

# INDIA'S NAVAL EXPANSION AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH THE US IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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## Abstract

*India views the Indian Ocean as an embodiment of its strategic presence in the region. India has realized the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean since its independence and is keenly interested in maintaining sustainable maritime operations. This strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has diversified India's national security objectives intertwined with its national interests. On top of that, the US has strengthened its relations with India in the last two decades; as a result, the Indo-US partnership is deemed to help India in becoming a pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean region. This has expanded India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region. In this sense, Indo-US strategic cooperation and bilateral agreements have granted the former an exceptional strategic role in the latter's strategic calculus and security interests in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, the US strongly supports India's military rise in the Indian Ocean region as a rightful Chinese competitor. China is not ready to accept the Indian naval exceptionalism. In response to Indian engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, China is increasing its naval presence in the Indian Ocean region. This paper attempts to explore linkages between India's naval rise in the Indian Ocean region due to Indo-US strategic partnership. Both powers have made a strategic handshake to contain rising China. In addition, the paper also explores the implications of India's naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean region and its implications for strategic stability and Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean, Navy, Indo-US Strategic Partnership, Pakistan, Net Security Provider.

## Introduction

**I**n pursuit of acquiring great power status, India is committed to transforming its navy into a 'blue-water navy' with advanced platforms that could protect India's key national interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In order to perform a wide range of naval operations, including naval diplomacy and exercising the Assured Second-Strike Capability (ASSC), India's navy aspires to acquire a range of conventional and nuclear capabilities. These modernization plans indicate that the prevailing conventional asymmetries among the regional navies are likely to grow, thus, resulting in a strategic imbalance in IOR, accelerating a shift in the existing balance of power in India's favor. Furthermore, as India aggressively operationalizes these capabilities, the

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potential naval skirmishes are likely to entail instability increasing the chance of escalation between rival states in the region.

India views the Indian Ocean as an embodiment of its strategic presence in the region. India has realized the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean since its independence and wants to create its dominance in the region. India's naval ambitions compelled it to create hegemony in IOR. In fact, India's naval modernization and its expanding strategic interests in the Indian Ocean have made it a pre-eminent maritime power. India is keenly interested in maintaining sustainable maritime operations to protect its national interests in IOR.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the Indo-US partnership has helped India to become a pre-eminent maritime power in the region. The convergence in Indian and US interests is likely to stir an environment of competition in the region as China is also looking to increase its presence, in response. The foremost factors behind China's rationale to increase its presence are its connectivity, road routes, and the dilemma of Straits of Malacca.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, the Indo-US strategic partnership has expanded. The "strategic handshake" between two powers is primarily to contain China and encourage India to act as a counter-weight to China. The US interests are now aligned with India's interests and so far, the convergence of interests has resulted in a "technological handshake."<sup>3</sup> The cooperation is to meet the mutual security challenges to both countries in IOR and South Asia overall. However, these developments and cooperation carry strong repercussions for other players of the region, specifically, Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

This study is based on deductive reasoning applying a top to bottom approach. It adopts the exploratory model of reasoning by utilizing sampling of existing literature on the subject. Furthermore, this paper attempts to trace linkages between India's aggressive posture in IOR and the effects of Indo-US partnership in asserting India's hegemony in the region. The paper also maps the history of Indo-US strategic cooperation under Obama and Trump administrations which has helped India to augment its naval muscles in IOR specifically and in general, encapsulates its expansion in strategic cooperation. Moreover, after mapping the cooperative arrangements between India and the US, this paper outlines the implications of this strategic cooperation for Pakistan that calls for a check on a destabilizing strategic equation in IOR.

## **India's Maritime Strategy**

To begin with, the Indian maritime strategy document titled 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' has laid the broader aims and objectives of its exploration of blue waters. The strategy document broadly identifies that India's maritime ambitions pivot around its vital geostrategic location and the evolution in Indian civilization as cosmopolitan.<sup>5</sup> In addition, India's maritime expansion is in view of the Indian Ocean environment which is linked with her economic, military, and technological growth. Moreover, the environment also allows India to rationalize its

interactions with its allies and partners in the Indian Ocean to widen her national security imperatives and political interests stretched gradually beyond IOR.<sup>6</sup>

Indian maritime strategy is designed in line with its aspirations to enhance its stature in the comity of nations. In order to sustain the economic growth, to address the perceived security-related challenges, and to acquire great power status, India accords great importance to IOR. The primary tools to achieve these objectives are diplomacy, enhanced trade, and establishing strong strategic relationships. Indian Navy is expected to perform all of these functions ranging from war preparedness to naval diplomacy, particularly, during peacetime. By acquiring 'blue water' capabilities, Indian Navy aspires to undertake its traditional role, like ensuring the coastal defense of the country, providing sea-based nuclear deterrence (entailing its assured second-strike capability), projecting nation's soft power beyond its shores, and maximizing the sphere of influence in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Various natural factors put India in an advantageous position to exploit its significant geostrategic importance. Being located between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, India has the ability to exert influence in all these regions. As Indian peninsula penetrates deep into the ocean, it gives India opportunity to be undisputed master of Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. India also possesses a huge network of ports, comprising of 12 major and 187 minor ports, which handle almost 90 percent of its foreign trade carried out through sea. Furthermore, the large coastline of 7,516.6km also prevents it from potential commercial crises in the event of natural calamity.<sup>8</sup> To exploit these factors, the Indian government has become increasingly passionate about enhancing country's naval capabilities.<sup>9</sup> Reportedly, it aims to become 200-ship navy in the next decade. In the defence budget for the year 2015-16, 16% share has been allocated to Navy.<sup>10</sup> All these factors, in combination with well-planned maritime strategy, pave the way for Indian ingress into IOR and achieving its hegemonic designs in the region.<sup>11</sup>

### **Motivating Factors behind Naval Modernization**

The study of principles mentioned in different official documents reflect that the efforts behind Indian naval modernization plans are driven by multiple factors that shape navy's perceived role during war and peace. Indian aspiration to enhance the reach of its navy is the primary driving factor behind naval modernization. Maritime Strategy document (2007) highlights the primary and secondary areas of interest extending to South China Sea and East Pacific Region, which hold significant importance for India's "Act East" policy.<sup>12</sup> This policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region at different levels.<sup>13</sup> To exert greater sea-control and deny China of its increased influence in this area, India is likely to assertively use its nuclear attack submarines and aircraft carriers.<sup>14</sup>

From India's view point, the two potential nuclear adversaries in immediate neighborhood, specifically, Pakistan's allegedly non-adherence to "No First Use" (NFU)

posture and unclear nuclear threshold greatly alarm India. This calls for the development of a sea-based ASSC.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in the contemporary world, where only a handful of navies possess blue water capabilities, the advanced naval fleet equipped with sophisticated technologies is generally regarded as a symbol of national prestige. It is not surprising to note that Indian naval officials consider these developments to be an expression of national esteem and power. India has justified its naval nuclear modernization for an assured second-strike capability.<sup>16</sup> The INS Arihant submarine can be equipped with up to twelve K-15 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). India has developed other variants of its SLBMs including K-5 and K-6 with extended ranges. India has also developed sea-based version of its Nirbhay cruise missile and is inducting Dhanush missile. Likewise, INS Arihant has also conducted deterrence patrolling and after the Pulwama fiasco in 2019, India had deployed its nuclear submarines. All these latest developments signify Indian efforts to develop its ASSC based on its naval nuclear capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

### India as a Major Defence Partner of US in IOR

In the wake of the abrupt economic and military rise of China, the US perceives India as a major ally in the region and strongly supports its maritime expansion. The US and India share common interests in IOR. Both states recognize the strategic importance of IOR as it has played a significant role.

*The Indian Ocean Region is at the nexus of global trade and commerce, with nearly half of the world's 90,000 commercial vessels and two-thirds of global oil trade traveling through its sea lanes. The region boasts some of the fastest-growing economies on Earth and is home to a quarter of the world's population. While the region offers unprecedented opportunities, it is also confronting a myriad of security challenges, including terrorism, transnational crime, trafficking-in-persons, and illicit drugs. To combat these challenges, the US seeks opportunities to broaden and strengthen partnerships with India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal to respond to shared regional challenges.*<sup>18</sup>

US interests in IOR are indicative of the fact that it wants to contain China by providing technological, military, and economic support to India in the region. India and the US share a wide spectrum of mutual interests in the Indian Ocean that pulls them together to establish closer ties.<sup>19</sup> Though the two states usually emphasize more upon transnational challenges, such as piracy and extremism; however, the China factor seems to be the most dominating of all these reasons prompting enhanced bilateral cooperation. Considering India as a rightful competitor with China, the US strongly supports India's military rise in the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> However, during the 1980s, the US was primarily concerned with the Soviet Union rather than China. Therefore, China remained a secondary priority.

Indian experts argue that defense partnership between the two countries has now become indispensable. The foundation stone of Indo-US strategic partnership was laid during Bush's era and the partnership dates back to Clinton administration but it got pace when the US agreed to transfer nuclear technology to India in 2005.<sup>21</sup> This

partnership was further bolstered during the President Obama administration. The partnership achieved major goals accomplished through the strategic and technological handshake between the US and India. Indo-US defense trade has reached \$ 18 billion from \$ 1 billion as it blossomed during President Obama's reign.<sup>22</sup> Both countries launched the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) in 2012. Seven joint working groups were established under DTTI to explore projects and programs to increase collaborative work. Likewise, both countries also signed two science and technology project agreements worth \$ 2 billion.<sup>23</sup>

In June 2016, the US designated India as a "Major Defence Partner." The status is unique to India as it attempts to "elevate the US defense partnership with India to a level commensurate with that of the US closet allies and partners."<sup>24</sup> The status was given in the backdrop of framework signed by then US Secretary Ash Carter and former Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar for US-India defense relationship in June 2015. India and the US agreed to sign the Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016. Under LEMOA, both countries agreed to conduct close military operations. The agreement will give access to both countries "to designated facilities on either side for refueling and replenishment" including "port calls, joint exercises, training, and humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief."<sup>25</sup> The convergence of interests under President Obama and Prime Minister Modi was the trilateral MALABAR naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in 2015. Previously in 2007, China lodged its protest against the multilateral naval exercises in the region, but PM Modi went ahead with the inclusion of Japan. The naval exercise was aimed to enhance cooperation at the multilateral level while India steered the whole exercise.<sup>26</sup>

Under the current administration of President Trump, the defense ties with India are exponentially growing. Both countries are on a path to solidify their defense partnership which has not been witnessed in previous administrations. To bolster their defense ties both countries have agreed to conduct land, sea, and air exercises.<sup>27</sup> However, it is noticeable that Trump administration is on following the policies adopted during President Bush and Obama's tenures. Both presidents "aspired to move closer to India strategically and succeeded measurably in areas like arms sales."<sup>28</sup> All these efforts by previous administrations have yielded a surge of US export of arms to India. The arms sale has increased by up to 557%, between 2013 to 2017.<sup>29</sup> In fact, "American arms sales to India currently stand around \$18 billion and could climb after the approval of a deal to allow India to buy \$1 billion worth of naval guns and ammunition,"<sup>30</sup> according to the New York Times citing Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The US House of Representatives passed a \$621.5 billion defense expenditure bill, in July 2018, that proposes to advance defense cooperation with India. The India-related amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act-2018 (NDAA) passed by the House requires the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State to develop a strategy for advancing defense cooperation between the US and India. NDAA passed by the Senate. President Trump's administration has granted a special status to India tagged as Strategic Trade Authorization (STA-1) status in July 2018. The

status has been previously granted only to NATO allies including Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The status permits India to import hi-tech defense products from the US. These items would help India in bolstering its defense (and offense) against its arch-rivals, Pakistan and China. The hi-tech items will be exported to India without a transaction-specific license. The special status will speed up India's purchase of defense technologies and ready-made products from US defense companies.<sup>31</sup>

The first-ever 2+2 dialogue is the hallmark of Trump administration's strategic relations with India. The dialogue is an attempt to elevate both countries' strategic partnership. The joint statement released after the dialogue stated that:

*The two sides further decided to establish secure communication between the Minister of External Affairs of India and the US Secretary of States and between the Minister of Defense of India and the US Secretary of Defense. Both countries mutually agreed upon steps to strengthen defense ties further and promote better defense and security coordination and cooperation.*<sup>32</sup>

The 2+2 dialogue process was held in September 2018 and it yielded two prominent agreements including the Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA). On top of that, the dialogue process further solidifies the Indo-US defense cooperation in the Indian Ocean and both agreed to start exchanges between the Indian Navy and US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT). This will gel and foster Indo-US maritime cooperation in the western Indian Ocean. COMCASA will help India to import hi-tech defense products from the US, which will help its land, sea, and air forces. The import of hi-tech defense technologies from the US and access to defense communication network will ensure the interoperability among the US and Indian military. Likewise, BECA will allow India to get geospatial information from the US for civil and military purposes.

A new draft bill was presented in the US House of Representatives on April 8, 2019. The proponent is Joe Wilson, a senior member of the US Committee on Foreign Affairs. The co-sponsors of the bill are three Democrats (Brad Sherman, Tulsi Gabbard, and Ami Bera) and two Republicans (George Holding and Ted Yoho). Mr. Bera and Ms. Gabbard both are Indian Americans. Whereas, Mr. Sherman, Ms. Gabbard, Mr. Yoho, and Mr. Holding are the co-chairs of the Indian caucus.<sup>33</sup> The bill is aimed at accelerating Indo-US strategic and defense cooperation and to overcome the obstacles in strengthening the partnership. The proposed bill suggests that India's status as a major defense partner has been recognized and reiterated. The content of the bill further stresses US commitments to work closely with India on the front of bilateral defense trade. This will allow India to transfer technology from the US on a fast track. This bill permits India to get license-free access to a variety of dual-use high-end technologies which will help it to support and strengthen its forces. This proposed bill suggests US firm resolve to act as a counterweight to the Chinese rise in IOR, Asia Pacific region, and South Asia. The bill seeks to consider this a US policy to approve and facilitate the transfer of advanced technology and strategic capability – consistent with

US conventional arms transfer policy – to support combined military and non-military missions with India. Further, the bill recommends that the US should continue to enhance defense and security cooperation with India in order to advance US interests in South Asia and greater Indo-Asia-Pacific regions.<sup>34</sup>

This proposed bill is the embodiment of 2+2 dialogue in which both sides agreed to communicate at secretary levels. It suggests that the Indian Minister of Defense and US Secretary of Defense will conduct a joint assessment of India's defense requirements "to support and carry out military operations of mutual interest for the US and India."<sup>35</sup> The joint assessment will help ease the defense export control regulations and policies to facilitate India to get hi-tech defense products and capabilities and also to maintain and solidify its status as a major defense partner. As per the amendment in the US Arms Export Control Act, the US can export arms to India in a similar way as it exports toward NATO, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Israel, and New Zealand. The bill also proposes the adoption of a reporting mechanism for assessing the progress over the above-mentioned bilateral agreements.

## **India's Diplomatic Initiatives in IOR**

PM Modi government is proactively engaging with littoral states. It has coined a term for its Indian Ocean outreach initiative, "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR).<sup>36</sup> This helps India to actively engage with like-minded states in the region and to counter China's increasing ties with littoral states. Modi government is particularly focusing on deepening maritime cooperation with Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. The establishment of surveillance radars, delivery of patrol vessels and aircraft, and agreements on infrastructure and investment development are few examples in this regard, not to mention India's active engagement in the Indian Ocean Region Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Furthermore, the grant of \$ 100 million to Vietnam for the acquisition of Indian naval ships and its strategic cooperation with Japan including the joint naval exercises reflect India's growing ties in the Pacific.<sup>37</sup>

## **India's Naval Build-up**

The Indian modernization and procurement of ships have been characterized by indigenous shipbuilding efforts at the levels of government, private and joint ventures.<sup>38</sup> The Indian shipbuilding industry has progressed at an accelerated rate in recent years and has been able to design and produce varied and complex designs ranging from Corvettes, Submarines, and even Catamarans. India is producing surface combat vessels with advanced structural and capability designs that will allow it to project its military might far away from its shores.<sup>39</sup>

Currently, India is operating one nuclear powered Akula submarine (a series of nuclear-powered attack submarine – SNN) leased from Russia. The type was commissioned in the Indian navy in 2012 as INS Chakra. Talks are underway to lease another Akula-class submarine.<sup>40</sup> In 2015, Indian authorities sanctioned a project to

indigenously build nuclear-powered attack submarines.<sup>41</sup> The conventional submarines of the Indian navy are numbered at 14 hulls. 10 are the Russian (Soviet) Kilo-class submarines while the other 4 are German designed Type-209 submarines modified to fulfill the Indian navy's requirements. Future Indian diesel-electric submarine fleet will be comprised of French Scorpène-class submarines being built locally in India. These are scheduled to incorporate an Indian designed AIP system and will be armed with Exocet, anti-ship missiles. The hulls of the first six boats have been completed and all are expected to be enter service by 2020.<sup>42</sup>

The Kolkata-class destroyers with stealth features are being built by Mazagon Dock Limited. The ship will carry BrahMos cruise missiles as offensive armament and employs Barak-1 and Barak-8 in short and medium-range anti-aircraft missiles. The Kamorta-class is designed as a dedicated anti-submarine vessel and with a hull and superstructure that reduces its cross-section. Four ships of the type are planned with three have been inducted.<sup>43</sup> The Indian navy has concluded a contract with South Korean Kangnam Corporation for the supply of eight minesweeper or countermine ships. These ships will play a pivotal role in safeguarding India's sea lines of communication as well as protecting its commercial and naval assets.<sup>44</sup> India, currently, operates two conventionally powered aircraft carriers, INS Vikramaditya and INS Viraat. INS Viraat carries the older Harrier jump-jets while Vikramaditya's air wing is equipped with MiG29Ks. Two aircraft carrier designs have been developed indigenously; the Vikraant class is conventionally powered and is currently under construction. The upcoming INS Vishal is a proposed nuclear-powered carrier.<sup>45</sup>

The joint development of Barak-8 with Israel gives the Indian navy the ability to shoot down not only aircraft and cruise missiles but also a defensive capability against Ballistic missiles. The Barak-8 is a highly maneuverable, solid-fueled, an active homing missile with a reported range of up to 70kms. The GSAT-7 satellite allows the Indian navy to coordinate operations in an area of 1000 square km. The space platform can also communicate with strategic submarines for passing on orders and information through the use of multiband transponders. This gives it the ability to achieve link up with submarines operating at various depths. The Indian navy also has an extremely Low-Frequency transmission facility at Kattabomman Island. The Indian navy is also planning to build a naval base at the Assumption Island in Seychelles. This will give India the ability to station naval assets well away from the reach of its regional enemies, such as China and Pakistan.<sup>46</sup>

### **Implications for Strategic Stability of the Region**

The combined pressure emanating from the Indian conventional and unconventional build-up will result in strategic instability in the region. Pakistan, in particular, would be much vulnerable due to the conventional superiority of the Indian navy as the asymmetries grow in the coming years. Pakistan has already established the Naval Strategic Force Command, although it currently does not possess any platforms or delivery measures.<sup>47</sup> Sea-based deterrence complements deterrence stability only if both nuclear adversaries possess assured second-strike capability and the robust



institutions to actualize that capability. If either of the states involved, i.e., India outweighs the other in any of these aspects, it results in strategic imbalance leading to instability. The Indian induction of SLBMs has added another factor that acts to undermine the fragile strategic stability between India and Pakistan as it negates Indian "minimalistic posture" as SLBMs carried by the four planned SSBMs warrant a few dozen warheads of varying yield.<sup>48</sup> The Indian nuclear fissile material stock of highly enriched Uranium has been earmarked for naval propulsion plans and is one of the reasons why Pakistan continues to oppose the talks on the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).<sup>49</sup>

The Indian investment in Helicopter Landing Decks along with air support from aircraft carriers will give India the ability to open another front in case of any future conflict, i.e., by invading the coastal areas of Pakistan and thus, lowering the threshold. China also perceives the Indian naval strategy as threatening to its vital sea trade routes via the Malacca Strait and this can be one of the reasons why the former is investing heavily in the One Belt One Road initiative across Asia. The Indian navy's capabilities allow it to disrupt the shipping lines passing through the Strait of Malacca from where China imports 80% of its oil. The Gwadar seaport will play a crucial part in securing the energy lifeline of China through the CPEC project.<sup>50</sup> The preceding discussion reveals that the Indian navy is seen as a stabilizing factor in the region by the US and its western and Asian allies. Stability is a relative term, the interests of a state dictate the definition of stability and thus, varies accordingly. From the regional states' point of view, India's assertive naval posture is destabilizing the whole region.

## **Implications for Pakistan**

- **India as Net Security Provider:** The US is seen to have franchised its role to India in the so-called Indo-Pacific region. India has also taken up the western narrative of it being seen as a Net Security Provider in the region. This may be because the US has a limited capability to engage at multiple fronts simultaneously. Such designations for India, however, continue to fuel its sense of grandiose which subsequently emboldens it to pursue strategies of belligerence towards its neighbors, especially, Pakistan.
- **Strategic Export Controls Waiver:** The export control waiver granted to India has brought both countries, India and the US close to each other. This will help India to uplift its domestic defense industries to realize the 'Make in India' dream of its leadership. This will significantly impact the already existing asymmetries between India and its regional arch-rival Pakistan. India is developing a two-layered ballistic missile defense and it required the latest technology to improve the propulsion technology of its interceptor missiles. STA-1 will help India to improve the propulsion of its ballistic, cruise, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). India is actively pursuing an ASSC. In case it achieves an ASSC, as it has numerous tested nuclear-capable SLBMs, then it will be a pre-eminent naval

force in IOR with nuclear weapons in its armament. STA-1 is a dangerous development as far as Pakistan is concerned. It is a fact that most of the Indian naval developments in the Indian Ocean are Pakistan-centric. STA-1 status will help India to purchase and transfer technology from the West in order to completely neutralize Pakistan and counter Chinese ingress in the Indian Ocean.

- **Cooperation in Missile Defense:** US cooperation with India in missile defense is not new. The US has helped India in developing its space launch vehicles in the 1960s when US scientists helped Indian scientists in building a rocket propulsion system.<sup>51</sup> The Trump administration's 2019-Missile Defence Review has summarized the objectives of Indo-US missile defense cooperation as "the threats posed by offensive missile capabilities are no longer limited to a few regions around the world. There are now a number of states in South Asia that are developing an advanced and diverse range of ballistic and cruise missile capabilities. Within this context, the US has discussed potential missile defense cooperation with India. This is a natural outgrowth of India's status as a Major Defense Partner and a key element of US Indo-Pacific Strategy."<sup>52</sup>

The Missile Defence Review document did not explicitly mention Pakistan as a threat to India. However, it did not exclude it as the only missile capability possessor in South Asia. It is a fact that both countries are involved in a missile arms race. The emphasis of the Trump administration to discuss potential missile defense cooperation with India to counter missile threats emanating from hostile states is indicative of the fact that the US may help India in countering Pakistan's missiles.

### **Possible Outcomes of the Indo-US Cooperation Draft Bill**

The objective of this bill is to essentially highlight the prospects of Indo-US defense cooperation. This bill is not crafted in isolation and it endorses the previous developments of STA-1 status to advance Indo-US defense cooperation under the National Defence Authorization Act (2018). This bill has reiterated US recognition of India as a major defense partner. This bill strengthens Indo-US relations at another level. It removes numerous legal and political barriers to advancing their future cooperation. Without Presidential consent, India can now acquire defense technology from the US. In the coming few years, Indian import of arms will likely double and such developments are unfavorable for the strategic stability of the South Asian region.

### **Status of Non-NATO Ally**

The recently proposed bills drafted by US Congress representatives will further strengthen Indo-US defense collaboration and will eventually grant India the status of a Non-NATO ally. India has already been declared as Major Defence Partner of the US in South Asia and the so-called Indo-Pacific. This will enable India to foster its cooperation in missile defense with the US in South Asia.

## **Recommendations for Pakistan**

Pakistan is thriving in a region where the interests of major powers converge as well as diverge. Pakistan is allied with China and has offered its deep seaport Gwadar as a gateway to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The project is envisioned to increase economic cooperation and infrastructure development in Pakistan. Likewise, it is a flagship project of the Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) to end China's Strait of Malacca dilemma. On top of that, China's BRI project was announced in response to the US Asia Rebalance Policy, which envisioned India as a strategic partner to contain the rise of China. Pakistan, undoubtedly, became a party to this geopolitical transformation in the region. Formulating recommendations for Pakistan while living and becoming part of this geopolitical transformation is not an easy job, however, in the backdrop of the findings of this research, some key recommendations are as follows:

- Pakistan's role in CPEC should be more proactive and it should open gates for neighboring countries to participate in the project. This will increase the stakeholders in the project further promoting economic integration and thus, reducing the chances of conflict in the region.
- In doing so, Pakistan should announce its foreign policy objectives to clarify its position on regional cooperation and to further avoid the chances of conflict in the region.
- Pakistan should engage with India in formulating a sea-based nuclear restraint regime by specifically focusing on the definition of the role of SLBMs in the Indian Ocean.
- Indian and Pakistan navies should develop a hotline to avoid sea-based conventional confrontation in peacetime.
- A quadrilateral working group at the ministerial level of India, Pakistan, China, and the US should be formed to discuss sea-based nuclear CBMs.

## **Conclusion**

India's national security objectives are clear in the sense that it sees IOR as an extension of India. The rising Chinese ingress in IOR is posing considerable challenges to its dominance and hegemony in the ocean. China's Strait of Malacca dilemma has reinforced its regional connectivity plans with in-built challenging outcomes for India in IOR and South Asia. In response, the establishment of Indo-US defense cooperation is seemingly the only way for both countries to contain China. In doing so, the Indo-US defense cooperation has resulted in significant military uplift of Indian forces including its naval expansion in the Indian Ocean. India's naval expansion and modernization will greatly benefit from the Indo-US defense cooperation. India-US naval exercises are the first step towards creating a broader coalition and partnership in the Indian Ocean to counter China in particular and creating sustainable cooperation to give an uplift to India's defense industry in general. The Indo-US cooperation has posed a significant threat to strategic stability in IOR and South Asia by contributing to existing asymmetries. The growing equation of strategic partnership will embolden India to

pursue belligerent and aggressive strategies against its arch-rival, thereby, fueling a never-ending arms race in IOR, and yielding strategic asymmetries between the competing states. Pakistan is a key player in South Asia, however, the broader economic interests of the US are linked with India which are likely to further increase convergences between the two states and enhance their bilateral defense cooperation on a sustainable basis, thereby, further raising the stakes for Pakistan in IOR and a warning for ensuing strategic instability in the region.

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