India and Pakistan following the 1998 nuclear tests, his handling of the Kargil crisis, somewhat, gratified the Indian political and strategic elite. The impression that the US was sensitive to the Indian security concerns was further strengthened by President Clinton's visit to India in March 2000, when he described India and the US as "natural allies."<sup>5</sup> This indicated a major shift in the US perceptions regarding India's strategic utility and a convergence of economic and strategic interests.

Consolidating the gains made by the previous administration, President George W. Bush undertook a personal initiative to further strengthen the Indo-US relations. In July 2005, the Bush administration announced its intention to offer fuel and technical assistance for the Indian civil nuclear programme under specific conditions. In 2008, the deal was ratified by the US Congress, following an approval by the Indian government, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>6</sup>

## **US Rebalance to Asia Pacific: India's Response**

The momentum in the Indo-US relations hit a plateau after the 2008 nuclear agreement. During the first few years of his presidency, Barack Obama made an attempt to seek a grand accommodation with China in the form of G-2.<sup>7</sup> Washington's failed attempt at rapprochement with Beijing made

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<sup>5</sup> Leon E. Panetta, "Partners in the 21st Century," Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), June 6, 2012,

<http://www.idsa.in/keyspeeches/LeonEPanettaonPartnersinthe21stcentury>

<sup>6</sup> S. Paul Kapur, "India and the United States from World War II to the Present: A Relationship Transformed," in *India's Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect*. Sumit Ganguly ed. (Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2010), 264.

<sup>7</sup> A G-2 (Group of Two) was conceived by the former US National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, as classical accommodation strategy in so far as it would allow the US to avoid confrontation with China while holding onto its super power status. For more details see Gideon Rachman, "Think Again: American

India feel both vulnerable and ignored after years of being wooed under the presidency of George W. Bush.<sup>8</sup> However, the financial crisis that hit the US in 2008, was perceived in China as a precursor to the US economic decline.<sup>9</sup> The efforts at seeking the Chinese cooperation at the Copenhagen summit on climate change in 2009, were not only unproductive but also unsettling for the US. Meanwhile, China was asserting its claims within the South China Sea and in turn, the US allies and partners in the region sought the US security reassurance. These and other developments marred President Obama's expectations of China and led to the formation of a more cynical perspective regarding the state of Sino-US relations.

As course corrective, in November 2011, the Obama administration announced the US rebalancing to Asia Pacific and India was accorded a special place in that strategy.<sup>10</sup> The US Secretary of Defence, Leon Panetta, emphasised in June 2012, "we will expand our military partnerships and our presence in the arc extending from Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and South Asia. Defense cooperation with India is a lynchpin in this strategy."<sup>11</sup>

From the American perspective, the pivot was aimed at addressing the negative fallout of China's growing military clout and assertiveness in Asia Pacific. Outlining the US intentions, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report argued that, "the (pivot) represents a simultaneous attempt to warn China away from using heavy-handed tactics against its neighbours and provide confidence to other Asia-Pacific countries that want to resist pressure from Beijing now and in the future."<sup>12</sup>

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Decline," *Foreign Policy*, January, 2011,

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/think-again-american-decline/>

<sup>8</sup> Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi, *The Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy: Asia's Evolving Balance of Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6

<sup>9</sup> Mike Green, "The Legacy of Obama's Pivot to Asia," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/03/the-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>

<sup>10</sup> Mark E. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Towards Asia," Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress (Washington DC: CRS, March 28, 2012), <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Panetta, "Partners in the 21st Century.

<sup>12</sup> Manyin, "Pivot to the Pacific?"

Weary of the new administration's policies and preoccupied with avoiding a backlash from China, the Congress government, led by Manmohan Singh, proceeded with caution. The strategy's anti-China overtones were seen as counterproductive to New Delhi's relationship with Beijing. The result was the India government's fall back to a non-alignment and a call for greater strategic autonomy in the country's dealing with the US and China. Prime Minister Singh's hedging strategy was motivated by the necessity to signal to Beijing that New Delhi was not a partner in the American plan to contain China.<sup>13</sup>

However, with the coming to power, Narendra Modi, with little ideological commitment to non-alignment, adopted a strategic tilt towards the US, responding with greater favourability to the rebalancing strategy. India's marked assertiveness towards regional rivals has been further emboldened by its growing strategic ties with the US. In order to enlist India as a regional contender to China, the US has expressed its resolve to elevate India's strategic profile in the Asia Pacific and the IOR, besides putting its weight behind the Indo-Pacific regional construct.

Following are the key aspects of the rebalance strategy including the Department of Defence 2012 Strategic Guidance emphasising India's role; the US-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia Pacific and the IOR; the Indo-US naval operability and the signing of the Logistical Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) in collaboration with 'Make in India' campaign.

#### *Department of Defence 2012 Strategic Guidance*

In accordance with the rebalancing strategy announced in late 2011, the US Department of Defence (DoD) issued its strategic guidelines in January 2012, entitled "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century." The guidance represented a significant readjustment of strategic priorities for sustaining the US global leadership. It referred to a "winding down" of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" and "increasing threats from China

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<sup>13</sup> Pant and Joshi, *The Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy*, 6.

and Iran.”<sup>14</sup> The document explicitly places an emphasis on maintaining a robust military presence in Asia Pacific in order to defend the US interests in an increasingly complex security environment.

Highlighting the challenges that the US faces from the rising China, the strategic guidance states that “over the long term, China’s emergence as a regional power will have the potential to affect the US economy and security in a variety of ways” and emphasised the need for greater “clarity of its strategic intentions to avoid causing friction in the region.”<sup>15</sup> It also emphasised India’s role in the strategy by asserting that “the United States is investing in a long-term strategic partnership with India to support its ability to be a regional economic anchor and provider of security in the Indian Ocean.”<sup>16</sup>

Cognisant of its limited capacities to operate in the maritime realm against China, the US expressed its willingness to cooperate with India in the up-gradation and modernisation of its military forces, especially its naval fleet. The following year, the ‘Joint Principles for Joint Cooperation’ were issued by the US Government affirming that India and the US share common security interests and place each other at the same level as their ‘closest partners.’ The focus of the agreement rested on cooperation in defence technology transfers, trade research, co-development and co-production including advanced and sophisticated technology.<sup>17</sup>

The Indo-US defence cooperation has reached unprecedented levels especially since the signing of the New Framework for Defence Cooperation in 2005. India now holds more annual military exercises with the US than any other country, cumulative defence sales have grown from virtually zero to more than US\$8 billion and high-level exchanges on defence issues have increased substantially.<sup>18</sup> During the US Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter’s visit to India in June 2015, a renewed Defence

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<sup>14</sup> US Department of Defence, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defence*, January 5, 2012,

[http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> US Department of Defence, *Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship*.

<sup>18</sup> “US-India Defence and Security Cooperation,” CSIS, 2013,

<https://www.csis.org/programs/wadhvani-chair-us-india-policy-studies/past-india-chair-projects/us-india-security-and>

Framework Agreement was signed with the Indian Defence Minister, Manmohan Singh, for another ten years. The agreement was considered an extension of the earlier meeting held between President Obama and the Indian Prime Minister Modi during the former's visit to India in January the same year. According to Richard Rossow, President Obama's visit to India on January 25, 2015, renewed India's place as a centrepiece of the "Pivot to Asia."<sup>19</sup>

Another outcome of the renewed Defence Framework Agreement was the establishment of the DTTI, which remained an earnest desire of the Modi government in India since the initiation of improved ties between both sides. The DTTI coincides with the Modi's 'Make in India' campaign calling for the US and India to be able to co-develop military capabilities for joint use. Both are examined after discussing the recent strides in maritime cooperation between the two states.

### *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia Pacific and IOR*

A significant outcome of the former US President Obama's visit to India as a chief guest during its 66th Republic Day celebration was the issuance of the Joint Strategic Vision for Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean, which sets forth the roadmap for the future Indo-US cooperation in the entire region expanding Asia Pacific and the IOR. The agreement is the first time that the US and India openly expressed their determination to work in collaboration for securing their interests in the region. The wording of the agreement refrains from making any direct reference to China, yet, leaves little to the imagination as emphasises the Indo-US interest in "safeguarding maritime security, ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea."<sup>20</sup> It also calls on all the parties "to avoid the threat or use of force and pursue resolution of territorial and maritime disputes through all peaceful means, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the United

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Rossow, "A New Vision for US-India Cooperation in Asia," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, February 4, 2015, <http://amti.csis.org/a-new-vision-for-u-s-india-cooperation-in-asia/>

<sup>20</sup> US Government, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *US-India Joint Strategic for the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean*, January 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-asia-pacific-and-indian-ocean-region>

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”<sup>21</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that the US itself has not ratified the UNCLOS but maintains that it abides by its principles.

The US calls upon India to play a prominent role in the region’s security affairs and help in managing the consequences of China’s rise as an Asia Pacific power. Despite such expectations and India’s own commercial and strategic relations with many countries in Southeast Asia, India’s capabilities largely stop at the Malacca Strait. By strengthening India’s maritime presence in the maritime arc, extending from the vast stretches of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, it could complicate China’s aspirations by inhibiting the steady flow of critical shipments, which remains a vulnerable point for China due to its significance as a conduit for trade and energy transportation.

The Malacca Strait is a strategically located narrow body of water that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific via the South China Sea. India has been encouraged to patrol the Malacca Strait through which 55 per cent of its own trade passes and reaches onto the major economies of the region.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the fact that India’s Andaman and the Nicobar Islands are located in a close proximity to the Malacca Strait, which provides India a lever in performing such a role that entails securing free passage and uninterrupted passage for international maritime traffic and trade and having the potential to obstruct it in case a contingency arises.

The joint statement evoked a strong response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, arguing that the South China Sea dispute needed to be resolved amicably through dialogue and consultations between the concerned parties; whereas extra regional states with no direct claim to the disputed territory should desist from complicating the situation in the region.<sup>23</sup> It also warned India not to be used as a pawn in the US strategy to instigate trouble in Asia Pacific. Regardless of China’s reaction, the joint statement established the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Mohan Malik, “India’s Response to the South China Sea Verdict,” American Interest, July 22, 2016, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/07/22/indias-response-to-the-south-china-sea-verdict/>

<sup>23</sup> Ye Qiang and Jiang Zong-qiang, “US-India Joint Strategic Vision for Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region,” Observer Research Foundation, January 14, 2015, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/us-india-joint-strategic-vision-for-asiapacific-and-indian-ocean-region/>



basis of a closer Indo-US naval cooperation aimed at checking the growing maritime influence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Western Pacific and the IOR.

*Indo-US Naval Cooperation and Memorandum of Understanding on Logistical Exchange*

Maritime cooperation has been a highlight of the Indo-US relations for quite some time. India now conducts the most military exercises with the US, which holds a large number of military in the maritime realm. The Indian and US navies have cooperated operationally on four occasions mainly. Firstly, during the US military operation in Afghanistan called "Operation Enduring Freedom" in 2002, during which the Indian Navy Ships, *Sharda* and *Sukanya*, relieved the USS Cowpens to escort ships in the Straits of Malacca and protected them against the terrorists and pirate attacks in the high seas in the operation "Sagittarius."<sup>24</sup> Secondly, both the navies participated in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) operations in the IOR during the 2004 Tsunami in which 200,000 people from 12 different countries lost their lives.<sup>25</sup> Thirdly, the Indian Navy cooperated with the US Navy in its Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) in Lebanon, in July 2006. Fourthly, since 2008, both the navies have been part of coordinated anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>26</sup> In December 2015, the Indian Defence Minister Parrikar visited the US and it was agreed that India would participate in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise hosted by the US Navy, off the coast of Hawaii.<sup>27</sup> India also expressed its interest in participating in the Red Flag Exercise.

The sustained and systematic maritime cooperation between India and the US, having an institutional dimension, has taken place through the annual Malabar Exercise, which began in 1992. Japan participated in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Nilanthi Samaranayake, etal, "Improving US-India HA/DR Coordination in the Indian Ocean," *CNA* July 2014, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2013-U-004941-Final2.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2013-U-004941-Final2.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Sudesh Rani, "Indo-US Maritime Cooperation: Challenges and Prospects," *Maritime Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2012): 125-127.

<sup>27</sup> Sushant Singh, "India to Participate in World's Largest Maritime Warfare Exercise in US Next Year," *Indian Express*, December 11, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-to-participate-in-exercises-rimpac-and-red-flag-in-us-next-year/>

the exercise for the first time as a non-permanent member in 2007, but drew ire from China, which strongly protested against the coordinated exercise between the three states.<sup>28</sup> Despite the objections, Japan continued to participate in the 2009, 2011 and 2014 military exercises. In 2015, Japan was formally included as a permanent member during the 19th Malabar Exercises.<sup>29</sup> Since the Malabar, India and the US have been coordinating regularly as permanent members of the annual drills while Singapore and Australia have also participated in the exercises as non-permanent members.

Parrikar stated, “As of now, India has never taken part in any joint patrol; we only do joint exercises. The question of joint patrol does not arise.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, India has become more vocal in raising the issue of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and also ventured into the disputed territory under the pretext of the Malabar exercises. The consequences of a formal commitment by India to jointly patrol the waters of the South China Sea could evoke a harsh response from China and lead to the possibility of similar patrols by China in collaboration with Pakistan in the IOR; an act that India would clearly not appreciate.

The growing maritime cooperation between the US and India within Asia Pacific is also evident by the progress made in advancing the bilateral inter-operability between the navies of both states. The Logistical Support Agreement (LSA) now renamed as the LEMOA remained an unresolved issue in the bilateral negotiations between the two sides for more than a decade. The previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, with support from the left wing parties, had strongly resisted signing the LSA along with the two other agreements on the grounds that it would compromise India’s strategic autonomy. However, according to the LSA,

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<sup>28</sup> Abhijeet Singh, “Malabar 2015: Strategic Power Play within the Indian Ocean,” IDSA, October 28, 2015, <http://www.idsa.in/idsanews/malabar-2015-strategic-power-play-indian-ocean-281015>

<sup>29</sup> Ramanand Garge, “Malabar-2015: Emerging Collective Defence in the Indo-Pacific,” *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs* 7, no. 4 (2015): 252-255.

<sup>30</sup> Sushant Singh and Pranav Kulkarni, “Question of Joint Patrolling with the US does not Arise: Need to Cut the Flab from the Military: Parrikar,” *Indian Express*, March 5, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/question-of-joint-patrolling-with-the-us-does-not-arise-need-to-cut-the-flab-from-the-military-parrikar/>

the US naval warships and aircrafts will now be able to gain refuelling, repair and other logistical support from the Indian military bases. The previous government could not finalise the three foundational agreements including the LSA, the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA). While the Modi government still has some reservations on CISMOA and BECA, it has taken a major step by moving forward with the LEMOA.

The agreement will provide greater credence to the Indo-US strategic partnership and complement the US rebalance to Asia Pacific, which has a strong maritime focus. The US has decided to shift 60 per cent of its naval forces to the Asia Pacific region by 2020.<sup>31</sup> The LEMOA will, thus, facilitate the US naval ‘re-balance’ to the region and serve as a building block for the future Indo-US maritime cooperation. The recently concluded agreement could provide new incentives for India to access Diego Garcia and Djibouti, which would only add up to India’s future ambitions in line with its maritime strategy. None the less, it is pertinent to mention here that the LEMOA allows for the US to have access to the Indian bases and logistical support. However, the Indian access to the US bases would be governed by the terms of the bilateral agreements between the US and such states.

### *DTTI and Make in India Campaign*

India’s constellation of interests in Asia Pacific is seen as being advanced by the US support to its role as a ‘net security provider’ in the IOR. It is, nonetheless, cognisant of its limited capabilities and therefore in coordination with the US is in a process of modernising its military forces. In return for such high-end technology cooperation and transfers of weapon equipment to close its military gap with China, India has had to contend with the US needs of logistical access to its military bases in the IOR.

It has been concerned with the sighting of the Chinese submarines four times every three months on average near India’s Andaman and Nicobar

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<sup>31</sup> Leon Panetta, “US to Deploy 60% of Navy Fleet to Pacific,” *BBC*, June 2, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-18305750>

Islands in the Indian Ocean in proximity to the Malacca Straits.<sup>32</sup> The US and India are now engaged in talks for Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW). The US expressed its willingness to share the US P-8 spy aircraft with India, which is considered to be Pentagon's most effective submarine hunting weapon. It is capable of using torpedoes, depth charges, SLAM-ER missiles, Harpoon anti-ship missiles and other weapons.<sup>33</sup>

According to Sourabh Gupta, "the understanding to share aircraft carrier catapult-launch technology and design capabilities will enable the two navies to operate a complementary set of deck-based platforms P-8I patrol aircraft; E-2D Hawkeye early warning aircraft; F/A-18E/F Super Hornet fighters."<sup>34</sup> He also anticipates that in the coming few years, the navies of the US and India could be in a position to individually operate a collaborated network of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets that allow a common information picture about the eastern Indian Ocean to be formed and exchanged as well as provide a basis for cooperative responses to any possible threats.<sup>35</sup> Both sides are jointly working on two pathfinder projects — digital helmet-mounted displays and joint biological tactical detection systems. Mobile generators and Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) warfare protection gear has already been finalised for production.<sup>36</sup> Besides this, India and the US are making progress on co-producing jet engines and aircraft carrier technologies. Both sides have agreed to co-produce the *Raven* unmanned aerial vehicle, reconnaissance modules for the C-130J and other weapons.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sanjeev Miglani and Greg Torode, "Weary of China's Indian Ocean Activities, US, India Discuss Anti-submarine Warfare," *Reuters*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-submarines-idUSKCN0XS1NS>

<sup>33</sup> "US Military Wants India to Counter China's Rise," *Press TV*, June 6, 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/06/06/469132/India-US-China-navy-Harris>

<sup>34</sup> Sourabh Gupta, "US-India Defence Partnership 2.0: Making Good (incrementally) on Strategic Congruence," CSIS, May 12, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-43-us-india-defense-partnership-20-making-good-incrementally-strategic-congruence>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> "India-US to Jointly Develop Gear to Protect Soldiers Against Biological , Chemical Warfare," *NDTV*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-us-to-jointly-develop-gear-to-protect-soldiers-against-biological-chemical-warfare-768614>

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Burgess, "The US Pivot to Asia and Renewal of the US-India Strategic Partnership," *Comparative Strategy* 34, no. 4 (2015): 369.

The DTTI was originally proposed by the former US Deputy Secretary of Defence, Ash Carter, in 2012, which received greater attention after Cater assumed the role of the US Secretary of Defence in February 2015.<sup>38</sup> The first four projects under the DTTI were announced during President Obama's visit to India in 2015. The agreement was to pursue four pathfinder projects under the DTTI as well as cooperation on aircraft carriers and jet engine technology were announced. Currently six projects are under consideration by both sides.<sup>39</sup>

Parallel to the US initiated DTTI, Prime Minister Modi announced the 'Make in India' project to strengthen India's defence industry and make it more self-reliant. Currently, India's Defence Industrial Base (DIB) comprises 52 defence laboratories and establishments under Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO); nine defence public sector undertakings and 39 ordinance factories under the Department of Defence Production of the Ministry of Defence (MOD). Moreover, there are many companies in the private sector.<sup>40</sup> While India seeks to upgrade its military arsenal, it has been heavily reliant on imports, while China has steadily grown into an exporter of military arms.<sup>41</sup> According to a Self Reliance Review Committee, constituted in 1992, India aimed to steadily increase its Self Reliance Index (SRI) from 30 per cent in 1992-93 to 70 per cent in 2005.<sup>42</sup> That target has yet to be met with India's SRI varying between 26 and 48 per cent during the 2006-07 and 2010-11 period.<sup>43</sup>

The Modi government's flagship 'Make in India' initiative spans 25 different sectors but defence manufacturing is at the heart of the project. A number of reforms have been undertaken by the government to mobilise

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<sup>38</sup> Sushant Singh, "DTTI: First Signs Good but India to Wait and Watch on Defence Ties with US," *Indian Express*, January, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/dtti-first-signs-good-but-india-to-wait-and-watch-on-defence-ties-with-us-obama-modi-trump-4493368/>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Laxman Kumar Bahera, *Indian Defence Industry: An Agenda for Making in India* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>41</sup> The SRI is calculated as a percentage share of indigenous content in total procurement expenditure.

<sup>42</sup> Standing Committee on Defence (2006-07), 14th Lok Sabha, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), 14th Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, 2007, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Bahera, *Indian Defence Industry*, 52.

defence production efficiently, which include increasing the upper limit of foreign investment in defence production from the earlier 26 per cent to 49 per cent; encouragement of the private sector to make investments in defence production as public sector defence entities so far failed to account for self sufficiency; articulation of first ever defence exports strategy along with a set of guidelines for grant of defence export licenses.<sup>44</sup> The ultimate goal is to achieve at least 70 per cent of self reliance in defence production to reduce reliance on the import of arms.

In nutshell, the DTTI is a parallel to Modi's 'Make in India' project, which brings into India's long held aspirations to acquire the cutting edge technologies and to be able to co-produce them indigenously. The US sees value in promoting the DTTI as a facilitator of India's self reliance project to undermine India's dependence on the Russian imports besides seeking a more lucrative and growing arms market for its own exports. This in turn would also have the likely effect of increasing India's reliance on the US and making it more sensitive to the American interests across the world including in Asia Pacific, where both the states are confronted by the rise of China as a peer competitor.

### **India in Trump's "America First" Policy**

President Trump's decision to pull out of the TPP gave mixed signals to the US allies in Asia Pacific about its commitments to the region. Japan and Australia are the staunchest allies of the US in Asia Pacific. However, President Trump's meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, though apparently for the usual rhetoric emphasising the enduring nature of the US-Japanese strategic partnership, was unable to mask the underlying tensions. President Trump reiterated that the US allies in Asia Pacific and elsewhere across the globe need to ramp up their economic contributions for the continued US security commitments. His telephonic correspondence with the Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, was described by Trump as "the worst call by far."<sup>45</sup> The diplomatic spat followed the Australian Prime Ministers assertion that the US honour an agreement to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Glen Thrush, "US-Australia Rift is Possible after Trump Ends Call with Prime Minister," *New York Times*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/us/politics/us-australia-trump-turnbull.html>

accept 1,250 refugees from an Australian detention centre made during the Obama era, which President Trump later described as a “dumb deal.”<sup>46</sup>

Such developments were misconstrued as an indication of the waning interest of the US in the region. On the contrary, the US has actually deepened its strategic engagement within the region. In order to strengthen the US influence, the US DOD announced its support for the Asia Pacific Stability Initiative in May 2017. Under the terms of the initiative, the US will invest US\$7.5 billion in the Asia-Pacific region over the next five years to upgrade military infrastructure, further conduct military exercises and deploy more troops and ships.<sup>47</sup>

Under the Trump administration, the US foreign policy has prioritised three key issues within Asia; maintenance of stability in the Indo-Pacific, safeguarding US trade interests and reigning in the North Korean regime. The US considers India’s role integral to the attainment of all these objectives. Despite an inauspicious start with President Trump’s accusations against India for receiving billions of dollars in return for signing the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the issue of H1B visa for the Indian skilled workers entry into the US, the first meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi, on June 27, 2017, yielded positive results for both sides.

The National Defence Authorisation Act for fiscal year 2017 (NDAA-2017) designated India as a major defence partner, which brings India at par with the closest American partners in terms of defence trade and technology transfer. Although an initiative of the Obama administration to allow India access to the US technology at par with its closest allies, the Trump Administration has also sought to continue cultivating strong defence ties with India. This was made evident by the US government’s decision to clear the sale of 22 Predator Sea Guardian hi-tech unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to India a few days before the first meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Trump.<sup>48</sup> With the enhanced maritime domain

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Zhang Tengjun, “Trump’s Asia-Pacific Policy Takes Shape,” *Global Times*, August 10, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1055759.shtml>

<sup>48</sup> Lalit K Jha and Yoshita Singh, “US Clears Sale of Guardian Drones to India,” *Wire*, June 27, 2017, <https://thewire.in/151745/us-clears-sale-of-guardian-drones-to-india/>

awareness presented by the Guardian, India can monitor the Chinese excursions in and around the Indian Ocean and — where national interests overlap — alleviate the need for a direct US presence, thus, serving the US interests and also contributing to an expansion of the Indian maritime power.

Prior to President Trump's tour to the five Asian nations, starting November 3, 2017, Sarah Sanders was asked in her daily news conference "if the administration sees India as a pivotal part of the US strategy when it comes to Asia Pacific more broadly?" Her response was, "It (India) certainly plays a big role," highlighting the continued importance the US places upon India in managing the affairs of the Asia Pacific region.<sup>49</sup> Also, during his tour, President Trump repeatedly made use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' instead of the more commonly used 'Asia Pacific.' The term, which signifies a coupling of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is seen as an attempt to legitimise India's involvement within the new regional construct, besides propping up India as a regional counterweight to the Chinese influence. The term though never employed in official discourse by any past US President, was none the less used by the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in a speech delivered in Honolulu in 2010, as well as in an op-ed she wrote for *Foreign Policy* in 2011.<sup>50</sup> By rechristening "Asia-Pacific" as "Indo-Pacific," she brought back the strategic significance of both the Indian Ocean and India in America's new approach to the region.<sup>51</sup>

In December 2017, the National Security Strategy (NSS) was released by the Trump administration, which provides an insight into the US strategic priorities and the roadmap for the future US security strategy. The NSS categorises "Russia and China as revisionist powers" and calls for the advancement of the American influence by focusing on allies and partners including Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>52</sup> More prominently, the document makes reference to the role of India, describing

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<sup>49</sup> "India Plays Big Role in Indo-Pacific Region: White House," *Tribune*, November 1, 2017, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/india-plays-big-role-in-indo-pacific-region-white-house/490775.html>

<sup>50</sup> Nikhil Sonnad, "All About Indo-Pacific: The New Term Trump is using to refer to Asia," *Quartz*, November 7, 2017, <https://qz.com/1121336/trump-in-asia-all-about-indo-pacific-the-new-term-trump-is-using-to-refer-to-asia/>

<sup>51</sup> Pant and Joshi, *The Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> US, White House *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>



it as “a leading global power and strong strategic and defence partner.”<sup>53</sup> Previously, President Obama had likewise emphasised the US “economic and strategic partnership with India” in the backdrop of the US rebalancing strategy within the NSS issued in 2015.<sup>54</sup>

On matters relating to trade, President Obama sought to take advantage of India’s rapidly growing consumer middle class by forging stronger trade ties and increasing foreign investment in the country. Despite this, India did not commit membership in the US-led TPP and instead preferred the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RECP) due to its flexible trading procedures. President Trump has similarly emphasised an economic partnership with India, but one, which is based on removing barriers to the US exports and reducing trade deficit. The US is India’s biggest export market and by far its biggest partner in trade in services. It is also capturing a larger share of the East market. Of India’s overall trade (exports & imports) of US\$750 billion plus, close to half comes through trade with East Asia.<sup>55</sup> As Asia’s third largest economy, India, therefore carries considerable weight in the US economic policy.

Another key priority of the Trump administration has been to deter the North Korean regime from taking provocative military actions. North Korea test fired its first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) with the capability to target the US mainland including all of Alaska. Until January 2017, North Korea conducted three nuclear and three long range missile tests. On 4 July, 2017, as the US Independence Day celebrations were underway, Pyongyang announced that it had conducted its first ever ICBM capable of attacking the US mainland.<sup>56</sup>

President Obama’s approach, centred on “strategic patience” in dealing with the threats emanating from North Korea, was outlined in the NSS

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> US, White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington D.C: The White House, February 2015), [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/jss\\_footnote\\_guide\\_may\\_2015.pdf](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/jss_footnote_guide_may_2015.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> Raviprasad Narayanan, (Associate Professor at Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University) email Message to author, April 4, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> “North Korea Claims Successful Test of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile,” *Guardian*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/04/north-korea-launches-ballistic-missile-japans-defence-ministry-says>

2015.<sup>57</sup> President Trump has been vocal in his criticism of the Obama administration's approach towards North Korea but has had little choice except to follow a similar strategy as that of his predecessor. Besides the bellicose rhetoric emanating from the White House, the US strategy continues to rely on pressurising North Korea through diplomatic and economic sanctions while encouraging other states to also isolate the rogue regime.

China and India's responses have been markedly different to the US calls to restrain North Korea. The Chinese President, Xi Jinping's meeting with the US President Trump during the G-20 Summit raised the possibility that the two countries could work towards better relations. The Chinese President assured his American counterpart that China would contribute towards fruitful negotiations. However, China remains North Korea's largest trading partner and the biggest source of humanitarian aid to the country. Despite the UN sanctions on the country, its trade relations with China imply that the country continues to thrive on the basis of its aid and trade with China, rendering the US sanctions ineffective in pressurising the North Korean regime. The US is, therefore, clearly dissatisfied with Beijing's efforts for bringing an end to the North Korean belligerent approach.

To this effect, the US is in the process of assessing the possibility of the imposition of secondary-sanctions on the Chinese citizens, companies and banks that are involved in financial transactions with North Korea, initially, targeting what the US officials have called "low-hanging fruits," as a warning to Beijing that the US could expand such sanctions in future.<sup>58</sup> In Beijing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, reiterated China's opposition to unilateral sanctions outside the framework of the UN and that China has been fully enforcing the UN resolutions. Getting China's help on passing the UN resolutions and then putting unilateral sanctions on China was like "abandoning one's benefactor upon achieving one's goal."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> National Security Strategy 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Matt Spetalnick and David Brunnstrom, "US Considers New Sanctions on Chinese Banks to Address North Korean Threat," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2017/0714/US-considers-new-sanctions-on-Chinese-banks-to-address-North-Korea-threat?cmpid=FB>

<sup>59</sup> "US Prepares New Sanctions on Chinese Firms Over North-Korea Ties-Official," *New York Times*, July 14, 2017,

Discontented with the pace of progress and efforts made by Beijing on the North Korean issue and ready to challenge China's assertions in the South China Sea, the US has adopted a tougher approach towards China. The Freedom of Navigation Operations have resumed in the South China Sea by the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Group leading to greater friction in the US-China relations since February 2017.<sup>60</sup> China has responded by warning the US against challenging its sovereignty in the South China Sea. Prior to the resumption of the naval patrols, China had concluded its own naval exercises in the South China Sea involving its own aircraft carrier group. This does not bode well for the regional peace and security in the region.

By contrast, India announced that it would halt all the trade exchanges with North Korea following the escalation of tension in the Korean peninsula in April 2017. Until recently, India remained North Korea's third largest trading partner after China and Saudi Arabia. In the fiscal year 2015-2016, India exported US\$111 million worth of goods to North Korea and imported about \$88 million, according to the Indian government data.<sup>61</sup> North Korea's biggest source of revenue comes from the sale of coal to the countries including India and China. Under the terms of the ban, India will no longer conduct trade or allow the exchange of North Korean individuals to visit the country for the purpose of training or technical cooperation. Therefore, in contrast to China, the US has found India a cooperative and willing partner to manage the security threats emanating from North Korea.

## Conclusion

The Indo-US relationship has come a long way in the post-Cold War era. Despite many rounds of elections, the bilateral relationship has continued to strengthen due to overarching strategic, economic and political convergences. While some criticism within the US about India as a geo-political underperformer still persists, current trends and developments indicate that India's interests are fast becoming global and the US is willing to assist India's rise as a geo-political contender to China's growing

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<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/07/14/business/14reuters-northkorea-usa-sanctions-exclusive.html>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Vana Kottasová and Sugam Pokharel, "North Korea Cut off by Third Biggest Trading Partner," *CNN*, May 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/01/news/north-korea-india-trade-ban/index.html>

influence in Asia Pacific. Within India, the opinion continues to be divided on the US commitment to India's strategic interests with some arguing that the US advances towards India are more rhetoric than reality.

However, an assessment of the growing rapprochement between the two states highlights that there has been a steady growth of relations, owing to the continuity in strategic preferences of successive governments in India post-1991. India's Look East policy that seeks to expand its engagement in Asia Pacific through its upgraded "Act East Policy" is in synchronisation with the US security strategy for Asia Pacific, a core feature of which is impeding the expansion of China's influence in the region. India has therefore come with greater prominence in the US security strategy for Asia Pacific, especially since President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' and has continued to subsequently hold significance in the Trump administration, highlighting the broad Indo-US strategic convergence in Asia Pacific.