

## Recalibrating US-India ties towards a coherent Indo-Pacific strategy by Puneet Ahluwalia and Prateek Joshi

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Since 2004, Indian Maritime Doctrine has mentioned “the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific combine to the Pacific-Indian.” While this perspective predates China’s maritime muscle flexing, there is no missing the competition with Beijing. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to re-energize India’s engagement with ASEAN nations, Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands, a shift encompassed by the decision to modify New Delhi’s strategy from “Look East” to “Act East.”

Strategist C Rajamohan argues that “the term Indo-Pacific allows the recognition of two important changes in the regional structures around us. One is the fact that Chinese economic interests and naval presence in the Indian Ocean have grown over the last decade. The other is the slow but certain rise in India’s economic and security profile in the Pacific. The idea that the Indian and Pacific Oceans are two different worlds has become increasingly unsustainable.”

How can India compete with China’s hard and soft power in the Indo-Pacific when New Delhi already risks being bested by Beijing in its immediate neighborhood? Deepening defense ties with Washington, and engaging immediate neighbors and distant littoral powers in strategic and economic spheres under the broader umbrella of US-India cooperation is the answer to this question. Most importantly, the two countries should build the US-India relationship on contours defined by the 2015 “US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region,” which outlines measures to jointly deepen defense and economic ties with the region.

### Toward deeper US-India defense cooperation

US-India defense ties are the closest ever following successful negotiation of the landmark Logistics Exchange Agreement (LEMOA) and the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). The LEMOA resulted in Reliance Defense and Engineering inking a [major contract](#) this February with the US Navy to provide repair and alteration services for ships of the Seventh Fleet. This is an excellent example of aligning US-India defense cooperation in the context of New Delhi’s Indo-Pacific pivot. Now, expectations are high that the Trump administration will pick up this relationship where Obama left off.

One recent analysis [highlighted](#) the long awaited recalibration in US-India defense cooperation. “That long-term

alignment, rooted in shared values, is also animated by a mutual appreciation of China’s challenge to both country’s security interests and the stability of the broader Indo-Pacific...the next Administration can work with Congress to reform the antiquated export control regime that is limiting defense cooperation between Washington and Delhi.” As expected, the Trump administration made necessary changes in export control laws in February, recognizing India as a “Major Defense Partner.” The [new rule](#) “creates a presumption of approval” for Indian companies seeking to import Commerce Department-controlled military items, except for weapons of mass destruction-related equipment, which also means that only under the rarest circumstances will India be denied licenses.

Another key area of cooperation is aircraft carriers, which are indispensable to New Delhi’s ambitions to project power in this theatre. The recently signed [megadeal](#) with Israel, which includes equipping India’s indigenous aircraft carrier *INS Vikrant* with LRSAM air & missile defense systems, shows New Delhi’s urgency in this regard. Force projection capabilities make carriers crucial for any nation that aspires to expand its maritime footprint. India has only the *INS Viraat* which will be retired soon; the [massive time and cost overruns](#) in the Russia-led 44,500 ton *INS Vikramaditya* project (due to increased costs in retrofitting, [discovery](#) of defects during the process and a two-decade negotiation period) gave New Delhi ample reasons to rethink its dependence on Moscow. Indeed, Indian strategists now debate the wisdom of having aircraft carriers at all, given their costs.

Yet, as China’s aggressive militarization of the South China Sea continues and as the country launches its second carrier (with plans to construct still more), India cannot miss an opportunity to emerge as a counter-balancing power in the region. Deepening defense ties with the US is central to this goal.

### Intensifying the Indo-Pacific Pivot: developments and strategies

The Modi administration is strengthening linkages with neighboring and far-away littoral powers with newfound vigor. This year alone there has been the announcement of air exercises between India and Indonesia, as well as visits by Malaysian, Australian, and Bangladeshi leaders. All show the “Act East” policy in action. The recent [visit](#) of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to New Delhi concluded with a slew of agreements, including a framework deal for defense cooperation, and a \$4.5 billion concessionary line of credit. The agreements advance crucial projects, including “upgrading of Payra, Chittagong and Mongla ports, and airports, highways, roads and rail links,” deals that also create space for collaboration between US and Indian technical sectors providing state of the art infrastructure to Bangladesh.

This will boost India's soft power projection toward Bangladesh, following Beijing's conclusion of agreements worth \$24 billion with Dhaka last October. Another \$500 million line of credit has been extended for defense procurement by the Bangladeshi military; significantly, that agreement allows Bangladesh to source supplies from producers other than India, opening a market for the US armaments industry to provide Dhaka with sophisticated technologies. In the longer term, India and the US could design concessionary maintenance/upgrade packages for technologies and platforms bought by Dhaka. These collaborations would help Bangladesh to possess superior and independent maritime power-projection capabilities, in addition to building a healthy relationship with New Delhi.

Meanwhile, Canberra's growing wariness of Chinese ambitions has brought it closer to New Delhi, after Australia's participation in the 2007 *Exercise Malabar* drew [sharp criticism](#) from China. In last few years, both nations have not hid their desire to deepen strategic engagement. The joint statement signed during Prime Minister Turnbull's recent visit noted that the "two Prime Ministers welcomed continued and deepened trilateral cooperation and dialogue among Australia, India and Japan" and that "they agreed to invest in trilateral consultations with third countries to enhance regional and global peace and security." While [Malabar 2016](#) was held near Okinawa (only 400 km from the disputed Senkaku Islands) with Japan, focus should now be on quadrilateral drills including Australia. The strategy should explore all potential avenues of economic and strategic engagement once an integrated framework on this long-contemplated quadrilateral cooperation is finalized. After Turnbull's visit, Canberra again expressed interest in joining *Malabar*, an opportunity that New Delhi and Washington must turn into reality.

The stability of Indo-Pacific depends on New Delhi and Washington coming together and devising a coherent strategy girded by deepening strategic alliances and economic engagement.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*