

India in the Indian Ocean Region

Re-calibrating U.S. Expectations

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In Brief

- The U.S.-India strategic partnership came with great hype about India's potential contribution to U.S. interests, that has led recently to a sense of disappointment in the absence of a realistic appraisal of India's international posture. A reassessment of India's strategy and objectives is therefore necessary.
- India is an independent-minded actor, unwilling to compromise its strategic autonomy. Any notions of a transactional relationship with India, or enlisting India to manage China's rise, should be abandoned.
- The Indian Ocean region, an area of growing importance to both the United States and India, offers an illustration of the fact that similar interests do not necessarily lead to joint actions.
- India is seeking to establish itself on the global stage as the main resident power of the Indian Ocean, willing cooperate with all external powers while aligning with none, to prevent strategies that might polarize the Indian Ocean region.
- As the U.S. re-balances its global engagements, it is beginning to promote an "Indo-Pacific" framework that would integrate the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean into a single region. A focus on economic incentives over strategic considerations might be preferable to convince India to buy into this new construct.
- After the rapid transformations and the excitement of the past few years, the U.S.-India bilateral relationship must now settle down: leaders should focus on strengthening ties by embracing small, concrete opportunities to cooperate rather than target a high-profile initiative, as the relationship needs time and substance to mature.
- Patience and firmness will therefore be required to nudge the strategic partnership along and enhance its productivity down the road.

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Introduction

After years of “estrangement¹,” the United States and India have transformed their relationship at a breathtaking pace since 1998, and grown it into a wide-ranging strategic partnership. The speed and scope of these changes initially led to highly positive reviews of India and its potential contributions to American interests by U.S. commentators, gushing with praise for this “natural ally.” Yet more recently, as substantive accomplishments have failed to materialize, criticism has begun in the U.S., directed towards India, accused of not doing enough, of not stepping up to the plate.

Such a situation was, however, highly predictable, given India’s strategic posture and foreign policy behavior.²

As the U.S. re-balances its global engagements to acknowledge the growing importance of the Asia-Pacific region (a strategy which explicitly refers to India’s place,³ the only country to warrant such mention among American allies and partners), it is crucial to understand India’s stance to recalibrate expectations and further strengthen the Indo-American partnership based on a realistic identification of short- and long-term objectives.



This is particularly true for the Indian Ocean region, where India has already begun to assert a more pronounced presence, and where the U.S. would like to see India become a “net security provider.” Indeed, the vast Indian Ocean is rapidly becoming more prominent in strategists’ thinking, amidst rapid changes affecting its dynamics.

Unlike the Arctic region, the Indian Ocean’s importance does not derive from an intrinsic value, from the resources it contains; its value, for the U.S. and other external powers, is primarily as a highway, as Ashley Tellis noted.⁴

Yet for the first time, as he also underscored, a resident power is appearing, with India’s gradual emergence and growing ambitions; an emerging power, however, that has no desire to see this region become an arena, and opposes reducing it to a mere “highway.”

While India is without doubt an attractive candidate for enhanced maritime cooperation and closer partnership in the Indian Ocean and beyond, it is necessary to better evaluate its rapport to the Ocean that bears its name.

This reassessment is crucial to increase the chances of a productive, substantive relationship evolving over time with a country whose cooperation Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has described as a “linchpin”⁵ of the redeployment and reconfiguration of U.S. power throughout the Asia-Pacific.

An attractive candidate... down the road

The Obama administration does not appear to harbor great expectations that India will provide much support for U.S. initiatives as of yet⁶ – Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described overtures to India as a “strategic bet.”⁷ Nonetheless, the U.S. is keen to enhance ties and lay the groundwork for closer cooperation in the future, by developing military exercises beyond their current levels, something India has appeared reluctant to agree to.⁸

Beyond India’s democratic nature and its demographic and economic weight, geography also contributes to make it an appealing candidate for greater cooperation. It juts out into the center of the Indian Ocean like a tongue⁹ from the North into the center of the region, with long coastlines facing East and West (totaling over 4,500 miles). As such, it sits at the center of the world’s third-largest ocean, through which transit half of all containers and more than 70% of oil products.

As maritime trade becomes increasingly important for interconnected economies (India itself conducts nearly 40% of its trade with littoral nations along the Indian Ocean rim¹⁰, and depends on shipping lanes for a significant portion of its growing energy needs¹¹), securing the Ocean that connects the Straits of Hormuz to the Straits of Malacca will be essential for global stability.

As U.S. shifts its focus more and more to the Asia-Pacific, it is naturally eager to see India become a “net security provider” for the region, preserving maritime transportation routes and possibly the global commons in Indian Ocean, given the two nations’ shared commitment to preserving open lanes of communication for all.¹² Steps taken by India over the past decade to expand its presence and enhance its influence throughout the Indian Ocean region have made such a prospect all the more alluring to U.S. policymakers, even as the rapprochement between the two countries has made it seem more plausible.

India is currently embarked on a large-scale program to upgrade its military capabilities,¹³ and is allocating large sums to the modernization of its Navy. This represents a noteworthy departure from the past, as the navy has traditionally suffered from neglect in the eyes of Indian policymakers focused on the land-based challenges emanating from China and Pakistan.¹⁴ Fueled by regular increases in its budget since 2001, India’s drive to develop a “blue-water” navy has focused essentially on acquiring three key attributes. The priorities identified by naval officials and policymakers (beyond the imperative of buttressing coastal defenses, especially in the wake of the 2008 Mumbai attacks) aim, ultimately, at enhancing India’s maritime “presence” throughout the Indian Ocean region:



- *Reinforcing force projection capabilities:*
 - Purchase of an aircraft carrier from Russia (the Admiral Gorshkov, renamed the INS Vikramaditya) that is being entirely refitted;
 - Construction of another aircraft carrier in Indian shipyards;
 - Acquisition of Deepak-class tankers with a range of 12,000 miles, expanding the perimeter Indian ships can venture out to;
 - Construction of multiple Shivalik-class stealth frigates, projected to be the main vessel of the Indian Navy for the first half of the 21st century.¹⁵
- *Bolstering deterrence*
 - Purchase of six Scorpène-class attack submarines from France (to be built in Indian shipyards).
 - Construction of its very own nuclear-powered submarine, the INS Arihant.
- *Strengthening maritime awareness:*
 - Acquisition of a growing number of P-8I long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft from Boeing¹⁶ to address a major gap in surveillance capabilities, including the detection of submarines.

In addition, India has sought to exploit the considerable advantages of its geographic features to further increase its ability to extend out into the Indian Ocean region, by constructing or upgrading a series of bases and facilities.

- In 2001, India inaugurated a new facility in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. The strategic location of this archipelago, at the crossroads between the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia, is a major reason why this site was elevated in 2005 to an inter-services base housing Air Force and Army personnel in addition to naval forces. On the other side, to the West, Indian leaders chose the archipelago of Lakshadweep, close to the Arabian Sea, to host a naval base, primarily for coastal surveillance.¹⁷
- To reaffirm India's thrust toward the Southwest Indian Ocean region, the Indian Navy established a third regional command, the Southern Naval Command, headquartered in Kochi near the southernmost tip of the country.
- Finally, India has begun building an important naval base next to Karwar, on its Western coast, not far from Mumbai. The INS Kadamba, or Project Seabird, as it is known, represents an extremely large undertaking to be carried out in several phases; the first phase gave the Indian Navy its first exclusive port (it has to share all others with merchant vessels, and cede to them priority access to Indian ports). The second phase, begun in 2011, will expand the base into the largest naval facility in Asia.¹⁸

As the Indian navy's budget has grown, so too has its use as an instrument of foreign policy. Indeed, numerous instances of naval diplomacy have occurred over the past 10-15 years, with Indian vessels paying port calls, participating in joint maneuvers or patrolling a partner's territorial waters.

In doing so, special attention has been paid to the Southwestern island-nations, designated an "area of vital interest" in 2006 by then-Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Arun Prakash.¹⁹ India enjoys strong historical ties with this region. Mauritius, for instance, has a significant population of Indian heritage: India's determination to consolidate its influence has led it to undertake regular missions patrolling Mauritius' waters on its behalf. The establishment in 2007 of a listening post in Madagascar²⁰ – the first one to be located outside of Indian national territory²¹ – marked an escalation by endowing India with a permanent presence in the area.

New Delhi has been mindful, at the same time, to develop privileged naval ties in other parts of the Indian Ocean as well: to the East, a bilateral defense agreement was signed with Singapore in 2003; to the West, negotiations have resulted in the signature, since 2005, of several defense agreements with the sultanate of Oman, situated along the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.



Such agreements give India a presence, whether directly or indirectly, on the rims of what the Indian Navy defines as its primary area of operations, from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca.²²

India's engagement with the Indian Ocean region

India's location along the Indian Ocean littoral inevitably leads New Delhi to view the Indian Ocean region differently from Washington. India's gradual emergence and increased reliance on international commerce compound these divergences: its deepening engagement in the Indian Ocean region inevitably gives the area greater prominence in India's foreign policy considerations.

As it emerges as the resident power of the region, India has no desire of being viewed as harboring hegemonic enterprises. It rejects any perception of the Indian Ocean region that would reduce it to a highway, as well as any attempt to equate it with an arena for great power competition. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao went so far as to directly address and reject this thesis,²³ defended by Robert Kaplan in his recent book *Monsoon*. Instead, Indian officials argue for a unified Indian Ocean region, with India at its center.

- India's assertion as the non-hegemonic resident power of the Indian Ocean

As Indian policymakers have begun shifting their gaze toward the vast Indian Ocean region, they have sought to portray India's presence as legitimate, and buttress their claims of a *sui generis* status for India in the Indian

Ocean region. Foreign Secretary Rao, for instance, asserted that “India and the Indian Ocean are inseparable. In the midst of the third largest ocean in the world, India’s location is in many ways her destiny. That is not just a statement regarding a fact of geography but of deeper civilizational, historical, cultural, economic and political linkages that have been forged between India and the Ocean that bears its name. [...] Apart from the Monsoon, the India-link, in its broadest sense, is the single common thread that is visible in the Indian Ocean region.”²⁴

Such a narrative seeks to establish India as an indispensable unit of the regional equation, indeed the underwriter of its structure and of its cohesiveness as a regional framework. It also posits that the concept of an “Indian Ocean Region” makes sense, that it is geopolitically pertinent despite the significant disparities between the different littorals framing the ocean, and despite the vast expanses of water separating them. Statements by public officials focusing on India’s centrality to the Indian Ocean region is not mere rhetorical posturing, as the strategy implemented seeks to establish India at the heart of regional dynamics, and make it an indispensable player in any regional or sub-regional grouping.

Moreover, Indian policymakers reject the idea of a single, all-encompassing regional forum, to which they prefer a less formal “web of cooperative relations that brings together all the stakeholders based on mutual interest and benefit.”²⁵ The flexibility such a structure entails would preserve India’s sacrosanct autonomy. “As the main resident power in the Indian Ocean region, we have a vital stake in the evolution of a stable, open, inclusive and balanced security and cooperation architecture in the region.”²⁶ Indian officials therefore appear to consider that any event occurring within this space affects their interests. They claim a certain specificity in this regard: “Geographically, India is in an unique position in the geopolitics of IOR, with its interests and concerns straddling across the sub-regions of IOR.”²⁷

The Navy stands out as a key tool to realize this strategy, as evidenced by the emphasis its leaders have placed on the notion of “constructive engagement,” presented as the guiding principle for the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean region.²⁸ This serves in part to underscore India’s benign intentions, that it does not harbor hegemonic aspirations for regional primacy. Indeed, India has undertaken multiple forms of naval cooperation with other nations throughout the region.²⁹ These efforts have led to India’s recognition as a “net security provider,” which makes it all the more attractive to Washington, looking for partners to contribute to preserving maritime security in the Indian Ocean region.³⁰

Though the Navy may play a key role in India’s approach to the Indian Ocean region, the strategy devised by policymakers looks far beyond the mere valorization of its naval forces. Indeed, one of the major objectives of India’s reengagement with nations of the Indian Ocean littoral is to redefine India’s place in mental maps.

Seizing on the opportunity offered by the “de-hyphenated policy” pursued by the Bush administration on the one hand, and India’s economic rise on the other, public officials in India are now looking to redefine the Indian Ocean as India’s core strategic environment. As India emerges on the global stage and seeks recognition from other powers in its own right, expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean region is not merely a response to increased commercial dependence on maritime routes, but part of an effort to change emerging India’s identity, to break free of the South Asian confines and redefine India within a larger, more dynamic setting.

As a result of this endeavor to redefine India's image on the world stage as more than a South Asian power, as well as of the imperative for stability to sustain India's growth, India's overriding concern has been and will continue to be to prevent any polarization of the Indian Ocean region. This includes resisting overtures from external actors that risk introducing security dilemmas into a region hitherto devoid of such dynamics. Gone are the dreams of the 1970s, when Indian officials sought to unite the Indian Ocean region as a zone of peace, that would exclude external actors, under Indian leadership.

Instead, India now engages with bilateral maneuvers with all the major powers present in the region, a shift that further cements its own standing as the resident power in the Indian Ocean while rejecting any hegemonic intent. India has begun organizing annual naval exercises with France (VARUNA, since 2002), the United States (MALABAR, first in 1992 and again regularly since 2002), Russia (INDRA, since 2003) and the United Kingdom (KONKAN, since 2004).



At the same time, India has made a clear decision to remove any multilateral exercises involving external powers out of the Indian Ocean region, in the wake of the fall-out of the “Quadrilateral” initiative,³¹ to avoid exposing it to the security dilemmas China's inevitable reaction would foster. Although India has since resumed multilateral naval exercises with the U.S. and Japan, such exercises now take place in the Sea of Japan, far from the Indian Ocean – indeed, they are referred to today as the multilateral element of MALABAR exercises, while the strictly bilateral part continues to play out in the Indian Ocean.³² The recent agreement between Indian, Chinese and Japanese naval forces regarding anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa does not entail actual cooperation, but a coordination of naval forces escorting commercial ships in the area to ensure maximum efficiency by avoiding simultaneous patrols that might leave gaps in escorts later on.³³

In short, India seeks to cooperate with all, align with none, and assert its ability to prevent certain strategies liable to polarize the Indian Ocean or introduce security dilemmas in a region viewed as increasingly vital to India's growth. Neither highway nor arena for great-power competition, India seeks to preserve the Indian Ocean region, by establishing itself as the resident power, capable of maintaining regional balances by expanding its own presence.

- *The limitations of a reactive strategy*

Despite this, China undeniably looms large in India's strategic calculus, including the modernization of its naval forces. In 2009, then Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sureesh Mehta created a stir when he declared, “In military terms, both conventional and non-conventional, we neither have the capability nor the intention to match China, force for force. These are indeed sobering thoughts and therefore our strategy to deal with China would need to be in consonance with these realities. [...] On the military front, our strategy to deal with China must include reducing the military gap and countering the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region. The traditional or ‘attritionist’ approach of matching ‘Division for Division’ must give way to harnessing modern technology for developing high situational awareness and creating a reliable stand-off deterrent.”³⁴

Such comments offer a vivid illustration of the existence of a “China factor” in India’s drive for maritime power – not only does it act as the impetus for India’s modernization effort, it also influences the components Indian officials choose to prioritize.

Although India is uncomfortable with China’s growing footprint in the Indian Ocean, it has no intention of jeopardizing its delicate relationship with China, or precipitating their ties into irreversibly and overtly hostile territory. The two countries will thus continue to engage in subterranean maneuvering, jostling for position, while seeking to manage tensions at the surface and avoid them spilling over to overall confrontation.³⁵

For one thing, India’s culture of non-alignment and obsession with “strategic autonomy” preclude it from entering into any alliance or exclusive partnership aimed at another country. Furthermore, China possesses sufficient leverage in South Asia (where on India’s eastern border the border dispute with China remains unresolved, while to the west lies the troublesome and troubled Pakistani neighbor, a close if asymmetric partner of China’s) to prevent New Delhi from implementing any policy that might go too far in targeting China.

Though India may attempt to fashion for itself a new international identity through its engagement in the Indian Ocean region, it cannot wish away the realities of its challenging continental geography.

Finally, China has already established several footholds in the Indian Ocean region (the so-called “string of pearls” strategy) which India cannot roll back. While Chinese involvement in ports such as Sittwe in Myanmar and Hambantota in Sri Lanka³⁶ do not seem to have for primary purpose an encirclement of India but rather ensuring China has the ability to secure its own energy supply lines,³⁷ India feels evident discomfort with China’s growing footprint so close to its shores, in its “backyard.”

New Delhi has sought to gain counter-leverage by raising its profile in the South China Sea and beyond. Its burgeoning partnership with Vietnam,³⁸ the decision to develop a multilateral component of the MALABAR exercises with the U.S. to involve Japanese naval forces in the Sea of Japan (but not in the Indian Ocean), are among the more visible parts of India’s maneuverings.

At the same time, that India’s response plays out beyond the Indian Ocean region also reflects the fact that it lacks the means to counter Beijing’s advances in the Indian Ocean region, other than seeking to deny it further opportunities to consolidate or expand its presence.



“There are ample opportunities for us to co-operate with countries in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond. (...) It is important to realise that if one nation does not meet a need, there will always be another ready to fill the vacuum. Such cooperation drives the strategic balance between friendly and other influences in the region.”³⁹

This statement by Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Verma suggests that cooperation is not merely a response to prevent polarization by promoting a more consensual approach, but is also driven by a desire to deny China opportunities to further expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean region. (Although China is not mentioned by name, it is the only other country actively seeking opportunities to provide assistance and enhance its presence in the Indian Ocean region at the moment...)

As a result, India’s Indian Ocean policy appears largely decided on a case-by-case basis, whether it is conceived as a response to Chinese initiatives, as a means of preventing potential Chinese actions, or as an instrument to manage the competing dynamics of its relationship with China. Indeed, India’s reengagement does not appear to stem from a clearly-articulated, proactive strategy.

Analysts have noted that its security assistance efforts proceed on an ad-hoc basis, without a comprehensive policy to determine interactions with nations around the Indian Ocean littoral.⁴⁰ None of this offers a clear, compelling presentation of what rising India actually entails for the Indian Ocean region, whether in terms of economic cooperation or maritime security.

Indeed, Indian officials have yet to define their vision of India’s role in the Indian Ocean in concrete terms. Some have defined India as a “consensual stakeholder,⁴¹” a term that does not let lead to any clear understanding of how India might behave in specific situations, most notably when consensus might not exist. Others, while touting India’s role as “net security provider,” rule out India becoming the “super-policeman” of the Indian Ocean region⁴² responsible for ensuring maritime security and the safety of the shipping lanes that crisscross its waters.

While India has been able to develop partnerships with an impressive and growing number of nations, it often has problems deepening initial successes at bilateral cooperation.

These limitations stem in part from internal bureaucratic impediments, such as insufficient coordination between the Ministries of Defense and of External Affairs, and the nature of civil-military ties in India, which hamper the Indian Navy’s desire at times to broaden the scope of bilateral interactions.

Within the Ministry of Defense, military officials are given a narrow perimeter within which to develop mechanisms for cooperation, with little latitude to go beyond the scope allotted by civilian officials. Furthermore, the Ministry of External Affairs has only begun over the past few years to develop a maritime perspective and hence recognize the value of the Navy as a diplomatic instrument; it is slowly starting to improve its coordination with naval leaders as a result, but with little institutional progress to date.

It will take time to redress these historical inefficiencies, as well as forward-thinking civilian leaders in the Ministry of Defense willing to allow military officers greater freedom of action.⁴³

India and Australia, two pivotal actors of an emerging Indo-Pacific region?

As part of the United States' efforts to rebalance external engagements, Australia has received far greater attention and visible consideration from the Obama administration,⁴⁴ to the extent that it now features as a central pillar of a new, "Indo-Pacific" framework promoted by U.S. officials.⁴⁵

India is, of course, another necessary piece of any Indo-Pacific construct; it is hard to imagine what such an expression might refer to without India's buy-in. Moreover, the new approach articulated by the Obama administration calls for encouraging closer ties among its partners and allies across the Asia-Pacific. Promoting greater cooperation between India and Australia thus appears at first glance to be a rather easy and obvious course to integrate the Indian and Pacific oceans. The recent upwards trend in Indo-Australian cooperation could lend further credence to such an approach, but it would proceed based on an erroneous impression.

Australia is indeed a mid-level power with a potential role in the Indian Ocean, one that it is moving to assume⁴⁶ by correcting its traditional emphasis on its oriental coastline alone.⁴⁷ The current state of Indo-Australian ties, which have been hampered by bilateral obstacles and missed opportunities, illustrates India's lack of eagerness to embrace or conform to the United States' agenda, and throws into relief its specific conception of the Indian Ocean region and the drivers of India's deepening engagement. This overview offers insights into the implications of India's stance for broad US interests, and helps identify possible ways forward to enhance U.S.-India ties (both direct and indirect) that take into account India's sensitivities and address its resistance to any perceived alignment or cooptation.

- *A constrained bilateral relationship*

On paper, India and Australia share many attributes that should lead naturally to close ties. They are both democracies, with a shared identity as part of the Commonwealth of Nations (based on the British Empire); they both possess long coastlines in more than one maritime expanse; and they both today nurture misgivings about China's rise and increase in naval power. Nonetheless, the most visible component of the Indo-Australian relationship today is cricket, for which both nations share a passion, and compete often against one another.



In reality, despite a number of agreements in the past few years, the Indo-Australian relationship is far from a strategic partnership. Some analysts point, not without reason, to a succession of misunderstandings in recent years to explain the slow rate of progress in recent years.

A recent report by the Australia India Institute goes so far as to qualify the past ten years as “the lost decade” for Indo-Australian ties.⁴⁸ Following the inevitable distance brought on by the Cold War (when Australia was a U.S. ally and India a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and close partner of the Soviet Union), the study argues that the two countries’ ties consist of a series of missed opportunities and misunderstandings that plague the relationship to this day. The authors note for instance Australia’s particularly strong reaction to India’s nuclear tests of 1998 (which they suggest might have been an attempt to compensate for Australia’s relatively timid reaction to France’s nuclear tests in the Pacific, closer to home, in 1995). Yet this incident still lingers in Indian institutional memory today due to the failure of Australian leadership to attenuate their condemnation even as other nations sought to look beyond the nuclear tests (notably, the United States, which began an informal dialogue with India shortly thereafter).

At the same time, that such incidents have been able to flourish and have an enduring impact on the status of ties between Australia and India points to a pervasive weakness of their relationship, namely a lack of clear political will to move beyond past issues to construct a dynamic partnership. In spite of the agreements signed over the past few years, little has materialized by way of bilateral cooperation between New Delhi and Canberra.

This stasis reflects an enduring inability by Indian elites in particular to identify significant interests that would be served by closer ties with Australia, whose strategic value and very location remain ill-defined in Indian strategic thinking.⁴⁹ A rapid survey of India’s main think tanks quickly establishes the dearth of research devoted to Australia; and when public officials deliver speeches on the Indian Ocean region, they rarely refer to Australia, which warrants at most a passing mention as the limit of the region – in which case it is not an actor, but a mere geographic reference point...

- *Towards an Indo-Pacific framework? Understanding the consequences of U.S. involvement*

The relative neglect Australia suffers from in India’s worldview is compounded by the wariness Indian officials exhibit towards Canberra. While the benefits of closer ties may not yet be fully clear to them, they see a clear risk in deepening cooperation with Australia, whom they perceive to be inextricably linked to the United States. Indeed, the recent decision by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard to lift the ban on exporting uranium to India, hailed by many as a key step removing a major impediment to closer ties, ultimately reinforced the perception of Australian dependence on the United States. The shift in policy came about after intense behind the scenes lobbying by the Obama administration,⁵⁰ which confirmed the United States’ clear interest in seeing closer ties emerge between Australia and India.

As a result, any discussion in India of a partnership with Australia would necessarily raise familiar issues pertaining to strategic autonomy, but also the threat of polarizing the Indian Ocean, given Australia’s close alliance with the United States. Unlike the U.S.-India-Japan trilateral dialogue, which further cements India’s place in the Asian-Pacific equation, a U.S.-India-Australia trilateral forum would necessarily have the Indian Ocean as primary backdrop.

Since the India-Australia-U.S. trilateral dialogue floated by some⁵¹ appears to be dead on arrival,⁵² U.S. policymakers should not dwell on this format but seek other means of supporting the integration of the

Indian Ocean region with the Asia-Pacific to achieve an “Indo-Pacific” framework. It is imperative that the Indo-Pacific not be associated with this proposed trilateral dialogue, as it would stamp this concept as an American-led approach implicitly targeting China.

Having worked so hard to promote India as an integral part of Asian dynamics, the U.S. should now step back and allow other, local consultation mechanisms to fill in the space, as U.S. patronage could actually slow down progress in Indo-Australian ties. Australia could be encouraged, for instance, to revive its proposal of a more local India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral forum, that might focus on economic issues or disaster relief, and avoid controversial or strategic issues for the time being...

These remarks serve as clear reminders that India will continue to act based on its perceived interests, and will not rush into any arrangement merely because the United States wishes it to.

- *Ways forward: enhancing India’s contribution to U.S. interests in the Indian Ocean region and beyond*

The implications for an “Indo-Pacific” thrust are clear. Rather than attempt to corral India into supporting a U.S.-promoted concept, American policymakers should focus on identifying economic incentives for India to strengthen its ties with an Indo-Pacific region, and develop a separate thrust in its foreign policy to that end. This implies that the U.S. clearly articulate what such a region would resemble, whether it would encompass the Indian Ocean region and the Asia-Pacific as a whole, simply refer to the region stretching from the North-Eastern Indian Ocean to the Southwestern Pacific Ocean, or just represent an attempt to integrate India further in an Asian architecture conducive to U.S. interests. It is entirely possible, of course, to begin with a minimalist definition of the region’s scope, and expand it westward over time.

At the same time, the U.S. has to adapt to the reality that India will refuse any initiative that risks jeopardizing the delicate balance it seeks to preserve in the Indian Ocean region, and forego any dreams of a broad naval partnership with India. Frustrations will continue over India’s unwillingness to act more decisively as an enforcer of maritime security, even as it benefits increasingly from a stable maritime environment and professes its (sincere) attachment to open seas and open sea lines of communication. Such paradoxes or tensions will remain a defining feature of India’s external stance for the next 10-15 years, if not beyond.



U.S. policymakers will have to recognize that ultimately, the rate of progress depends on Indian willingness to go along with U.S. initiatives. Until India develops a proactive, strategic vision to guide its foreign policy, it will continue to proceed in the ad-hoc fashion it has adopted to date. This should not deter from further engaging India, as strengthening bilateral ties and perhaps more importantly making interactions between

the two nations more routine, and to a certain extent banal even, will be essential if the U.S. interests are to be served by India's rise. This requires patience and a more realistic understanding of India's worldview and priorities. Seeking to draw India into any U.S.-conceived order may backfire, not only because India must manage its relationship with China but because it is also determined to stake out an independent path to global power status.

The Indian Ocean region, where the U.S. and India have shared concerns but divergent interests in closer cooperation, offers a good example of the need to reassess U.S. expectations to favor the emergence of an ultimately more productive partnership. The United States cannot conclude too swiftly that broad interests automatically lead to common calculations, and must be mindful that India views events in the region through its own frame of reference.

At the same time, India will also have to recognize that it needs to recalibrate its own attitude towards the U.S., and not demand that America "prove" its commitment to India or judge its attitude on every issue as a test on the matter.

The rapid transformations of the past ten years must now give way to normal exchanges, converting the excitement of the past few years into a sentiment of routine – but not of complacency. Sustained efforts will be required, from the U.S. and from India, to understand each other, overcome frustrations and embrace limited opportunities to collaborate in order to breed more comfort and familiarity over time.

Major initiatives that redefine the relationship, such as the civil nuclear deal, will no longer part of the equation; the Indo-American strategic partnership will now be advanced, deepened and strengthened through incremental progress, something both countries must realize and accept. Recognizing divergences in foreign policy perspectives, that shared values do not translate into identical interests, and that public rhetoric must be adapted accordingly to avoid overinflated expectations, is a good place to start.

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Colin earned both his undergraduate degree and his Masters in Paris, where he lived for 11 years

Endnotes

1. Dennis Klux, *India and the United States: Estranged Democracies* (New York: National Defense University Press Publications, 1992).
2. Xenia Dormandy noted that India would play the role of “norm-setting partner” rather than “burden-sharing partner” in the near future, i.e. it would contribute to promoting values and principles that correspond to those defended by the U.S., but would not act alongside the United States in specific initiatives. Xenia Dormandy, “Is India, or Will It Be, a Responsible Stakeholder?” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30 no. 3, summer 2007, p. 117-130.
3. “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defense,” Defense Strategic Guidance Review, Department of Defense, January 2012, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf, accessed September 26, 2012.
4. Ashley Tellis, “Indian Ocean and U.S. Grand Strategy,” lecture at India International Centre, January 17, 2012, <http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/Ashley.pdf>, accessed September 20, 2012.
5. Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi, India, June 6, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5054>, accessed September 26, 2012.
6. S. Amer Latif, formerly director for South Asian affairs in the Office of South and Southeast Asian Affairs in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, noted that “Knowledgeable people inside the Pentagon and at Pacific Command know it will take a long time for India to emerge as a credible provider of security in Asia. They also know about India’s inhibitions regarding a closer U.S. partnership—ranging from India’s desire to preserve its strategic autonomy to its reluctance at being ensnared in a U.S.-led “counter China” strategy. U.S. policymakers understand these limitations and, consequently, do not expect India to be a consistent, “go-to” security partner anytime in the near future.” S. Amer Latif, “India and the New U.S. Defense Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 23, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/india-and-new-us-defense-strategy>, accessed September 20, 2012.
7. Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full, accessed September 19, 2012.
8. During a trip to India, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta raised this point with Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony, and “highlighted the benefits that joint military exercise play in deepening the overall relationship.” Department of Defense, “Readout of Secretary Panetta’s Meeting with Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony,” June 06, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15348>, accessed September 8, 2012.
9. Image borrowed from Iskander Rehman: “Formed of a tongue-like peninsula which lolls deep into the heart of this century’s central lake, India’s rarefied geography is a stronger sign of its oceanic destiny than any narrative could ever hope to be.” Iskander Rehman, “An Ocean at The Intersection of Two Emerging Maritime Narratives,” Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, IDSA Issue Brief, July 11, 2011, http://idsa.in/system/files/IB_AnOceanatTheIntersection.Iskander.pdf, accessed September 8, 2012.
10. According to Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, in a speech at the National Maritime Foundation: “India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean: Policy Contours,” New Delhi, November 19, 2010, <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530116701>, accessed September 8, 2012.
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12. In 2007, India laid out its naval policy in a document whose very title underscores its commitment: *Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy*, Integrated Headquarters, Indian Ministry of Defense (Navy), 2007.
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14. Cf. Ambassador (and current National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh) Shivshankar Menon, “Maritime Imperatives of Indian Foreign Policy,” National Maritime Foundation, September 11, 2009, <http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/SMenon.pdf>, accessed September 9, 2012.

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19. Admiral Arun Prakash, "Emerging India: Security and Foreign Policy Perspectives," September 1, 2005, http://indiannavy.nic.in/cns_add1.htm.
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21. Cf. for instance an article by Vidhan Pathak, which highlights the partially reactive dimension of Indian efforts in the face of China's progress in the region under Hu Jintao: "China and Francophone Western Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Indian Interests," *Journal of Defence Studies* 3:4, October 2009, p. 79-102, http://www.idsa.in/system/files/jds_3_4_vpathal.pdf.
22. Cf. interview with Admiral Sureesh Mehta, *Asian Defence Journal*, December 2007, p. 16.
23. In a key speech outlining India's vision of its role in the Indian Ocean region, he stated: "A popular theme in the media is to project the Indian Ocean as the new theatre of big power conflict. A widely read analyst who has also published a book on the Indian Ocean recently spoke of India being a "global pivot state supreme", in the so-called tussle between the United States and China. (...) There is no inevitability of conflict. India views the emerging trends with realism – building a sustainable regional security will require a cooperative effort among all regional countries on the one hand and all users of the Indian Ocean." Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, "India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean."
24. Nirupama Rao, "India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean."
25. Nirupama Rao, "India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean."
26. Nirupama Rao, "India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean."
27. *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy*, p. 29.
28. Cf. a 2007 speech by Admiral Sureesh Mehta: "India's Maritime Diplomacy and International Security," International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, June 21, 2007, <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/military-leaders-forum/admiral-sureesh-mehta/>.
29. David Brewster, "An Indian Sphere of Influence in the Indian Ocean?," *Security Challenges* 6:3 (Spring 2010), p. 7-15, <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol6no3Brewster.pdf>, accessed September 26, 2012.
30. Then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared in 2009 "In coming years, we look to India to be a partner and net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond." Robert Gates, "America's security role in the Asia-Pacific," speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 30, 2009, <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2009/plenary-session-speeches-2009/first-plenary-session/dr-robert-gates/>, accessed September 26, 2012.
31. The successful coordination of relief efforts by the U.S., Indian, Japanese and Australian efforts in response to the 2004 tsunami led the four nations to consider building on this experience. Representatives met together on the sidelines of regional fora in Asia in what became known as the Quadrilateral, or "Quad." In 2007, the four navies, joined by Singapore, conducted an exercise in the Bay of Bengal, thus giving the Quad a military component. China's response to this development was swift, and included lodging official demarches at the pertinent embassies demanding a clarification. Australia's subsequent decision to remove itself from the equation led to the dissolution of the Quad venture. Though Australia precipitated this outcome, India was also uncomfortable with both the marked anti-Chinese dimension the Quad initiative was taking (the

- Japanese Prime Minister labeled it an “axis of democracies”), and the envisioned scope of naval cooperation, as it would have preferred simpler maneuvers focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).
32. Sourabh Gupta points out quite correctly that “Far from suggesting a willingness to extend Indian maritime security obligations beyond the IOR, as some have inferred the trilateral Malabar exercises in the East China Sea to be, it in fact reveals an Indian disinclination to be tied to a US and allied maritime strategy in its core Indian Ocean zone of interest.” Sourabh Gupta, “US-India Ties: the Limits to Defense Cooperation with New Delhi,” Pacific Forum CSIS, PacNet No. 38, July 25, 2011, <http://csis.org/files/publication/pac1138.pdf>, accessed September 26, 2012.
 33. Nitin Gokhale, “India, China and the Pirates,” *The Diplomat*, March 6, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/03/06/india-china-and-the-pirates>, accessed September 26, 2012.
 34. Admiral Sureesh Mehta, “India’s National Security Challenges – An Armed Forces Overview,” New Delhi, August 10, 2009, http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/CNS_Lec_at_Habitat.pdf, accessed September 9, 2012.
 35. For a (somewhat excessive) analysis of these trends in Sino-Indian relations, cf. Iskander Rehman, “Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India’s Counter-Containment of China in Asia,” *Asian Security*, 5:2, May 2009, p. 114-143.
 36. Vikas Bajaj, “India Worries as China Builds Ports in South Asia,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/business/global/16port.html>, accessed September 26, 2012.
 37. Ashley S. Townshend, “Unraveling China’s ‘String of Pearls,’” YaleGlobal, September 16, 2011, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/unraveling-chinas-string-pearls>, accessed September 20, 2012.
 38. Saurav Jha, “Vietnam, India Boost Naval Ties to Counter China,” *World Politics Review* Briefing, July 29, 2011, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/9630/vietnam-india-boost-naval-ties-to-counter-china>, accessed September 26, 2012.
 39. Admiral Nirmal Verma, “India’s Role in the Indian Ocean – Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in the Decades Ahead,” address at Indian Maritime Foundation, Pune, December 19, 2010, http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/CNS_Speech_IMF_Pune_Giveaway.pdf (accessed September 18, 2012).
 40. Ashley Tellis, “Indian Ocean and U.S. Grand Strategy,” lecture at India International Centre, January 17, 2012, <http://maritimeindia.org/sites/all/files/pdf/Ashley.pdf>, accessed September 20, 2012.
 41. Cf. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, “India as a Consensual Stakeholder in the Indian Ocean.”
 42. Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Nirmal Verma declared in 2010 that “India’s role in the Indian Ocean is not to be a super-policeman in the neighbourhood. Rather, it would relate more to its own sovereignty, security and prosperity, which are of vital interest. The country would not compromise on the fundamental issue of national security. At the same time, we should be able to respond to requirements of other smaller nations in the IOR.” He goes on to mention “maintaining a favourable maritime environment in the Indian Ocean” as the goal India should work toward – an expansive, yet vague objective that does little to further illuminate how India might behave and what responsibilities it is prepared to shoulder... Admiral Nirmal Verma, “India’s Role in the Indian Ocean – Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in the Decades Ahead.”
 43. The remarks on internal bureaucratic dynamics in India owe much to the insights of Sourabh Gupta, who shared them during a meeting with the author on September 13, 2012.
 44. Iskander Rehman even posited in a 2011 paper that just as the United States had needed a “special relationship” with the United Kingdom to underwrite strategy in the second half of the 20th century, Australia could well achieve a similar status as the United States shifts its focus to the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century. Iskander Rehman, “From Down Under to Top Center: Australia, the United States, and this century’s special relationship,” *Transatlantic Academy Paper Series*, May 2011, <http://www.transatlanticacademy.org/publications/down-under-top-center>, accessed September 19, 2012.
 45. In her sweeping article laying out a new vision for the United States’ approach to the Asia-Pacific, Secretary Clinton wrote that “We are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one,” in one of the clearest affirmations of an ongoing shift to embrace and promote this new framework. She went on to underscore the importance attached to this new regional construct, declaring, “How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region.” Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full, accessed September 19, 2012.
 46. Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith, previewing Australia’s 2012 Defense White Paper, recently remarked that “The

critical strategic importance of the Indian Ocean continues to be substantially under-appreciated.” “Smith puts defence focus on Indian Ocean,” AAP, August 2, 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/smith-puts-defence-focus-on-indian-ocean/story-fn3dxiwe-1226440688021>, accessed September 19, 2012.

47. A growing number of research institutes in Australia are now focusing on the Indian Ocean region (including Future Directions International, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), and the Lowy Institute for International Policy), highlighting the increased importance Australian strategists now attach to an area it long neglected. Some analysts have even called for Canberra to implement a “Western front” strategy: cf. Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, *Our western front: Australia and the Indian Ocean*, ASPI, March 2010, http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=248, accessed September 19, 2012.
48. John McCarthy et al., *Beyond the Lost Decade*, Australia India Institute, 2012 <http://www.aii.unimelb.edu.au/public-perception-and-policy-change>, accessed September 19, 2012.
49. The authors of *Beyond the Lost Decade* note that “India is still unsure of Australia’s place in New Delhi’s construct of Asia,” as evidenced by the lack of any visit by successive Prime Ministers to Australia since 1986 even as they have made repeated journeys throughout South-East Asia. *Beyond the Lost Decade*, p. 13.
50. Greg Sheridan and Imre Salusinszky, “Julia Gillard’s uranium backflip opens US door to Delhi,” *The Australian*, November 16, 2011, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/julia-gillards-uranium-backflip-opens-us-door-to-delhi/story-fn59nm2j-1226196154363>, accessed September 20, 2012.
51. Rory Medcalf, Lisa Curtis, et al., *Shared Goals, Converging Interests: A Plan for the U.S.-Australia-India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, a joint report of the Heritage Foundation (U.S.), the Observer Research Foundation (India) and the Lowy Institute for International Policy (Australia), November 7, 2011, [http://lowyinstitute.cachefly.net/files/pubfiles/Shared goals%2C converging interests.pdf](http://lowyinstitute.cachefly.net/files/pubfiles/Shared%20converging%20interests.pdf), accessed September 26, 2012.
52. Rajat Pandit, “India snubs Australia, US move to check China,” *Times of India*, December 2, 2011, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-12-02/india/30467151_1_defence-cooperation-security-pact-australian-defence-minister, accessed September 26, 2012.

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