

# India and the multilateral initiatives for securing maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region

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## ABSTRACT

The arena of international relations, is in a large measure, all about convergence of interests between the nations and dealing with antagonistic powers by building alliances. India has remained committed to the philosophy of non-alignment trying to balance her relationships with different powers at different periods of history. India is a naval power of great significance in the Indian Ocean region. However, she has to rely on international alliances in order to further her own economic and security interests in the region. The rise of communist China as a counterweight to USA coupled with her growing aggressive military and economic postures in the Indian Ocean region forced India to take a relook at its foreign policy. India has therefore joined a number of international initiatives for pursuing her economic and security interests. Some of these initiatives are The Quadrilateral security dialogue, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Exercise Malabar etc. This paper would take a look at some of these important economic and security initiatives in the context of changing dynamics of international relations.

## 1. Introduction

The post-cold war era has seen rising cooperation between India and the US. Consequently India's relations with the US allies have also improved significantly. Although these relations took a down turn because of the 1998 nuclear tests conducted by India, the US played an important role in forcing Pakistan to end its misadventure in the Cargil war in 1999.

The September 11 terrorist attack brought home to US the need to find new strategic partners against the rising menace of terrorism. India, the biggest democracy, and a long victim of terrorism on her soil, was almost a natural ally. This partnership also became most significant against the backdrop of the rising profile of China in the international arena. China, which had largely kept herself away from the world politics till quite recently, the prime reason of which was her international economic and trade dependence on other countries for market as a production powerhouse, became more and more assertive and aggressive vis-à-vis its neighbours pursuing its territorial claims against countries like Vietnam and Japan. The US along with the countries of the region including India has seen China with suspicion especially due to the lack of transparency in its dealings and its continued relationship with the 'rogue state' regimes like North Korea.

India has also suffered at the hands of China first due to the annexation of Tibet, resulting at the end of a buffer between the two countries, and then India's humiliating defeat in the 1962 Indo-Chinese war. China has also always had a strong strategic partnership with Pakistan with disturbing consequences for India. The Chinese hand is suspected strongly by India in particular and by the world in general in the nuclearisation of Pakistan. China is also the largest defence

supplier of military hardware to Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> China has established itself as the 5<sup>th</sup> largest global arms exporter after the US, Russia, France, and Great Britain. Pakistan has played a major role for China in achieving this feat. This becomes very problematic and troublesome for India.

Pakistan is also providing China strategic access to South Asia through the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. China is building the Karakoram highway through Ladakh and POK which is a grave concern to India, which still doesn't have comparable civil and military infrastructure in the areas bordering China.

Another example of the Chinese policy of foreign investments is the deep sea port of Gwadar, situated at the western end of the Makran coast in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. In view of the projected Chinese ambition of establishing a blue water navy, it would help China greatly in extending its power projection in the Indian Ocean Region by developing the port of Gwadar which would ensure the supply of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf.<sup>2</sup>

China has also included other countries of the region in its maritime ambitions developing naval bases and port facilities. All this is perceived as a part of the strategy of building a "string of pearls" round India both on land and in the sea. The long-standing trust deficit between India and China precludes any chance of major cooperation and understanding on regional affairs by the two countries in the near future.

<sup>1</sup> Dr Monika Chansoria, 'China's arms sales to Pakistan unsettling South Asian security' Indian Defence Review, Vol. 25.4, Oct-Dec 2010, taken from <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/chinas-arms-sales-to-pakistan-unsettling-south-asian-security/> Date : 19 Apr , 2013

<sup>2</sup> IBID.

In such a scenario, India must depend on building cooperative partnerships with the countries who share with her understanding, common goals and interests in terms of regional security issues. This strategy is also of utmost significance to India if she wants to balance Chinese power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In order to deal with her security challenges in the Indian Ocean region, India has entered into a number of cooperative partnerships in the form of joint naval exercises, associations, strategic dialogues etc.

## 2. The Quadrilateral security dialogue

The United States, Japan, Australia, and India engaged in an informal strategic debate known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). Beginning in 2007, with the backing of then-Vice President Dick Cheney, then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe initiated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, the United States, Australia, and India, led by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. Large-scale military drills between the countries were held alongside the talks under the name "Exercise Malabar." A lot of people saw this diplomatic and military drill as a reaction to the increasing economic and military power of China. The Chinese government wasted no time sending a diplomatic complaint to the Quad members.

The US has been a dominant military power in the Indian Ocean region for long. However, her engagement with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq towards the beginning of this century kept her busy and served as a distraction from the major power shifts in the region brought about by the increased economic and military power of China challenging US strategic interests in the Asia Pacific region, where it has been traditionally strong. In the long run US has sought a policy of soft containment of China by entering into strategic partnerships with the democracies at its periphery.<sup>3</sup> The US alliance with Japan, Australia and India forms the bulwark of this policy. Commentators in India and Australia have shown mixed attitude at the US involvement aimed at the containment of China.

The relationship between India and the US has been a complicated affair and has traversed a chequered path in the past. Active military cooperation between the two started expanding in 1991 after the policy of economic liberalisation initiated by India. Another very important factor contributing to this partnership was the dissolution of Soviet Union and consequent end of cold war. During his time as commander of the United States Army Pacific, American Lt. General Claude C. Kicklighter recommended establishing military ties between India and the United States. At about the middle of the 1990s, the scope of this collaboration broadened even more. In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the government of India offered the United States use of its territory for military purposes. Under the Indian United Progressive Alliance government in 2005, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee signed a "New

Framework for India-US Defense,"expanding military relations, sharing in the defence industry and technology, and establishing a "Framework on maritime security cooperation."<sup>4</sup> Before the formation of the Quadrilateral conversation, India and the United States engaged in a large number of joint military exercises.

## 3. Exercise Malabar

Exercise Malabar was initially a bilateral naval exercise which included the United States and India. The partnership has expanded over the years and has included Japan, Australia and Singapore. The annual Malabar series started in 1992, and includes diverse activities, such as fighter combat operations from aircraft carriers, through Maritime Interdiction Operations Exercises.

3 exercises were conducted prior to 1998 when US suspended its participation due to the nuclear tests conducted by India. The military contacts were renewed in 2001 when after the Sept 11 attack, India decided to join the campaign against international terrorism led by the United States.

Naval exercises were held on a regular basis every year in which US aircraft carriers, submarines etc. participated along with their Indian counter parts.

The exercises have ever been expanding and a strong partnership is building up between India and the US along with her allies, Japan, Australia, Singapore etc.

In September 2014, the leaders met for the first time under the 'framework of the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative. They agreed with its determination to quickly form a Task Force to examine and make choices on novel initiatives and cutting-edge technology. This will significantly improve India's defence sector and military capabilities and have a profound impact on the countries' mutual defence relationships.

To maintain freedom of navigation and unhindered movement of legitimate commerce and economic activities in line with generally acknowledged norms of international law, the leaders resolved to increase cooperation in maritime security.

The leaders restated their extreme worry about the ongoing threat of terrorism, with the threats posed by ISIS being the most recent example. They also stressed the importance of maintaining global, coordinated efforts to counter and ultimately eradicate terrorism. Leaders emphasised the need of taking measures like eliminating safe havens for terrorist and criminal organisations and cutting off all financial and tactical support for groups like Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, the D-Company, and the Haqqanis. To bring those responsible for the terrorist assault in Mumbai in November 2008 to justice, the leaders underlined their resolve to applying pressure to Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> eCampbell, K. M., Patel, N. and V. J. Singh, "The Power of Balance: America in Asia", Centre for a New American Security, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Kumaraswami, Sridhar, "India, US Defence cooperation 'set to escalate.'" The Asian Age, 9 September 2007.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/us-india-joint-statement>

#### 4. Milan Exercise

Strategic diplomacy includes a lot of key defense-related projects. The "Milan exercise" was a significant maritime diplomacy attempt by the Indian Navy (which means meeting together in Hindi). Asia-Pacific marine navies collaborate in Milan every two years. With a view to fostering "friendship across the seas" ties, improving interoperability among the fleets of the area, and exchanging opinions on shared marine challenges, the Indian Navy is hosting this event at Port Blair in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Since over 60,000 ships, or 30% of the world's shipping volume, pass through the Straits of Malacca each year, there is a pressing need in the Asia-Pacific area to defend these sea lanes.

"For India, the advantage of having the Milan Exercise in Port Blair is to emphasise India's key location in the Indian Ocean, astride these vital trade routes and energy lifelines, which also makes India a significant stakeholder in the region's security and stability," claims Sanat Kaul.<sup>6</sup>

Following is some of the difficulties that the countries in the area confront, according to the former chief of naval operations Admiral D.K. Joshi: terrorism committed by non-state actors, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, illicit weapons trafficking, and EEZ poaching. He said, "We must band together and collaborate, benefiting from one another's knowledge and expertise."<sup>7</sup>

The naval exercise in Milan is growing in popularity as more and more nations participate. It has the ability to quickly transform into a cooperative taskforce for the Asia-Pacific area, which includes Australia and New Zealand. India is in a good position to take the lead in the fight against maritime terrorism, poaching, gun trafficking, and drug trafficking.

#### 5. SIMBEX With Singapore

In 1965, Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of Singapore, asked India for assistance in bolstering the country's armed forces. The authorities in Singapore were equally concerned about China's covert influence in fomenting communist uprisings. The role of Indian guardian was desired by Singapore. The primary collaboration, however, didn't begin until the 1990s, when P.V. Narasimha Rao's Look East Policy was implemented. India and Singapore have been working together more after September 11th. India has been keeping an eye on the waterways of the Indian Ocean, especially the Straits of Malacca, and Singapore has welcomed its presence as a counterbalance.<sup>8</sup>

This partnership can be viewed in the context of growing proximity between India and the US and their increasing unanimity in the field of international relations. This has led to India's enhanced relationships with the US allies.

India and Singapore have been carrying out joint exercises for the last 25 years. The latest addition of SIMBEX,

which is an acronym for Singapore India Maritime Bilateral Exercise, (SIMBEX-18) was held in November 2018. This marked the silver jubilee of the bilateral partnership. This particular addition of simbex was held in 4 phases, two in the Bay of Bengal in the Andaman Sea and two in Visakhapatnam. The exercise was able to achieve a high degree of efficiency in joint inter operability between the two navies.<sup>9</sup>

Since the start of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) training exercises in 1994, operational cooperation between the Indian Navy and Singapore Navy has progressively increased.

This operational engagement became a yearly bilateral exercise in 1999 and was given the name SIMBEX.<sup>10</sup>

#### 6. JIMEX With Japan

In the security and commercial domains, particularly on the marine front, Japan and India have been deepening their connections over time. In June 2012, Tokyo hosted the first bilateral maritime exercise between Japan and India. It was given the name "JIMEX 12" (Japan India Maritime Exercise). Two destroyers, a maritime patrol aircraft, and a helicopter made up the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) units. The INS Rana, INS Shivalik, INS Karmukh, and INS Shakti were among the Indian Naval vessels that took part in the drill. The four ships docked in Tokyo on June 5, 2012, following stops in Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea. The three-day drill in Tokyo took place at the same time as India and Japan celebrated 60 years of diplomatic ties.

India is progressively constructing marine bridges with other nations in the area as part of the wider strategy to resist China's enormous strategic incursions in the Indian Ocean region and beyond.

#### 7. India and Vietnam

Since 1954, India and Vietnam have had close ties of friendship. India took part as a participant in the UN-affiliated International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) of Vietnam.

In 1962 and 1979, respectively, China's assertive stances caused harm to both India and Vietnam. In both the historic Vietnam War and its fight with Cambodia, India backed Vietnam. In a similar vein, Vietnam's assistance to India during the Indo-Pak conflict made a significant contribution to the growing mutual trust and collaboration on the global stage.

In the South China Sea, where China and Vietnam are in direct conflict, the Chinese have begun taking an assertive stance more frequently. It has been a significant source of worry for Vietnam. Other ASEAN nations, like Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are embroiled in acrimonious disputes with China over its claims to the South China Sea. In this situation,

<sup>6</sup> Sanat Kaul, 2015, PP. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Op. Cit.

<sup>8</sup> Bilveer Singh, "Security Issues in South-East Asia: A Singapore Perspective", in *Emerging Asia: Challenges for India & Singapore*, New Delhi, Manohar and India International Centre, 2002.

<sup>9</sup>

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1553037>

<sup>10</sup> <http://currentaffairs.gktoday.in/india-singapore-bilateral-naval-exercise-simbex-15-commences-singapore-05201523024.html>

economic and military ties between India and Vietnam are crucial for both nations.

Given the growing closeness between China and Pakistan, the strong ties between India and Vietnam bode well for maintaining peace and security in the area. A number of defence agreements have been struck between India and Vietnam, notably the 2003 joint Declaration of Comprehensive Cooperation between India and Vietnam and the 15-point Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement (MDAA) in 2002. A formalised strategic cooperation between the two nations has resulted from this. Vietnam has received help from India to improve its navy and air capabilities. Both nations have Russian equipment, which has made their defence collaboration easier. Through their respective coastguards, India and Vietnam have also been conducting combined marine patrols. Both countries have SU-30 Russian-made aircraft, which India may use to assist in training Vietnam's coastguard.<sup>11</sup>

### 8. Joint Patrolling of the Maritime Borders

The Andaman & Nicobar Command is conducting this crucial exercise. This covers maritime interactions with nations around the coast. Additionally, joint military drills and patrols with the neighbouring nations are part of it. The goal of the cooperative patrols is to reduce issues with illegal fishing, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and the transportation of weapons and ammunition. Additionally, it entails conducting search and rescue missions as well as preventing piracy.

Every six months, Indian and Thai ships move together on opposite sides of the maritime boundary to undertake a joint patrol along the border. In a similar vein, India also engages in joint patrols with Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

China's military challenge has brought together nations in the East and South China Sea, including Japan and certain ASEAN nations. As a result, these nations are strengthening their diplomatic and military ties with India. The above-mentioned nations all increase their defence budget. The intentions to purchase submarines include those of Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

Other Bilateral Defence Exercises which take place are the following:

- Varuna with French Navy
- Konkan with Royal British Navy
- Indra with Russian Navy
- IBSAMAR 2010 with South African and Brazilian navies

### 9. India and the BIMSTEC

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation is known as BIMSTEC. It consists

of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, with a combined GDP of more than US\$2.5 trillion and a population of 1.5 billion people, or 21% of the world's population.

Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand - Economic Cooperation, or BIST-EC, was established during a gathering in Bangkok in June 1997. Due to the addition of new members, the organization's name has undergone a number of modifications. After Myanmar's admission in December 1997, the group's name was changed to BIMST-EC. Additionally, the name of the organisation was changed to BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) during the first summit meeting, which was held in Bangkok in July 2004. Nepal and Bhutan were inducted in February 2004.

The goals of BIMSTEC are to foster an environment that supports rapid economic development, accelerate social progress in the sub-region, encourage active collaboration and mutual assistance on issues of common interest, offer one another training and research facilities, work more effectively together in joint initiatives that support and complement member states' national development plans, and maintain close and beneficial relationships.<sup>13</sup>

BIMSTEC organises inter governmental interactions through summits, ministerial meetings, high level official interactions and expert group meetings and through BIMSTEC Working Group BWG based in Bangkok.

So far BIMSTEC Has largely remained focused on economic and technical spheres and has not evolved into any regional security forum. But Given India's separate engagements with its members like Myanmar and Bhutan, the defence cooperation cannot be ruled out in future and the forum could serve in furthering the strategic objectives of India's foreign policy and balancing the rising military and economic power of China.

### 10. India and the Indian Ocean Rim Association IORA

One of the salient aspects of International relations is the politics of linkages. Since India enjoys soft power in the Indian Ocean region due to various factors, it has been highly successful in recent times in forging relationships with countries of the region.<sup>14</sup> India's shared cultural and civilizational trends with IOR which has had a palpable effect of turning the region into an area of similarities."

The name of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has undergone several revisions. An international organisation made up of coastal governments surrounding the Indian Ocean region was formerly known as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC).

The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Collaboration, or IOR-ARC, was officially established in March 1997 in Mauritius with the goal of fostering technical and

<sup>11</sup> A.V. Chandrasekaran, "Indo-Vietnamese Relations: Exploring Collaboration in China's Backwaters, Defence and Diplomacy in Pursuit of National Security", *Air Power Journal*, 2(1), 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Ashok Sawhney, "Indian National Effectiveness". RSIS Working Paper No. 197, May 7, 2010, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore.

<sup>13</sup> Sanat Kaul, 2015, PP. 96-98..

<sup>14</sup> <http://indian-ocean.in/concept-note.php>

economic cooperation among the member nations. There are now 19 countries that are a part of it, including Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. China, Egypt, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom are the five Dialogue Partners, while the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) and Indian Ocean Tourism Organization (IOTO) are the two Observers.

It is the first pan-oceanic organisation where nations from three continents with diverse populations, economies, and linguistic and cultural variety join together to forge a framework for commerce, social cohesion, and cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean rim region. There are around two billion people living in the area. The Indian Ocean region is abundant in strategic and valuable minerals, metals, and other natural resources, marine resources, and energy, all of which may be obtained from the deep bottom, continental shelves, and exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

It's main objectives have been defined as follows:

- Focusing on those sectors of economic cooperation that provide the most potential for the promotion of common interests and the realisation of mutual benefits will help to foster the sustainable growth and balanced development of the region and of the Member States.
- To fulfil duties under other regional economic and trade cooperation accords, including exploring all options and paths for trade liberalisation.
- To promote cooperation in the development of human resources, particularly through closer ties among training institutions, universities, and other specialised institutions of the Member States.
- To strengthen cooperation and dialogue among Member States in international fora on global economic issues, and where desirable to develop shared strategies and take common positions in the fora on issues of mutual interest.<sup>15</sup>

## 11. Conclusion

The end of the cold war in 1991 brought about drastic change in the field of international relations. This gave rise to new alliances, cooperative partnerships and configurations. An important outcome of this turn of events was the forging of closer ties between two of the largest democracies of the world namely India and the US. The rise of a belligerent China in the subsequent years also helped in the cause.

The task of maintaining peace and tranquility in the Indian Ocean region has been of utmost importance in view of the criticality of keeping the sea lanes of communication open, which contributes substantially to international trade and commerce through the seas. Thus India and the US began a strategic partnership gradually involving other important countries of the Asia-Pacific region through various initiatives in

the form of multilateral dialogues, joint naval exercises and consultations. It has assumed grave importance for the purpose of balancing the rising belligerence of China in the region.

<sup>15</sup> <http://mea.gov.in/in-focusarticle.htm?20707/Indian+Ocean+Rim+Association+for+Regional+Cooperation+IORARC>