

THE AMERICAN “PIVOT” AND THE INDIAN NAVY

It’s Hedging All the Way

Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi

Just after addressing the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2012, Leon Panetta, then the American secretary of defense, visited New Delhi, where he remarked that “defense cooperation with India is a lynchpin in this [pivot] strategy.”¹ Since the thrust of the “pivot” has been on the maritime balance of power

Harsh V. Pant is Professor of International Relations at King’s College London. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow with the Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C. His current research is focused on Asian security issues. His most recent books include The US-India Nuclear Pact: Policy, Process and Great Power Politics (Oxford), The Rise of China: Implications for India (Cambridge), and The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities, External Challenges (Ashgate). Yogesh Joshi is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. He has been a fellow at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, George Washington University, and is currently an international PhD partnering fellow at the Defence Studies Department, King’s College London. His PhD dissertation examines the interaction between political ideologies and international political structure in the making of Indian foreign and national security policy during the Bharatiya Janata Party–led government from 1998 to 2004.

in the Indo-Pacific, both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans have gained tremendous traction in the new U.S. strategy. From the very initiation of the pivot, India has featured on the American radar as an important strategic partner. Based on publicly available Indian government and Indian Navy documents, as well as structured interviews with key Indian naval officials, this article investigates the Indian Navy’s response to the strategy of the pivot and argues that it has had no major influence on its approach to the region. This is evident in the unchanging nature of its exercises with the U.S. and regional navies, stagnation in defense agreements with the United States important for interoperability, and Indian Navy reservations on increasing its constabulary role in the Indian Ocean. This lack of response can be located in the larger strategic discourse that is guiding Indian foreign policy vis-à-vis the changing balance of power in the region. Indian strategy so far has

been primarily to hedge—which translates into reluctance and caution when it comes to actively participating in the pivot.

This article first discusses the current strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific, underlining the transition of power taking place in the region—that is, China’s ascending relative power vis-à-vis the United States. Further, it reflects on the strategy of the pivot as a response to this strategic flux, suggesting that this power transition is more likely to unfold on the high seas rather than on Asia’s continental landmass and that the Indo-Pacific region, therefore, is geostrategically significant for the success of the pivot. Subsequently, this article focuses on the Indo-Pacific nature of America’s pivot, then on India’s emergence as a potent naval power in the region. India’s maritime strategy, ambitions, and objectives are seen as largely compatible with those of the United States. An empirical appraisal of the Indian Navy’s response to the pivot follows, along three dimensions: naval exercises with the U.S. and regional navies, progress on interoperability with the U.S. Navy, and change in India’s constabulary services in the region. Finally, the article explains the unresponsiveness of the Indian Navy to the American strategy in terms of the larger Indian foreign-policy paradigm. It concludes with some policy recommendations for better coordination between the two countries in the Indo-Pacific, given their mutual apprehensions over China’s regional aims and their compatible objectives in seeking greater regional stability.

THE “PIVOT” AND THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERS

In late 2011, the Barack Obama administration issued a series of official statements and policy directives indicating a shift in America’s strategic focus. In a major foreign-policy speech to the Australian parliament, President Obama declared the strategy of a “pivot,” a shift that entailed a strong military commitment to the Asia-Pacific.² Action followed words: it was announced that 2,500 U.S. Marines would be stationed in the Australian port city of Darwin.³ By January 2012, the Pentagon was ready with a major policy directive, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*.⁴ The terminology it used to define the new strategic vision—one geared toward the Pacific—was “strategic rebalancing.”⁵

This rebalancing entailed a comprehensive shift in America’s military and diplomatic commitment to the Asia-Pacific. By the summer of 2012 the Department of Defense had declared that 60 percent of America’s naval assets would be stationed under the U.S. Pacific Command.⁶ Washington followed up by increasing its defense cooperation with Vietnam, renewing its military engagement with the Philippines, promising more conventional arms to Taiwan, and permanently stationing a flotilla of littoral combat ships in the port city of Singapore.⁷ New missile-defense systems were installed in East Asia, and similar plans were made

for Southeast Asia. Naval reallocation to the Pacific was followed up with the dedication of 60 percent of the U.S. Air Force to the Pacific theater by mid-2013.⁸ In April 2014, to reassure its Asian allies, President Obama visited a number of key countries in the Asia-Pacific. In Tokyo, Obama declared that the Senkaku Islands fall under the purview of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.⁹ He also signed a ten-year defense pact in Manila, paving the way for a greater U.S. military presence in the Philippines.

This dramatic change in U.S. military commitment to the region is largely a function of the astonishing rise of China. Riding high on two decades of double-digit economic growth, China is now on the cusp of becoming a serious regional military power. Capabilities notwithstanding, the transition appears all the more menacing because of China's aggressive posturing in the East and South China Seas, challenging the freedom of navigation in these waters. This behavior has aggravated concerns that a rising China may jeopardize America's basic commitments in the region, such as respect for international law, free and open commerce, open access to the global commons, and the principle of resolving conflict without the use of force.¹⁰

Since most of China's territorial conflicts are spread across the East and South China Seas, naval force projection has gained uncharacteristic momentum for a country that has had for most of its history a continental mind-set. China's maritime strategy and its increasing capabilities underscore, for some, Beijing's Mahanian ambitions.¹¹ It may simply overwhelm the smaller powers in the region. With respect to extraregional powers such as the United States, China's singular objective is to deny them any operational space in its oceanic sphere of influence.¹² Its robust submarine fleet and antiaccess/area-denial capabilities are aimed against any possible intervention by the U.S. Navy.¹³ The Chinese might also use these sea-denial platforms to conduct "anti-SLOC operations" (that is, against sea lines of communications), which its naval doctrine identifies as one of the six legitimate offensive and defensive campaigns it might carry out in the open seas.¹⁴ According to the Pentagon, trends in Chinese military power suggest that the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN's) DF-21D antiship ballistic missile will soon be able to target the entire South China Sea, the Malacca Strait, most of the Bay of Bengal, and parts of the Arabian Sea.¹⁵

Against this background, the pivot strategy "represents a simultaneous attempt to warn China away from using heavy-handed tactics against its neighbors and provide confidence to other Asia-Pacific countries that want to resist pressure from Beijing now and in the future."¹⁶ The focus of the pivot has been extensively on America's freedom and capability to intervene in Asia's littorals to maintain a healthy balance of power. The U.S. Navy, not surprisingly, has received enormous attention in recent years. It is the only service that has escaped the worst

consequences of budgetary sequestration and new capabilities continue to be introduced. Its activity in the Asia-Pacific theater has also seen a spike. However, China's oceanic offensive is not limited to its immediate neighborhood. Though the eastern Pacific is its immediate area of operation, where it would like to have absolute control, lately the Indian Ocean too has gained currency in China's grand strategy. Most of China's trade—energy or otherwise—passes through the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. China considers the Indian Ocean, with its multiple choke points, its “soft underbelly,” where constant vigilance might be required. America's articulation of a strategy of the pivot has catapulted the Indian Ocean to the center stage of the geopolitical tussle between Washington and Beijing. The Pentagon's “post-pivot” declarations underline that America's “security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean and South Asia.”¹⁷

The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is the highway of international commerce. Fifty percent of the world's container traffic and 70 percent of its crude and other oil products go through the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. Securing the Indian Ocean's SLOCs is extremely important for sustenance of U.S. allies in the eastern Pacific, as well as for the international economy.¹⁸ The Indian Ocean's geography makes it an extremely difficult place for an extraregional power to operate. Encircled by strategic choke points such as the Strait of Malacca and Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean highway can easily be blockaded by sea-denial strategies. Maintaining a constant presence in the Indian Ocean is therefore a strategic necessity. As two American analysts have argued, the U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean “provides important defense-in-depth for countering threats to strategic chokepoints.”¹⁹

The Indian Ocean may well be the space wherein India and China compete for supremacy in Asia. Whereas China is trying hard to spread its influence in the IOR, India—the preeminent power in the Indian Ocean—is turning its gaze toward the Pacific. This quest for “mastering space” in the Asia-Pacific has led to a naval competition between the two Asian giants.²⁰ The probability that any future conflict over the unsettled Himalayan frontier may spill over to the Indian Ocean and the eastern Pacific remains high. The clash of these geopolitical tectonic plates may ultimately render the Indian Ocean a “cockpit of great power rivalries.”²¹ For all these reasons, the Indian Ocean occupies a distinct place in America's strategic imagination, and therefore the pivot is not restricted to the Pacific. It has redefined Asia's oceanic geography—the Indian and Pacific Oceans have converged to become a “single strategic system.”²² However, as one American scholar cautions, “this reorientation will demand the redeployment of [U.S.] naval forces that have been traditionally split between the Atlantic and the Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, a unified, albeit massive, stretch of water.”²³

Contemporary Asia is witnessing a transition of power largely unfolding in its oceans. As in the great-power transitions of the past, naval force will be the principal determinant in the end result of this strategic flux. However, the success of the pivot and “strategic rebalancing” is far from assured. The ultimate outcome, as has been argued, “will turn on whether Washington has the will, and the wallet, to follow through the initiatives of the last several years.”²⁴ Owing to a large debt burden, the United States is going through an era of austerity. Cuts in defense outlays may range anywhere from \$450 billion to a trillion dollars.²⁵ Though “pivoting” toward Asia means strengthening U.S. naval forces, if the military sequestration continues the Navy will suffer. Cuts in American defense outlays will impinge on the U.S. Navy’s ability to operate simultaneously and with effect in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, just as the pivot to the Indo-Pacific entails greater commitments in the region.²⁶

It has rightly been suggested that as the United States directs its attention toward the Indo-Pacific and assumes more responsibilities there, “a potential mismatch between US policy objectives and the structure of American naval power looms over the coming decades.”²⁷ This is true especially given that the Indian Ocean’s numerous choke points may demand that “American naval forces confront transcontinental distances, complex strategic geography, and the emergence of anti-access threats that will severely complicate future operations.”²⁸ There is also a growing debate in America about finding suitable partners to share the load of strategic rebalancing. Any overcommitment by Washington would provide an incentive for potential partners to shift the burden onto U.S. shoulders; undercommitment, however, might force them to “bandwagon” with Beijing.²⁹ It is therefore important for the United States to be extremely careful in forging meaningful partnerships with credible strategic partners.

American officials have found a strategic partnership with India extremely enticing, especially in guarding the Indian Ocean from the negative fallouts of China’s rapid rise. Washington continues to express its appreciation of India “as a net security provider in the IOR.”³⁰ Maritime security cooperation between India and the United States has become a strategic necessity, especially for sustaining a favorable strategic equilibrium as Chinese power rises. American strategy, according to some, “should focus on supporting Indian pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean and closer U.S.-India strategic cooperation.”³¹

In both the U.S. government and strategic circles there is an emerging expectation that India should play a significant role in maintaining the maritime balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The readiness of India to assume that role, however, remains ambiguous, despite New Delhi’s assertions about India’s emergence as an Indo-Pacific maritime power.

INDIA AS AN INDO-PACIFIC MARITIME POWER

India's political leaders, diplomats, and strategic thinkers have been articulating an Indo-Pacific vision for the nation's maritime power in the twenty-first century for some time now. On a visit to Japan in May 2013, Manmohan Singh, then prime minister, mentioned the increasing "confluence of the . . . Pacific and the Indian Oceans," even as he cautioned his audience that "this region faces multiple challenges, unresolved issues and unsettled questions. Historical differences persist despite our growing inter-dependence." This was clearly an allusion to the rise of China and its impact on the region. Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, therefore, in Singh's view, is "essential for regional and global prosperity."³² The idea of the Indo-Pacific as an arena of geopolitical tussles also informs the Indian Navy's assessment of the strategic environment: "It signifies the fusion of two geopolitically sensitive and economically vibrant regions . . . [and] could well define the future trajectory of political interactions in the 21st century."³³ Accompanying this shift of focus toward the Indo-Pacific is a larger shift in self-perception, in that India's unique geography in the Indian Ocean "gives [it] a point of a pivot" in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁴

In the last two decades, the geographical extent of India's maritime interests has expanded to cover the whole of the Indo-Pacific. This geographical reimagination of India's maritime interests has been driven by India's economic performance and the growing economic opportunities in the East. India's trade with the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and with Japan, South Korea, and Australia has increased considerably (see the table). Moreover, with its booming economy, India's energy dependence on the Middle East has also increased; maintaining the flow of energy and commodities has become a prime concern. India is the fourth-largest consumer of oil and gas in the world, and its dependence on imports increased from 40 percent of total demand in 1990 to about 70 percent in 2011.³⁵ Sixty-four percent of these imports come from the Middle East and 17 percent from Africa, making security of supply

INDIA'S TRADE WITH ASEAN, AUSTRALIA, JAPAN, AND SOUTH KOREA

Partners	Trade (billions of dollars, 2007–2008)	Trade (billions of dollars, 2012–13)
India–ASEAN	40	80
India–Australia	10.9	13.8
India–Japan	9.89	16
India–South Korea	11.22	17.44

Sources: Government of India, *Annual Report 2012–13*; idem, *Annual Report 2007–08*.

routes in the Indian Ocean a vital national interest.³⁶ Economics, however, is only one among a number of drivers in this reorientation. Strategic necessities have hugely influenced India's approach to the Indo-Pacific.

India views growing Chinese naval power with concern. For the first five decades of India's independence, its geographical advantage of the Indian Ocean and its limited interests in the East facilitated its lackadaisical approach to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. China's rapid naval modernization and its forays into the Indian Ocean have forced New Delhi to rethink the role of its navy in maintaining the maritime balance of power. In the last decade, China has developed naval facilities in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan and is planning to build naval infrastructure in Seychelles.³⁷ Though Beijing considers these installations as economic hubs, some strategists in India argue that economics notwithstanding, they can be later converted into military facilities and used against India as an elaborate "string of pearls" to contain New Delhi's influence in the Indian Ocean.³⁸ The Indian Navy, as is evident from its 2007 doctrine, is particularly alarmed by China's growing naval presence in the region.³⁹ As one senior naval official underlined to the authors, "They [the Chinese] are definitely not building these facilities to develop golf courses."⁴⁰ Though the Indian national security adviser has tried to allay the fears engendered by the "string of pearls" theory, the Indian strategic community remains wary of China's ultimate intentions.⁴¹ China's antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden have also raised hackles with some in the Indian Navy who question the need for the PLAN's continuous deployment of two frontline warships and a tanker.⁴² But the rivalry also extends to waters beyond Malacca. If for China the Indian Ocean is not an Indian lake, New Delhi's imperative is to contest impressions in Beijing that the waters east of Malacca automatically fall under the latter's sphere of influence.⁴³ India's naval engagement in the East, therefore, has also been a reaction to China's expansion in the Indian Ocean region. The turf war between the two navies, as both nations further prosper and seek greater roles in regional dynamics, is set to grow. This was illustrated even in the search and rescue operations for the missing Malaysian jetliner MH370 in April 2014. China deployed eight major naval warships in this operation, a presence that may have been unthinkable a decade ago.⁴⁴ China also requested that India allow four of its warships to conduct search operations in the Andaman Sea, which New Delhi categorically rejected, insisting that search operations in that area are its own responsibility.⁴⁵

Another strategic imperative that has facilitated India's naval engagement in the Indo-Pacific is New Delhi's burgeoning relationship with Washington. The end of the Cold War forced India to mend fences with the world's only remaining superpower. However, nuclear proliferation and India's own nuclear status kept bilateral relations tense. Change accompanied the presidency of George W.

Bush. President Bush transformed Indo-U.S. ties by offering India the landmark civil nuclear energy cooperation pact.⁴⁶ His administration perceived India as a rightful competitor with China, with its growing clout in Asia, and foresaw India playing a particularly important role in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ Management of maritime threats in the IOR gained further momentum after 11 September 2001. The Indian Navy launched Operation SAGITTARIUS, providing escorts and protection to U.S. ships passing through the Indian Ocean, operationally relieving the U.S. Navy of its constabulary services in the region, and facilitating the American operations in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Annual joint naval exercises, suspended since 1998, were restarted by India and the United States in 2002, with a series now code-named MALABAR. This interaction fostered “operational cooperation” between the two navies, which, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, was evident in the post-tsunami relief operations in the Indian Ocean in 2004.⁴⁹ Learning from those experiences, the two navies established a “U.S.-India Disaster Response Initiative to spur greater training and engagement to prepare for combined responses to future disasters in the Indian Ocean Region.”⁵⁰

Following the footsteps of the Comprehensive Defence Agreement of 2005, India and the United States signed a Maritime Cooperation Agreement in 2006 that institutionalized cooperation between their navies. INS *Jalashwa*, a *Trenton*-class amphibious ship, joined the Indian Navy in 2007, augmenting its capability to undertake “amphibious and expeditionary warfare.” Subsequently, P8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft were obtained from Boeing, the Indian Navy thereby becoming the “first [foreign] navy in the world,” as India’s external affairs minister told his audience at Harvard University, to operate this “state of the art” aircraft.⁵¹

Strategic necessities notwithstanding, an important agent of change in India’s maritime ambitions has been the Indian Navy itself. Least ideologically driven and also the most strategic minded of all the services in India’s defense establishment, the navy has long articulated the need to expand India’s maritime vision. This ambitious streak in the Indian Navy’s thinking is evident in its policy documents, as well as in its increasing maritime engagement with states across the Indo-Pacific. Indian naval officials and maritime strategists seem to be “intent on a ‘naval forward strategy’ that, logically speaking, could extend eastward into the South China Sea and the Pacific Rim.”⁵² Forward defense of the subcontinent or of India’s traditional sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean means a forward presence on the very edge of the Indian Ocean and beyond in the Pacific. The logic of forward presence is manifest in the *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, a policy document released by the naval arm of the Integrated Headquarters of the Indian military in May 2004.⁵³ Unlike the “limited framework of defensive limited coastal ‘sea-denial’” that had defined the navy’s strategic thinking for the first fifty years of independence, the maritime doctrine in 2004 “moved to a more assertive competitive

strategy for projecting power deeper into and across the Indian Ocean.”⁵⁴ Recognizing that a shift in global maritime focus is taking place “from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Pacific-Indian Ocean region,” the document envisages as one of the major missions of the navy raising the costs of intervention by extraregional powers in India’s maritime sphere of influence.⁵⁵ Equal emphasis was given to the navy’s role as an instrument of diplomacy in the larger interest of India’s foreign policy.⁵⁶ Moreover the doctrine, given the navy’s experiences in escorting U.S. cargo during SAGITTARIUS, also paid attention to the service’s ability to supply international “public goods,” such as the protection of SLOCs, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.⁵⁷ The nation’s first document on maritime doctrine in the twenty-first century had an ambitious vision for India’s maritime power.

The Indian Navy also seemed to walk the talk. In 2005, India finally established the Far Eastern Naval Command in the strategic islands of Andaman and Nicobar. The strategic value of the base is evident in the fact that it provides the Indian Navy a forward operating platform in the Indian Ocean only sixty nautical miles from the Strait of Malacca. In consonance with the changing maritime realities and roles the doctrine envisaged, the Indian aircraft carrier INS *Viraat* visited in 2005 for the first time a number of ports in Southeast Asia while transiting to the western Pacific.⁵⁸ The year 2007 was quite eventful for the Indian Navy, insofar as its expansion into the western Pacific is concerned. The MALABAR exercise with the United States was conducted off the coast of Okinawa from 6 to 11 April, followed by a trilateral exercise, called TRILATEX, with the navies of the United States and Japan.⁵⁹ Later, the Indian Navy participated in West Pacific Naval Symposium multilateral at-sea exercises with regional navies in the South China Sea.⁶⁰ If the Indian Navy was sailing across the western Pacific in the spring and summer of 2007, major navies of the region—those of Japan, Australia, and Singapore—and that of the United States gathered in the Bay of Bengal in September to conduct with India a joint multilateral naval exercise called MALABAR 07-02.⁶¹ This was in addition to the annual MALABAR bilateral exercise between India and the United States, and it was one of the largest exercises ever conducted in the region, involving approximately twenty-five ships, 150 aircraft, and twenty thousand personnel. For the first time in the Bay of Bengal, three carrier strike groups, two from the United States and one from India, participated.⁶²

If the underlying reason behind the exercise was to signal to China an impending shift in the regional balance of power, the 2007 policy document issued by the navy, *Freedom of the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, conveyed the same. Forewarning India’s decision makers of China’s creeping influence and power-projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean, it stated that the “Chinese navy is set on the path to become a blue-water force [along with] attempts to gain [a] strategic toe-hold in the IOR.”⁶³ This allusion to China’s growing capabilities, in

conjunction with the strategy document's acknowledgment that "strategic objectives of a majority of extraregional navies are broadly coincident with India's own strategic interests," suggests that India's naval strategy in some sense had become China focused.⁶⁴ It is therefore important to note that the document laid great emphasis on maritime cooperation with regional powers, with a clear intention "to prevent . . . incursions by powers inimical to India's national interests."⁶⁵ In 2008, the Indian Navy organized the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, inviting all navies of the IOR to address regional security challenges multilaterally. The scope of its annual naval exercises with regional navies has also expanded considerably; the MILAN exercises, initiated in 1995 with just five members, have now fourteen regional navies under their ambit. Engagement with other navies has also been institutionalized; the Indian Navy now conducts institutional staff talks with fifteen other national naval forces.

This shift in strategy can also be located in India's increasing capabilities. In a span of two decades, the Indian Navy has seen a growth of 30 percent in its military wherewithal, emerging as the third-largest navy in Asia, after China's and Japan's.⁶⁶ In 1992–93, the navy's share of the defense budget stood at 11.5 percent; by 2012–13, it had grown to 19 percent. Though compared to Japan and China these financial figures may appear small, "in local terms India's military spending now being channeled into naval purposes is significantly greater than naval spending by all other Indian Ocean states."⁶⁷ Capital investment in future capabilities constitutes 50 percent of its budget, much higher than in its sister services. The navy's strategic decision to invest in long-term capabilities has lately started manifesting itself. INS *Vikramaditya*, India's second aircraft carrier and by far the largest ship in its kitty, joined the force in 2013. Though the ship took more than a decade and double the initial cost, the Indian Navy now boasts a very capable force-projection capacity in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Indigenous production of defense equipment is also high on the navy's agenda, with all forty-five vessels currently on order being constructed within India. The nation's first indigenously designed aircraft carrier, INS *Vikrant*, 37,500 tons, was launched in August 2013, entering the second phase of construction, during which it would be fitted with weapon and propulsion systems and the entire aircraft complex. It is set to enter sea trials in 2015–16 and is estimated to be introduced into service by 2017. Designs for another aircraft carrier, INS *Vishal*, are in preparation. The Indian Navy plans to operate three battle groups by the end of this decade.

Its underwater fleet, though a cause of concern both in the Indian Navy and among observers outside, is now bolstered by the advent of its first nuclear submarine. After a long gestation period of over three decades, INS *Arihant*, built under the pseudonym of "Advanced Technology Vessel," may now provide the navy a perennial presence in the depths of Asia's waters.

The navy also has some very ambitious plans for asset acquisition and construction. Under the new five-year Defence Plan for 2012–17 and the Long-Term Integrated Perspective Plan for 2012–27, the “Indian Navy is aiming to induct more than 90 fighting platforms in another ten years.”⁶⁸ Given its past record, incorporation of all these platforms may eventually face delays. It is also important to acknowledge that lately the Indian Navy has been under great scrutiny due to a series of accidents on board major vessels, including the sinking of a submarine owing to malfunctioning electric batteries.⁶⁹ This has further beleaguered a force that already suffers from lack of political clout in New Delhi, as was evident in the speedy acceptance of the resignation of the Chief of the Naval Staff by the defense ministry soon after another accident marred its reputation in February 2014.⁷⁰ Though these developments have undermined the navy’s credibility, its motivation to modernize and to master the space around the Indian Ocean remains as potent as ever.

The above discussion suggests that India’s engagement in maritime Asia is not restricted to the Indian Ocean alone; in fact, the nation is increasingly being perceived as an Indo-Pacific power. India’s official declarations and its naval proactiveness attest to this ambitious portrayal of its maritime sphere of influence. Second, this reimagining of India’s traditional maritime outlook is a result of India’s ascending economic profile. However, China’s growing power and capabilities, its impressive naval modernization, and its slowly advancing footprints in the Indian Ocean area have catapulted the Indo-Pacific to the very center of India’s strategic considerations. These changes in the scope of India’s maritime interests have been facilitated by engagement with other regional powers, such as Japan and Australia, but particularly with the United States. New Delhi’s core strategic objectives in the region are largely compatible with those of Washington.

India’s naval expansion has occurred in a period of relative stability in the Indo-Pacific region, secured by American military supremacy. Aside from a few occasions of activism, India has been reluctant to provide public goods in the region, relying on the United States to do the heavy lifting. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, the sustainability of the U.S. commitment came under increasing scrutiny. Moreover, the U.S. strategy of pivot and rebalancing focuses much more on the Pacific, especially the East and South China Seas, than on the Indian Ocean. Given its geography, threat perceptions, and maritime ambitions, India may now be the natural heir to the American role in the region and particularly in the Indian Ocean.

THE INDIAN NAVY AND THE U.S. “PIVOT”

India’s growing capabilities suggest that it can be an important player in maintaining the maritime balance in the Indo-Pacific. The United States also expects,

and has actively encouraged, India to increase its footprint in the region. The pivot therefore represents a strategic opportunity for India to realize its true potential as an Indo-Pacific power. The Indian Navy's response to this new strategic paradigm can be discerned in naval exercises with the U.S. and regional navies; in progress in interoperability between the Indian and U.S. Navies; and in the constabulary services the Indian Navy offers in the IOR.

The "flagship" naval program between the Indian and U.S. Navies—the MALABAR exercise series—has gathered momentum since 2002. Just after President Obama announced his plans for a pivot to the Asia-Pacific, the 2012 exercise, conducted in the Bay of Bengal, saw unprecedented contribution from the American side—the Seventh Fleet's Carrier Strike Group 1, which included among other ships a *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier and a nuclear submarine, participated.⁷¹ Though its scope may have been decided long before, coming in the wake of the pivot this exercise conveyed a forceful message. The Indian and U.S. Navies the same year also conducted a joint submarine-rescue exercise off the coast of Mumbai, INDIAEX 12.⁷² Given the fact that the Indian Navy had recently commissioned a nuclear-powered submarine, this focus on submarine rescue suggested a new leap in naval cooperation. In July 2014, MALABAR exercises were conducted off the coast of Sasebo, Japan.⁷³ Japan participated in the exercise on India's invitation. A host of ships, including destroyers, submarines, and long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft from all three states, were involved in the exercise.

With regard to regional maritime cooperation, the Indian Navy has been partnering with various states in Southeast Asia and Oceania. The SIMBEX exercises, between the Indian Navy and the Republic of Singapore Navy, take place annually and have been conducted all over the Indo-Pacific, including the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea.⁷⁴ Indian naval ships have been regularly calling on ports in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Australia.⁷⁵ Both Australia and Indonesia have shown interest in annual naval exercises with India, which may begin as soon as 2015.⁷⁶

The real development, however, has been in maritime cooperation between the Indian Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. Since 2007, the two services have been constantly interacting with each other in trilateral and multilateral forums but until recently had eschewed bilateral naval engagement. In 2012, the two sides decided to conduct direct bilateral maritime exercises to enhance maritime security in the Asia-Pacific.⁷⁷ The first-ever Indo-Japanese joint naval exercise took place off the coast of Okinawa in June 2012; four Indian ships participated.⁷⁸ It was here that the Indian Navy observed the capabilities of the Japanese US-2 amphibious aircraft, which India now desires to buy. In December 2013 the Japanese navy conducted its first bilateral maritime exercise with the

Indian Navy in the IOR. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan in September 2014 reinforced this emerging defense partnership. The Memorandum of Cooperation and Exchanges in the field of defense was signed, aimed at institutionalizing the growing military cooperation between the two navies.⁷⁹ In fact, the Tokyo declaration indicates that rather than being an invited participant, Japan may henceforth join the Indo-U.S. bilateral naval exercises as a full partner. If "the future direction of the burgeoning Japan-India strategic relationship will be one of the important indicator[s] of the degree to which U.S. allies and partners within Asia are prepared to align more closely with each other to maintain a favourable strategic equilibrium in the region as the future of Chinese power grows relative to the United States," growing naval cooperation between the two navies suggests that a local balance of power might be slowly emerging in the waters of the Indo-Pacific.⁸⁰

The naval strategy under the pivot focuses extensively on interoperability with regional navies. Given that the new American strategy concentrates on the Indo-Pacific, with a heavy emphasis on naval forces, the U.S. Navy expects to strengthen interoperability with its Indian counterpart. Ever since the New Framework for Defence Cooperation was signed in 2005, followed by the Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement, the United States has been pressing India to conclude a Logistics Sharing Agreement (LSA). However, even after a decade, the "New Framework" remains in limbo; the LSA and two other crucial strategic agreements—the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for Geo-spatial Cooperation—have seen no progress. Proper logistical support arrangements are important for practical cooperation between the two countries. The most important aspect of the LSA is the element of interoperability, whereby collaborating nations can use each other's military equipment, leading to more efficient joint military operations. The strategy of the pivot necessitates increased strategic interaction and cooperation between the U.S. and Indian Navies. But Delhi has given no indication that it is in a hurry to proceed.⁸¹ The new government in New Delhi under Modi has shown more willingness to engage with the United States militarily. During Modi's visit to the United States in September–October 2014, the two nations not only renewed their 2005 defense cooperation agreement for another ten years but also expanded its scope, by declaring that the two countries will "treat each other at the same level as their closest partners" on issues including "defense technology, trade, research, co-production and co-development."⁸² In their joint statement both nations declared their support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, signaling that the Modi government is not reluctant to highlight New Delhi's convergence with

Washington on regional issues. The United States expressed its willingness to enhance technology partnership with the Indian Navy. Though the two nations have now decided to upgrade the MALABAR series of exercises, it is not yet clear whether the Modi government is ready to move forward on the LSA, CISMOA, and BECA.

Given that the United States is seeking new partners to provide international public goods in the Indo-Pacific, one would expect India to take its constabulary role in the Indo-Pacific more seriously. However, in 2012, Admiral Nirmal Verma, then the naval chief, categorically rejected any deployment of warships in the Pacific: "At this point of time, Pacific and South China Sea are of concern to the global community, but in terms of any active deployment from our side, it is not on the cards."⁸³ At the same time, he expressed concern that the Indian Navy could do much more in the Indian Ocean region than it was being allowed to. According to the Indian Navy, in the last five years thirty-six of its combat vessels have been involved in supporting maritime security in the IOR, an average of six to seven vessels a year. Given the volume of trade involved and the vast geographical extent of India's maritime interests, this is clearly not sufficient. Also, the "deployment of warships in Gulf of Aden by various navies is not entirely for anti-piracy operations"; it is helpful also for, as an Indian naval commander points out, gaining "experience in out of area deployment," developing "joint-manship," and the most vital of all, increasing the "visibility of the Indian Navy."⁸⁴ In the last decade the Indian Navy's real show of strength in the Indian Ocean was in antipiracy operations in Somali waters in the summer of 2008. Since then it has maintained a continuous presence in the western Indian Ocean and has effectively dealt with specific pirate threats on multiple occasions.⁸⁵

However, India remains reluctant to participate in Combined Task Force 151, an initiative led by the United States, mainly because Pakistan is also a part of it. The Indian Navy, just like those of China and Russia, prefers independent antipiracy operations, or "national escort missions," though it does coordinate with other navies.⁸⁶ Also, the navy's deployment in the western Indian Ocean took place only after a prolonged and bitter debate between the service and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).⁸⁷ The issue was the legality of unilateral Indian deployment of force in international waters. As of now, piracy is not a crime under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Prosecution of captured pirates, therefore, cannot be taken to its logical ends. However, there is a bigger problem for Indian Navy operations in international waters. According to the Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on Anti-Piracy Law, another "limitation of the IPC is that the piratical acts by a foreigner committed outside territorial waters of India do not constitute an offence under the IPC."⁸⁸

This clearly limits the Indian Navy's case for antipiracy operations in international waters. The navy considers that law should be an important enabler in its efforts to curb piracy in the region. "A strong law is definitely needed to avoid ambiguities that exist," opines a senior naval officer who has commanded warships in the Gulf of Aden.⁸⁹ The MEA proposed such a bill in June 2012 but immediately ran into controversy, because the ministry had not consulted the states over its implementation and operationalization. As a result, the bill is still pending in the Indian Parliament.⁹⁰

The legal issue must be juxtaposed to India's historical ambivalence toward the use of force internationally. Traditionally, India has refrained from unilateral use of force outside its territorial jurisdiction and has been comfortable only in United Nations–mandated multilateral security operations. Such reluctance even when the UN Security Council has authorized individual states to combat piracy suggests deep-seated ideological resistance.⁹¹ It also reflects on India's hesitant attitude toward power projection. Given these realities, "ad hocism" pervades India's constabulary role in the Indian Ocean.

As a consequence, the Indian Navy has found it difficult to take full advantage of the new strategic opportunities presented by the U.S. pivot toward the Asia-Pacific. The next section explores the larger political context within India that has prevented the Indian Navy from exploiting the potentials presented to it by the changing strategic realities in the region.

POWER TRANSITION, UNCERTAINTY, AND STRATEGIC HEDGING

Notwithstanding expectations in Washington, Delhi has been a reluctant supporter of the American pivot. Indian official response indicates a preference for hedging—India would not like to choose sides in this great game, at least before the dust settles, allowing it to make informed choices. Former prime minister Manmohan Singh has underscored uncertainty as the driving force behind India's reluctance to participate enthusiastically in the American designs, arguing, "If you survey the global strategic environment over the past decade, it would not escape your notice that, just as the economic pendulum is shifting inexorably from west to east, so is the strategic focus, as exemplified by the increasing contestation in the seas to our east and the related pivot or 'rebalancing' by the United States in this area. This to my mind is a development fraught with *uncertainty*."⁹² Similar anxieties were expressed by the prime minister's special envoy to the United States, Ambassador Shyam Saran, back in February 2009. Commenting on a future "fraught with deep uncertainty" due to the ongoing transitions of power in Asia, Saran prescribed a policy of hedging vis-à-vis the battle between the two great powers, the United States and China.⁹³ Some in the military have argued

similarly that a “balanced and interest based cooperation with both [the United States and China]” allows India “to reduce the risk of over-investing in any of the great powers.”⁹⁴ This early emphasis on hedging is instructive, inasmuch as India and the United States during the presidency of George W. Bush were openly talking of a strategic partnership, shaped partly by China’s growing influence. The Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, the high-water mark of this strategic partnership, had just been signed in 2008.

Compared with the Bush era, Indian-U.S. strategic partnership has lost some momentum under the Obama administration. As a senator, Obama opposed the civilian nuclear agreement. As president, in formulating his Afghanistan policy, he tried to “rehyphenate” India and Pakistan, by bringing Kashmir back onto the Indo-U.S. bilateral agenda, which drew a good deal of criticism from New Delhi.⁹⁵ But it was Obama’s idea of a G-2 (a condominium of China and the United States to manage Asia) that was most heavily contested in New Delhi.⁹⁶ In the early days of the first Obama administration senior American officials reportedly told their Indian counterparts that the United States “was not doing balance of power in Asia anymore.”⁹⁷ This view was seen as in strong contrast to the Bush administration’s more geopolitical approach, and it created a flutter in Indian strategic circles, bringing back the memory of American ignorance of Indian concerns that had been the case during the first term of the Clinton presidency. Of course, within two years, the Obama administration’s policy shifted in response to growing Chinese assertiveness, and the president declared the rebalancing strategy.

However, the damage had already been done—at least in perceptions. Hedging made inroads in the Indian mind-set mainly as a result of the Obama administration’s initial strategy of accommodation vis-à-vis China. In the looming maritime competition between India and China, the United States sought to play the role of a distant “sea-based balancer” and “honest broker.” In reaction, India was forced to recalibrate its own position. Reacting to the new stream of thinking in American strategic circles, India’s then national security adviser, Shiv Shankar Menon, explicitly rejected the proposition that India would balance China on America’s behalf: “Is it likely that two emerging states like India and China, with old traditions of state-craft, would allow themselves to remain the objects of someone else’s policy, no matter how elegantly expressed? I think not.”⁹⁸ India also seemed to be recalibrating its activism in securing the Indian Ocean. Its unwillingness to assume alone the mantle of maritime security was evident in the words of Ambassador Nirupama Rao: “While India is seen as a net security provider, we cannot carry the burden of regional security on our shoulders alone.”⁹⁹ If some in New Delhi saw American retrenchment as an extra burden on India, others were deeply skeptical about whether the United States could sustain its commitment in the region, given its dire fiscal state. Reliance on American primacy for ensuring

regional stability appeared to be “an inherently problematic proposition because it relies on U.S. military power which is not only getting thinner on the ground, but no longer has the necessary economic underpinning.”¹⁰⁰

Obama’s initial policy inclination to retrench from Asia and cede the traditional American sphere of influence to Beijing created a sense of vulnerability in India. This vulnerability was accentuated by the fact that a rising India had been used to American primacy. It was ready to take advantage of America’s global leadership, but it was not yet prepared to assume any responsibilities of its own. The uncertainty regarding U.S. intentions in the Asia-Pacific and its own vulnerability in the face of American decline therefore largely determined India’s lukewarm response to the pivot. Even as successive policy statements by American officials and government agencies have prodded it to play a bigger role in the pivot and rebalancing, India has tried to distance itself from the more threatening military connotations of U.S. strategy.

There are some domestic factors as well behind India’s cautious approach. New Delhi remains conscious of the fact that any unilateral naval deployment might provoke reactions from other regional actors. As has been noted, the Indian Navy’s only show of strength in the IOR was in Somali waters in 2008, and its two major tasks in the Indo-Pacific, supporting security for the littoral states and the global commons, have been pursued only on an ad hoc basis.¹⁰¹ India’s preference is for a concert of power in the region, one in which the United States would be just one among several major actors ensuring collective security in Asian waters.¹⁰² This view, however, clearly discounts the fact that a major military transformation is under way in Asia, one that is fundamentally threatening, in that there exist real conflicts among principal participants and uncertainty about their intentions. Another problem may be the difficulty for India of abandoning its habit of free-riding on U.S. guarantees and assuming the weight of securing the Indian Ocean highway from inimical forces.¹⁰³ Lastly, India’s economic growth has stagnated in the last couple of years, as is evident in the decrease in percentage growth of India’s defense budgets. In November 2013, the prime minister warned India’s top military commanders of an impending resource crunch.¹⁰⁴ Capital investment in military modernization may be the first casualty of the decrease in the growth of India’s gross domestic product. Whereas rapid economic growth fueled India’s naval expansion, it is possible that economic reversals may put limits on it. They may direct India inward to the immediate confines of the Indian Ocean. All these factors together have made it difficult for Delhi to assume a more prominent role in the unfolding American foreign-policy posture of strategic rebalancing.

However, the coming into office of the Modi government has raised expectations that New Delhi may alter course. Though Modi’s reading of the future Asian strategic landscape is also underlined by a sense of uncertainty, he seems

more willing than his predecessor to take responsibility in shaping the regional balance of power. This was underscored by his comments in Japan that “greater uncertainty” in Asia only brings “greater responsibility for Japan and India.”¹⁰⁵ He has also been unequivocal about China’s growing assertiveness in Asian waters, emphasizing prevalent tensions in the Indo-Pacific and warning that states should not pursue “expansionist” policies.¹⁰⁶ With the 2005 defense cooperation agreement having been extended for another ten years, military-to-military ties between the United States and India are likely to prosper further. Yet change will not be drastic. The trust deficit accumulated over the last several years between the United States and India will take great investment and time from both sides to overcome. Moreover, lack of clear focus on the Indo-Pacific as Washington continues to struggle to come to terms with multiple crises in the Middle East and Europe will only encourage India to hedge its bets for the foreseeable future, even as the geostrategic flux in the region is likely to shape its foreign policy choices in unprecedented ways.

SITTING ON THE SIDELINES

The U.S. policy of a pivot to the Asia-Pacific requires a strategic partnership with India to maintain a healthy balance of power in maritime Asia. Yet though the Indian Navy has been constantly seeking a bigger role in the region, it appears reluctant to increase its coordination with U.S. forces in the Indian Ocean and beyond. This lack of enthusiasm arises from India’s hedging strategy. India does not want to be seen as allied with the United States. Instead, it wants to sit on the sidelines while the United States and China slug it out for dominance in the Indo-Pacific. India felt highly vulnerable when Washington tried to accommodate Beijing at the expense of other, smaller powers in the region between 2009 and 2011. The idea of a G-2 has made a strong impression on India’s strategic thought. Even now that Washington has committed itself to the pivot, Indian strategic thinkers consider a G-2 a possibility that cannot be ignored. Also, the domestic debate in India over New Delhi’s role in the pivot is fractured.

Nevertheless, India may well participate in the U.S. pivot, given strategic circumstances, if the domestic political context undergoes a change. Meanwhile, there are a few things that the United States can do to decrease India’s sense of vulnerability and encourage its participation.

First, the United States should provide the Indian Navy technological assistance in such key projects as nuclear propulsion and the design and construction of aircraft carriers. This could be the new “nuclear deal,” guiding the future trajectory of Indian-U.S. relations; it would clearly indicate American resolve to help India attain technological sophistication for its defensive preparedness. Indian Navy officials suggest that the force has embarked on an extensive

modernization, which presents America with a rare window of opportunity to establish a “comprehensive military partnership” by selling India “top of the line” defense equipment, complemented by technology transfers. If it does not, Russia would love to fill the gap. Given the fact that the shelf life of contemporary procurements is at least twenty or thirty years, Indian-Russian dependence would continue, as was the case during the Cold War.¹⁰⁷ American technological assistance, on the other hand, would strengthen the hands of those in New Delhi who are proposing closer defense engagement with the United States, while underscoring America’s commitment to India’s rise as a major regional-security provider. Also, Washington should appreciate that a potent Indian Navy would be an important lobbying force behind a gradual expansion of India’s constabulary activity in the IOR. It would also prod the navy to expand its strategic reach to the western Pacific, signaling a shift in the balance of power to Beijing. If the pivot is meant to signal the same thing, technological assistance should guide the U.S. and Indian Navies’ relations in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, Washington must be consistent in signaling its commitment and strategy with respect to the IOR. As is evident from the above discussion, Obama’s early flirtations with China, followed by a more muscular approach in the form of the pivot, created an environment of uncertainty for regional powers. Also, even if other pressing issues—such as the perennial crisis in the Middle East or a sudden downturn in U.S.-Russian relations—might divert substantial strategic focus and resources, Washington should be clear in its commitment to the Asia-Pacific. It was America’s strategic uncertainty that motivated New Delhi to hedge. Hedging may be clever in the short term, but the long-term consequences of China’s rise and assertiveness can be arrested only by a clear display of resolve and will to balance its military power. Clarity and consistency on the part of the United States would help regional powers shed their reluctance to commit themselves to a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

For its part, India needs to think carefully about its role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. New Delhi’s credibility as a regional balancer has already suffered because of its lackadaisical attitude toward power projection. If it is serious about its emergence as a regional security provider, New Delhi will have to rethink its opposition to the LSA, CISMOA, and BECA, in order to enhance its practical cooperation with the U.S. Navy. There is also an urgent need for a law that would provide strong support to Indian intervention in international waters to combat piracy. Some in India want to wait for a “grand bargain” in which India would become a security provider in the IOR only if the United States assumed significant costs in terms of policies on China, Pakistan, and technology transfer. If that is indeed attempted, New Delhi would be disappointed, as not even a Republican administration would be in a position to deliver.

The larger conundrum remains unresolved: Will India see in the changing regional environment sufficient cause to begin to act in the IOR of its own volition? Or will India step in only because the Americans want it to, hoping to extract concessions in return? Even as Washington and New Delhi try to work this out, they need to acknowledge that they share strategic objectives in the larger Indo-Pacific and should not let their historical baggage override the imperatives of the future.

NOTES

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