



**Delhi Policy Group**  
Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

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Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

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### INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

This publication is a monthly analytical survey of developments and policy trends that impact India's interests and define its challenges across the extended Indo-Pacific maritime space, which has become the primary theatre of global geopolitical contestation. It is authored by Cmde. Lalit Kapur (Retd.), DPG Senior Fellow for Maritime Strategy based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to the author at [lalit@dpg.org.in](mailto:lalit@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

### Cover Image:

*Family Photo of the 23rd Meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers and the 25th Meeting of the IORA Committee of Senior Officials at Colombo, October 11, 2023. Source: Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

*President Xi Jinping with foreign leaders at the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation at the Great Hall of the People, Beijing on October 18, 2023. Source: Official President of Russia website.*

*Imphal, the third of four Indigenous P15B Stealth Guided Missile destroyers designed by Indian Navy's Warship Design Bureau (WDB) & built by Mazagon Dock Ltd, Mumbai, delivered to Indian Navy on Oct 20, 2023. (Source: Indian Navy/Official Twitter)*

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# INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

October 2023

## Abstract

Hamas launched an unprecedented terrorist attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 07, killing more than 1400 Israeli citizens and taking away around 230 hostages, impacting peace and stability across the Middle East and beyond. Israel launched retaliatory attacks against Hamas and deployed the USS Gerald R Ford and USS Dwight D Eisenhower strike groups to the Eastern Mediterranean, while the USS Carl Vinson strike group sailed to join the USS Ronald Reagan carrier group in the Pacific. The Israel-Hamas conflict clouded prospects for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 summit last month, and for progress on normalised relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

In the South China Sea, China upped the ante by blocking resupply missions to the Filipino ship BRP Sierra Madre, grounded at the Second Thomas Shoal since 1999. It also carried out what the US termed an unprofessional intercept of a B-52 in the region. Meanwhile, a P-8A from the Seventh Fleet carried out a Taiwan Strait transit on October 12.

China hosted the Third Belt and Road Forum on October 17-18. China's investment of over \$ 965 billion in BRI projects over the last decade has generated resonance and influence, particularly in the Global South.

The US and China continued high-level engagement to stabilise relations, with Director of the CCP Foreign Affairs Office and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visiting the US on October 26-27 to prepare for a possible Biden-Xi Summit in San Francisco on November 14.

The report of the US Congressional Commission on the Strategic posture of the US was released on October 18. The Pentagon also released its Annual Report to the Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, otherwise called the China Military Power Report (CMPR), on October 19. On October 26, the US Secretary of the Navy released priorities for the USN and USMC to strengthen maritime dominance, build a culture of war fighting excellence and enhance strategic partnerships. Service Chiefs of



the USN, USMC and RN met on October 18 to sign an updated agreement on delivering combined sea power across the globe.

The US EU Summit held on October 20 accorded first priority to the ongoing war in Ukraine, followed by commitments to Israel. The trans-Atlantic partners announced biannual US-EU consultations on the Indo-Pacific to expand domain awareness, encourage cooperation on connectivity and counter foreign information manipulation and interference. Separately, the UK awarded a £4 billion contract to British companies for Detailed Design and Long Leads (D2L2) for the SSN-AUKUS programme.

India became the Vice-Chair of IORA at the Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Colombo on October 11, while Sri Lanka assumed the chair. The IORA noted Sri Lanka's proposal to convene a leaders' summit in 2024.

India continued to expand its maritime outreach, including with the first joint anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Guinea with the EU and preparation for Exercise MILAN 2024. The third Project 15B destroyer, Imphal, was delivered to the IN on October 20.

## **BRP Sierra Madre and the Second Thomas Shoal**

Built in Indiana, USA, Landing Ship Tank 821 was commissioned in October 1944 and ferried supplies between islands in the Western Pacific in preparation for the invasion of Japan. Laid up in the reserve from 1946 – 1955, she was recommissioned in 1966 as USS Harnett County, equipped with a helipad and maintenance facilities, and served in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War. She was transferred to South Vietnam in October 1970 and used as a base for riverine warfare. Just before the fall of Saigon, she embarked more than 3000 South Vietnamese refugees and sailed to Subic Bay. Ownership of the vessel was transferred to the Philippines Navy in exchange for harbouring the refugees and she became BRP Sierra Madre in 1976, serving as an amphibious transport. In 1999, the Philippine Navy deliberately grounded her in the Second Thomas Shoal to serve as a forward outpost and maintain a territorial claim. She remains aground there to this day and has become a focal point of China's grey zone activity to evict the Philippines from the Second Thomas Shoal.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration had in July 2016 unambiguously ruled that "China's claim (to resources in the South China Sea) was incompatible with the detailed allocation of rights and maritime zones in UNCLOS, and any historic rights China may have had were extinguished on entry into force of the

convention"<sup>1</sup>. The Tribunal also recorded that China had "protected and failed to prevent Chinese fishermen from fishing within the Philippines exclusive economic zone at Mischief Reef and the Second Thomas Shoal"<sup>2</sup>. However, the tribunal did not consider the Philippines' submission regarding China preventing rotation and resupply of Filipino personnel on board BRP Sierra Madre and endangering their health and well-being, noting that this was a military matter on which it did not have jurisdiction. China maintains that the tribunal's award is "illegal, null and void", that "China's sovereignty and relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea were established in the long course of history and are solidly grounded in history and the law", and that "this shall under no circumstances be affected by any illegal award"<sup>3</sup>. This despite its having signed and ratified UNCLOS, in which Article 11 of Annex VII specifically provides, "The award shall be final and without appeal" and "It shall be complied with by the parties to the dispute"<sup>4</sup>. As a great power, China chooses to disregard parts of UNCLOS it doesn't like; the only law it chooses to recognise is its malleable domestic law.

China has taken the stand that the Philippines illegally grounded its warship at Ren'ai Jiao (the Chinese name for the Second Thomas Shoal), an integral part of China's territory. It claims that the Philippines has explicitly promised several times during the course of the last 24 years to tow away the vessel. Despite such promises, the Philippines continues to repair and reinforce the vessel so as to permanently occupy Ren'ai Jiao, ignoring China's goodwill and sincerity and reneging on its promise, violating China's territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interests and undermining regional peace and stability<sup>5</sup>. The Philippines, on the other hand, maintains that the Second Thomas Shoal is an inalienable part of its EEZ as recognised by the arbitral tribunal, a part that China is trying to seize. It will not give up its claim easily. President Marcos has challenged China to produce any evidence of it having ever agreed to remove BRP Sierra Madre and stated that if there is any such agreement, he

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<sup>1</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China, July 12, 2016, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1801>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks of the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines on the Seventh Anniversary of the Wo-called Award on the South China Sea Arbitration, July 12, 2023, [http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202307/t20230712\\_11112236.htm](http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202307/t20230712_11112236.htm)

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, [https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on CCG Lawfully Blocking Philippine Attempt to Send Construction Materials to its Illegally "Grounded" Warship at Ren'ai Jiao, October 22, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/202310/t2023102\\_11165712.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/202310/t2023102_11165712.html)

rescinds it with immediate effect<sup>6</sup>. China has so far failed to produce such evidence; its argument is that there is no point in showing proof if Marcos has rescinded the agreement<sup>7</sup>. And so, the standoff continues.

In the latest manifestation, China and the Philippines accused each other on October 22 of having caused two collisions, one between a Chinese Coast Guard ship and a Philippine vessel carrying supplies to troops on board BRP Sierra Madre, and the second between a Chinese maritime militia vessel and a Philippines Coast Guard ship<sup>8</sup>. No injuries were reported. Earlier this month, Chinese and Philippine Coast Guard vessels had come within a metre of colliding<sup>9</sup>. A game of chicken is on, with both sides pushing the envelope to see who blinks first.

Economic interests have resulted in the Philippines' ASEAN partners choosing not to rake up the issue, bringing the future of ASEAN into question. Interestingly, US Navy and Coast Guard assets were present, albeit over the horizon: USCGC Frederick Hatch was visiting Tacloban from October 19-23<sup>10</sup> and USS Dewey was reported as being in the region<sup>11</sup>, though not in the immediate vicinity.

For the time being, the US restricted itself to a chorus of statements of support and reaffirmation that Article IV of the Mutual Defense Treaty applied to all Philippines official vessels anywhere in the South China Sea, including from

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<sup>6</sup> Marcos: Rescind deal with China to remove BRP Sierra Madre from Ayungin Shoal if it exists, August 9, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/9/marcos-no-agreement-sierra-mdre-ayungin-shoal.html>

<sup>7</sup> China says no point in showing proof of Ayungin Shoal deal if Marcos has already rescinded it, August 11, 2023, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2023/8/11/China-no-point-proof-ayungin-shoal-deal-rescinded.html>

<sup>8</sup> China and Philippines accuse each other over collisions in disputed South China Sea, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/22/asia/south-china-sea-philippines-collision-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Chinese and Philippine Coast Guard ships come within a meter of colliding, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/10/07/asia-pacific/politics/china-philippines-second-thomas-shoal-one-meter/>

<sup>10</sup> US Coast Guard strengthens historic relationship with Philippines during landmark visit to Tacloban, October 23, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3566326/us-coast-guard-strengthens-historic-relationship-with-philippines-during-landma/>

<sup>11</sup> China, a US Ally and the fight over an old rusty ship, October 25, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/asia/china-a-u-s-ally-and-the-fight-over-an-old-rusty-ship-daf24da3>

the White House<sup>12</sup>, the US State Department<sup>13</sup> and the Department of Defence<sup>14</sup>. Neither China nor the US appear prepared to escalate. Both were preparing for the visit of Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Washington<sup>15</sup>. There is no benefit for China to elevate grey zone activity into the military domain: it will be patient and act only when the US is distracted, or it can reach a clandestine agreement with the US. The Philippines is emboldened by US support; in any case giving up on its EEZ would entail unacceptable political costs. On its part, the US is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East. Its capability in the Indo-Pacific is far short of what is needed: in fact, a former Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command has stated, "I'm concerned that we're building a modern navy and air force for the 2030s and the 2040s when the challenge before us is in this decade"<sup>16</sup>.

India had, in a carefully measured response to the PCA award in 2016, noted it and urged all states to show the utmost respect for UNCLOS<sup>17</sup>. This position evolved following the visit of the Philippines Foreign Secretary (Minister) to India in June 2023: the Joint Statement following his interaction with Dr. S. Jaishankar "underlined the need for peaceful settlement of disputes and for adherence to international law, especially the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea in this regard". The disapproval of India, or for that matter any other nation, is hardly likely to deter China from continuing along its chosen path in the region. So, brinkmanship over BRP Sierra Madre can be expected to continue, at least till such time China judges that the US has

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<sup>12</sup> Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with National Security Advisor Eduardo M Año of the Philippines, October 23, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/23/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-call-with-national-security-advisor-eduardo-m-ano-of-the-philippines/>

<sup>13</sup> US Support for our Philippine Allies in the Face of Repeated PRC Harassment in the South China Sea, October 22, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-our-philippine-allies-in-the-face-of-repeated-prc-harassment-in-the-south-china-sea/>

<sup>14</sup> Joint Press statement for Secretary of Defense Lloyd J Austin III's Call With Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr., October 27, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3571219/joint-press-statement-for-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-ph/>

<sup>15</sup> Secretary Blinken to Host Visit by People's Republic of China (PRC) Director of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinken-to-host-visit-by-peoples-republic-of-china-prc-director-of-the-ccp-central-foreign-affairs-commission-and-foreign-minister-wang-yi/>

<sup>16</sup> Admiral Harry B Harris Jr, at the American Enterprise Institute, October 16, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/231016-Peace-in-the-Pacific-A-Conversation-with-Former-Indo-Pacific-Commanders-Transcript-1.pdf?x91208>

<sup>17</sup> Statement on Award of Arbitral Tribunal on South China Sea Under Annexure VII of UNCLOS, July 12, 2016, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/27019/statement+on+award+of+arbitral+tribunal+on+south+china+sea+under+annexure+vii+of+unclos>



been distracted enough for it to change the situation militarily and create a fait accompli.

## The Third Belt and Road Forum

Speaking at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University on September 07, 2013, China's President Xi Jinping outlined his vision of building a Silk Road Economic Belt in conjunction with Central Asia, thus re-launching an era of trade and cultural exchanges that had connected China to Europe in the past<sup>18</sup>. A month later, speaking to Indonesia's Parliament in Jakarta, he announced the upgradation of the China-Indonesia partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership and unveiled his vision of building a Maritime Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>19</sup>. The two corridors combined into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promotion of which was incorporated into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution at the conclusion of the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress in October 2017<sup>20</sup>, making it a major instrument of China's foreign policy. With the initiative entering its second decade, China hosted the Third BRI Forum at Beijing on October 17-18, 2023.

The siren song of the BRI is both seductive and deceptive. Its underlying supposition, according to China, is that development provides the master key to solve all the world's problems. It acknowledges that economic globalisation has imparted a strong momentum to the world economy and has become a "surging historical trend", particularly after the 1990s. However, the present form of globalisation dominated by a few countries has been exploitative and has "widened the wealth gap between rich and poor, developed and developing countries, and within developed countries", says a White Paper published this month<sup>21</sup>. Certain countries have practiced unilateralism, protectionism and hegemonism, hampering economic globalisation and threatening global economic recession. It is no longer acceptable that only a few countries dominate world economic development, control economic rules and enjoy the fruits of development. The BRI thus targets development not only for China but for the world. Its stated goal is to help build a global community of a shared

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<sup>18</sup> President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries, September 07, 2013, [http://toronto.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zqwxw/201309/t20130913\\_7095490.htm](http://toronto.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zqwxw/201309/t20130913_7095490.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament, October 02, 2013, [http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c\\_133062675.htm](http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm)

<sup>20</sup> Pressure on as Xi's 'Belt and Road' enshrined in Chinese party charter, October 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-congress-silkroad-idUSKBN1CT1IW>

<sup>21</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future, October 10, 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/files/Full-text-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-A-Key-Pillar-of-the-Global-Community-of-Shared-Future.docx>

future, and the BRI is intended to provide a platform for turning this vision into reality.

The BRI framework comprises six corridors: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China Indo-China Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China Mongolia Russia Economic Corridor, the China Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Corridor. These corridors are supposedly to be built on the basis of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefit. They are intended to foster open, green and clean cooperation towards inclusive and sustainable development, with zero tolerance for corruption and targeted to promote steady and high-quality growth, offering a path to peace, prosperity, openness, innovation and social progress. The BRI has already become the world's largest platform for international cooperation, with the broadest coverage. The White Paper spells out the progress that has been made on the six corridors, as well as the six other routes China is building<sup>22</sup>. Basic connectivity is already in place, China is now moving to expand the coverage from road and rail to pipelines, digital power and industrial connectivity. Open-source statistics from an American public policy think tank indicate that China has, over the last decade, invested \$ 965.95 billion in BRI projects<sup>23</sup>.

President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum announced eight new initiatives<sup>24</sup>. China will speed up the development of connectivity corridors. It will enter into investment protection treaties with more countries, in the process removing all restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector and advancing the opening up of cross-border service trade. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China will each set up a RMB 350 billion (about \$ 48 billion) financing window for signature projects as well as small yet smart livelihood programmes. In addition, China will promote green development; advance scientific and technological innovation, support people-to-people exchanges with BRI partner countries; promote integrity-based Belt and Road cooperation; and strengthen institution building. Notably, even as the US struggles with protectionist trends, China is portraying itself as opening up.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> American Enterprise Institute China Global Investment Tracker, accessed October 19, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/?ncid=txtlnkusaolp00000618>

<sup>24</sup> Building an Open, Inclusive and Interconnected World for Common Development, October 18, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202310/t20231018\\_11162854.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202310/t20231018_11162854.html)

A decade after the launch of BRI, the West is still discussing connectivity corridors and associated developmental projects. In 2021, the G7 launched the Build Back Better World (BBBW) Partnership<sup>25</sup>. This seems to have become the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) at the June 2022 G7 Summit<sup>26</sup>. It has only begun mobilising funds<sup>27</sup> and promised to reform multilateral financial institutions<sup>28</sup>. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 Summit last month<sup>29</sup> will become hostage to the action of Hamas and the response from Israel, holding up normalisation of Israel-Saudi Arabia relations till a mutually acceptable solution can be found. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor jointly announced between Japan and India in 2017 appears to have gone into the doldrums, with little to show apart from a vision document<sup>30</sup>. Updates don't find mention in India-Japan joint statements or websites of the concerned agencies any longer. Perhaps the only other large corridor that has come to fruition is International North South Transport Corridor, with the announcement of the first successful completion of the transport of goods to India in June 2022<sup>31</sup>. But banking channels with both Russia and Iran have been disrupted due to sanctions imposed by the West, hindering utilisation of this corridor.

The reality is that unlike for corridors envisaged by democratic leaders, China can fulfil the aspirations of underdeveloped nations quickly and without too many questions. If 35% of China's projects have run into problems as per some assessments, the implication is that the balance 65% have succeeded.

<sup>25</sup> Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership, June 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>

<sup>26</sup> Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Formally Launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, June 26, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-formally-launch-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>

<sup>27</sup> Fact Sheet: Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment at the G7 Summit, May 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/fact-sheet-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment-at-the-g7-summit/>

<sup>28</sup> Fact Sheet: Delivering a Better, Bigger, More Effective World Bank, September 09, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-delivering-a-better-bigger-more-effective-world-bank/>

<sup>29</sup> Fact Sheet: World Leaders Launch a Landmark India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, September 09, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-world-leaders-launch-a-landmark-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/>

<sup>30</sup> Asia Africa Growth Corridor: Partnership for Sustainable and Innovative Development – A Vision Document, May 2017, <https://www.eria.org/Asia-Africa-Growth-Corridor-Document.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Russia Launches Trade with India via Eastern Branch of INSTC Involving Central Asian States, July 8, 2022, <https://www.ibef.org/news/russia-launches-trade-with-india-via-eastern-branch-of-instc-involving-central-asian-states>



Not that China's vision is without visible blemishes. That the US-led West has selfishly exploited the world for its own betterment, particularly after the unipolar moment, can no longer be denied. This does not mean China will not do the same: the democratisation of economic power, especially between nations, is a chimera. The wealth gap between China and the underdeveloped world has risen in much the same way as that between the West and the underdeveloped world. China too has displayed a penchant for unilateralism (as in its outlook towards the South China Sea and refusal to accept a binding award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, or unilateral sanctions against Australia, Japan, South Korea, Lithuania and others). It continues employing protectionism and controlling market access despite its commitments to the WTO. Hegemonism is visible in its extending domestic law to cover international waters in the South China Sea, and enforcing it. The global community it seeks is China and CCP-directed – having been unable to accept political competition and dissonant voices within its own territory, it is unlikely to do so abroad. The consultation it speaks of is with those who bend to its will, or with captured elites, and has led to debt traps as in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The shared benefit it speaks of disproportionately favours China, leaving only remnants for underdeveloped partners. But these partners understand that they will be exploited anyway, either by the West or by China.

So, China's vision has generated resonance, particularly in the Global South, which was also the constituency addressed by India at the September 2023 G20 Summit. Delegates from over 130 countries attended the Third Belt and Road Forum, though the number of heads of state or government have reduced from 37 in 2019 (and 29 in 2017) to 23 this year. Eleven leaders have attended all three BRI Forums: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Laos, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Southeast Asia appears ambivalent: while the CLV countries, Thailand and Indonesia attended, Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines and Singapore did not. From the IOR, the notable presence was from leaders of Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Sri Lanka. Egypt and UAE were the notable leaders from the Middle East. Europe largely stayed away, with only Hungary remaining committed to China.

History teaches us that control over connectivity leads to colonial exploitation, as this author had observed following the First Belt and Road Forum in May 2017<sup>32</sup>. The tool used for colonial exploitation has changed. If colonialism was

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<sup>32</sup> Lalit Kapur, "Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative: Maritime Imperatives for India", DPG Policy Note Vol II, Issue 7, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-)

driven by military power in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it has been driven by economic power after World War II.

In the competition between the West and China for control over global connectivity, China appears to be well ahead, with the result that it has already become the world's largest trading nation, and that too on its own (and not WTO) terms. Unless the West can get its act together and quickly, putting its money where its mouth is, it will continue falling behind. This cannot be allowed to become a fait accompli, and India will have to shape its foreign policy accordingly.

## Towards a Temporary China-US Rapprochement?

Just over a year after he visited the US in September 2022 for the UNGA session and to lay the ground for the Bali Leaders' Summit, Director of the CCP Foreign Affairs Office and Foreign Minister Wang Yi returned on October 26-27, this time to prepare for a possible San Francisco Summit meeting. US-China relations and communication channels had seized up after the balloon imbroglio<sup>33</sup>; their restoration began only after the much-delayed Blinken visit to Beijing in June 2023<sup>34</sup>. China's top diplomat met US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken, National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan and President Joe Biden.

Both sides maintained their respective positions, as is evident from the readouts. The US readout of his meeting with President Biden emphasised that both US and China need to manage competition responsibly, maintain open lines of communication and work together to address global challenges<sup>35</sup>. China's readout says much the same, with the addition that the one-China

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[issue-7-geopolitics-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-maritime-imperatives-for-india-1053.pdf](#)

<sup>33</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "China's Balloon over America and Implications for India, DPG Policy Brief Volume VIII, Issue 10, February 15, 2023,

[https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/chinas-balloon-over-america-and-implications-for-india-4853.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/chinas-balloon-over-america-and-implications-for-india-4853.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Secretary Blinken's Visit to the PRC, June 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-visit-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china-prc/>

<sup>35</sup> Readout of President Joe Biden's Meeting with People's Republic of China Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, October 27, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/27/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-meeting-with-peoples-republic-of-china-director-of-the-office-of-the-foreign-affairs-commission-and-foreign-minister-wang-yi/>

principle and three China-US joint communiques must be earnestly maintained, with efforts to steer clear of disruptions<sup>36</sup>.

The scope of discussions at the NSA level as portrayed by the US included the bilateral relationship, the Israel-Hamas Conflict, Russia's war against Ukraine, cross-Strait issues and China's action against the Philippines in the South China Sea<sup>37</sup>. Both sides agreed to work towards a meeting between the Presidents in San Francisco. The White House announced that President Biden would travel to San Francisco on November 14 for the APEC Meeting<sup>38</sup>. China's readout contained the same subjects, but with different emphasis<sup>39</sup>. Wang Yi emphasised that the biggest threat to peace and stability in Taiwan Strait is "Taiwan independence"; this is also the biggest challenge for China-US relations. He noted that Taiwan independence must be specifically opposed and reflected in US policies and actions. He also elaborated on China's position on South China Sea issues.

Discussions at the foreign minister level occupied over seven hours spread over two days. The US readout mentioned the range of issues on which the US and China have differing perceptions<sup>40</sup>. These include American citizens who have been wrongfully detained or subjected to exit bans; counter-narcotics, human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, unfair treatment of US companies and the PRC's nonmarket economic policies, concerns about China's actions in the South and East China Seas and cross-Strait issues, the Second Thomas Shoal issue, Israel, Ukraine and DPRK missile launches, and

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<sup>36</sup> US President Joe Biden Meets with Wang Yi, October 28, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzb\\_663304/wjzbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202310/t20231028\\_11170112.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzb_663304/wjzbz_663308/activities_663312/202310/t20231028_11170112.html)

<sup>37</sup> Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting with People's Republic of China Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, October 27, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/27/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-peoples-republic-of-china-director-of-the-office-of-the-foreign-affairs-commission-and-foreign-minister-wang-yi/>

<sup>38</sup> Statement from Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on President Biden's Travel to San Francisco for APEC Leaders' Week, October 27, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/27/statement-from-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-president-bidens-travel-to-san-francisco-for-apec-leaders-week/>

<sup>39</sup> Wang Yi Meets with Assistant to the US President for National Security Affairs Jake Sullivan, October 28, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzb\\_663304/wjzbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202310/t20231028\\_11170089.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzb_663304/wjzbz_663308/activities_663312/202310/t20231028_11170089.html)

<sup>40</sup> Secretary Blinken's Meeting with People's Republic of China Director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, October 27, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-peoples-republic-of-china-director-of-the-chinese-communist-party-ccp-central-foreign-affairs-commission-and-foreign-minister-wang-yi-2/>

the need to resume military-to-military communications. Positive content in the readout included agreement on the need to resume people-to-people exchanges and increase the frequency of flights between the two countries, agreement on consultations regarding arms control, maritime security, policy planning and disability in the coming weeks, and agreement on the need to work together to address shared challenges including climate, global macroeconomic stability, food security, public health and counter-narcotics.

China's readout<sup>41</sup>, on the other hand, emphasised agreement on the two sides working together for a meeting between the heads of state in San Francisco, the need for China-US relations returning to the path of sound and steady development at the earliest, and the need for the two to have "objective understandings of each other's strategic intentions". It recorded that the two sides would hold consultations on maritime affairs, arms control and non-proliferation and on foreign policies and discuss signing of an MoU on disability affairs in the coming days. Both agreed to further increase direct passenger flights.

The differences between US and China's strategic interests and perceptions are too large to be easily bridged. The geo-strategic and political costs of conceding Taiwan, or the South China Sea, or in the economic domain, will be unacceptable. However, the wars in Ukraine and now in Gaza have highlighted the limits of US deterrence as well as industrial and military power. US resources are stretched: another simultaneous crisis in the Western Pacific, either in the Taiwan Straits or in the South China Sea, could mark a tipping point. On the other hand, the prevailing opinion is that China is not yet ready to enter into conflict with the US, notwithstanding distractions and its opinion about declining US power.

It is thus in the interest of both to manage their differences, working around altered red lines including in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea and negotiating a mutually acceptable via media, just as the US formulation did in 1979. The contours of this compromise will have to take into account China's vastly increased power. Its broad parameters will be set by the two leaders, through a process that was begun at Bali in November 2022, but proved abortive. Much water has flowed under the bridge since then. That both sides are still amenable to and seek a negotiated compromise, however, temporary it may be, is indicated by the Wang Yi visit. The outcomes, however, will be known only after the Biden-Xi Summit takes place.

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<sup>41</sup> Wang Yi Holds Talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, October 28, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202310/t20231028\\_11170113.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202310/t20231028_11170113.html)

## China Military Power Report 2023

In compliance with the National Defense Authorisation Act for FY 2000 (Section 1202), the US Department of Defense has been submitting an annual report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, otherwise called the China Military Power Report (CMPR). The 2023 edition was unveiled by Pentagon on October 19, 2023<sup>42</sup>. The US Congressional Research Service updated its analysis on China's naval modernisation the same day<sup>43</sup>.

The report is divided into six chapters: understanding the PRC's strategy; PLA forces, capabilities and power projection; operational structure and activities on China's periphery; the PLA's growing global presence; resources and technology for force modernisation; and defense contacts and exchanges in 2022. It also addresses five special topics: the PLA's self-assessment; PRC support to Russia in its war against Ukraine; PRC building "A Strong Strategic Deterrent System"; PLA recruitment and personnel management situation; and PRC perceptions of the international security environment.

**Strategy.** The PRC's national objective, as per the CMPR, remains achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049. The prevailing strategic environment is viewed as one of rivalry among powerful nation states as well as a clash of opposing ideological systems. The PRC's strategy involves determined pursuit of political, social and military modernisation to expand its national power, perfect its governance and revise the international order in pursuit of the PRC's system of governance and national interests. The foreign policy thus seeks to build a "community of common destiny" and reshape the international order in China's favour. In US eyes, Russia's war in Ukraine represented a major and unexpected challenge, and the PRC will probably seek to balance its strategic partnership with Russia while avoiding reputational or economic costs that could follow from its assistance. In its economic policy, China's leadership is now emphasising quality growth rather than the speed of growth, common prosperity, more equitable access to basic public services, a better multi-tiered social security system and cultural and green developments. The PRC uses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand global transportation and trade linkages and deepen economic integration with nations on its

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<sup>42</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2023, Annual Report to Congress, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>

<sup>43</sup> China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress, updated October 19, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153>





periphery and beyond. Overseas developments under BRI will drive the PRC towards expanding its overseas security relationships and presence to protect its interests. The PRC pursues a military-civil fusion approach to fuse its security and development strategies into an integrated national strategic system. The stated defence policy remains oriented towards safeguarding the PRC's interests while emphasising a greater global role for the country. It continues to be based on active defence, and the PRC continues strengthening the PLA into a world-class military.

**Force, Capabilities and Power Projection.** The PRC continues strengthening its ability to fight and win wars against a strong enemy, counter an intervention by a third party in a conflict along China's periphery and project power globally. The PLA Army demonstrated a long-range fire capability in 2022. The PLA Navy, already numerically the largest in the world, launched its third aircraft carrier Fujian in 2022; the ship is expected to commission in 2024. In the near term, the PLAN will have the ability to conduct long-range precision strikes against land targets from its submarine and surface combatants using land-attack cruise missiles. It will continue challenging foreign military activities in its EEZ in a manner that is not consistent with UNCLOS, while conducting activities in the EEZs of other countries, including the US, Australia, Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam. The PLA Air Force and PLAN aviation together constitute the largest aviation force in the Indo-Pacific. The PLA Rocket Force is developing new ICBMs that will significantly improve its nuclear-capable missile forces and will necessitate increased nuclear warhead production. The PRC's counter-intervention strategy prioritises precision attack, an integrated air defence architecture within 300 nm (556 Km) of its coast and hypersonic weapons. The PRC is advancing its cyberspace attack capabilities, improving its capabilities in space-based ISR, satellite communication and satellite navigation, and developing a range of counter-space capabilities, including kinetic-kill missiles, ground-based lasers and orbiting space robots. In the nuclear domain, the CMPR states that the PRC is rapidly modernising capability and possesses more than 500 operational nuclear warheads as of May 2023. This number will increase to over 1000 by 2030 and will continue to grow till at least 2035. The PRC has begun fielding the JL-3 SLBM, enabling their JIN class SSBNS to reach the continental US from PRC littoral waters. In the South China Sea, the PRC views international military presence as a challenge to China's sovereignty. China has amplified its diplomatic, political and military pressure against Taiwan, including ballistic missile overflights, sharply increased flights into Taiwan's ADIZ and conducted a series of major exercises. It has also expanded its coercive and risky operational behaviour, with over 180 instances of risky intercepts against US aircraft in the last two years.



**Growing Global Presence.** Enhancing the PLA's global presence is considered an essential element of the PRC's international activities. Beyond the PLA Support Base at Djibouti, the PRC has confirmed it will have access to parts of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base. It is considering military logistics facilities in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the UAE, Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Island and Tajikistan. The PLA Strategic Support Force operates tracking, telemetry and command stations in Namibia, Pakistan, Argentina and Kenya, apart from using the Yuan-Wang space support ships to track satellite and ICBM launches. Western sanctions against Russia have almost certainly amplified the PRC's push for defence and technological self-sufficiency and financial resilience.

**Resources and Technology for Force Modernisation.** The PRC's long-term goal is creating an entirely self-reliant defence-industrial sector fused with a strong civilian industrial and technology sector that can meet the PLA's needs for modern military capability. It has mobilised vast resources for this purpose, including through its military-civil fusion development strategy, espionage and substantial increases in military spending. Outcomes include rapid advances in hypersonic missile technologies, the development of BVR air-air missiles more resistant to countermeasures, and the first domestically designed and manufactured aircraft carrier with an electromagnetic launch system.

**Defence Contacts and Exchanges.** The PRC continues to refuse to engage with the US Department of Defense. This raises the risk of an operational incident or miscalculation spiralling into crisis or conflict.

The CRS report on China's Naval Modernisation observes, "China's Navy is, by far, the largest of any country in East Asia, and sometime between 2015 and 2020 it surpassed the U.S. Navy in numbers of battle force ships. DOD states that China's Navy "is the largest navy in the world with a battle force of over 370 platforms, including major surface combatants, submarines, ocean-going amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, aircraft carriers, and fleet auxiliaries. Notably, this figure does not include approximately 60 Houbei-class patrol combatants that carry anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM). The... overall battle force [of China's navy] is expected to grow to 395 ships by 2025 and 435 ships by 2030." The U.S. Navy, by comparison, included 291 battle force ships as of October 19, 2023, and the Navy's FY2024 budget submission projects that the Navy will include 290 battle force ships by the end of FY2030. U.S. military officials and other observers are expressing concern or alarm regarding the pace of China's naval shipbuilding effort, the capacity of China's shipbuilding

industry compared with the capacity of the U.S. shipbuilding industry, and resulting trend lines regarding the relative sizes and capabilities of China's navy and the U.S. Navy".

China expressed its strong dissatisfaction with and firm opposition to the report, describing it as disregarding facts and fabricating falsehoods<sup>44</sup>.

As a multi-aligned, strategically autonomous nation in China's immediate periphery and in view of its continuing border dispute, India cannot remain impervious to the continued growth of China's military power. Effective steps to balance it in both the continental and maritime domains, internally, externally or both, are essential. The CMPR and CRS report on China's Naval Modernization are inputs that will, no doubt, be taken into account as India shapes its responses.

## The US-EU Summit and the Indo-Pacific

The 2021 US-EU Summit had renewed the transatlantic partnership after the downslide during the Trump Administration. The US-EU Summit of October 20, 2023 continued the process of strengthening the partnership and thus re-binding the EU to the US. It was the first summit was held in the US since 2011: the 2014, 2017 and 2021 summits all took place in Brussels.

Leaders condemned "in the strongest possible terms Hamas and its brutal terrorist attacks across Israel"<sup>45</sup>. They affirmed Israel's right to defend itself; concern about the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Gaza followed. They reiterated their unwavering political, financial, humanitarian and military support to Ukraine, their commitment to continuing this support for as long as it takes, and called for Russia to bear the legal consequences of its acts including compensation for the damage caused to Ukraine. Their third priority was the common interest the US and the EU share in promoting the security, stability and prosperity of North Africa and their commitment to tackling common security challenges in the Sahel.

Fourth came Indo-Pacific partnerships, where they reiterated their commitment to enhancing coordination and cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific and contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region. To enhance this coordination, they

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<sup>44</sup> China slams US report on its military for ignoring facts, fabricating falsehoods, October 25, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16261768.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16261768.html)

<sup>45</sup> US – EU Summit Joint Statement, October 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/20/u-s-eu-summit-joint-statement/>



announced biannual US-EU Indo-Pacific consultations, which would include expanding MDA, encouraging cooperation on connectivity, respond to foreign information manipulation and interference, increase coordination on cyber cooperation and encourage ongoing efforts to uphold fundamental freedoms and human rights. They also reaffirmed their continuing support for ASEAN centrality and unity and promoting cooperation in line with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

On China, the leaders reiterated their readiness to build constructive and stable relations and called on China to engage with them. They sought a level playing field for their companies and workers to enable sustainable economic relations, while recognising that economic resilience requires de-risking and diversifying. They also recognised the need to protect certain advanced technologies that could be used to threaten global peace, without unduly limiting trade and investment. They reiterated their serious concern about the situation in the East and South China Seas and their strong opposition to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion. They underscored the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, while emphasising there was no change in their one-China policy.

The leaders committed to further strengthening and deepening EU-US cooperation and engagement on security and defence, including practical cooperation in operational theatres of mutual interest. They committed to accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and to mobilising additional finances for development, including greater private capital mobilisation.

US-EU economic cooperation comprised the second pillar of their joint statement. The leaders agreed to deepen cooperation to address the urgent and interdependent crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, urging ambitious action by all other major players. They also agreed to expand research collaboration "to ignite a clean industrial revolution", identified progress towards an agreement to expand access to sustainable, secure and diversified critical mineral and battery supply chains, agreed to step up joint efforts to promote an open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, secure and innovative digital ecosystem, and expand cooperation on critical and emerging technologies such as AI, quantum, renewable energy and other key areas. They announced they would work towards substantial WTO Reform by the 13<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference, including having a fully-functioning dispute settlement system by 2024. They announced continuing cooperation to strengthen economic resilience and security, and measures to expand people-to-people contacts.

If the Trump Administration had begun action on pivoting or rebalancing to the Pacific, the US-EU Summit confirms the Biden Administration's prioritising of the Anglo-Saxon world over the rest. The Euro-Atlantic has returned to being the first priority in this group's strategic calculus, with the Middle East reclaiming its second position. Africa, especially the Sahel and North Africa as the EU's immediate neighbours across the Mediterranean; they come third. The Asia-Pacific, which has gained in importance due economic reasons, comes fourth. Notably, the Indian Ocean does not figure in the group's calculations, though they continue to use the term Indo-Pacific.

Though there is recognition that China poses the much greater long-term threat, capacity constraints force the grouping to focus on managing the challenge rather than confronting it. Years of neglect following the unipolar moment have hollowed out the US defense industrial base as well as that of Europe. Production capacities that have been lost will take a long time to rebuild. Although some funding has been provided to the Pacific Deterrence Initiative last year, this is only the beginning of a long road, it will have to be sustained for decades. As observed by Admiral Harry Harris, "If China remains the fundamental threat for the rest of this decade and into the next decade, we are not resourced, in my opinion, correctly, for that challenge"<sup>46</sup>. This lack of resources is visible not just in the conventional, but also nuclear deterrence domains, as brought out by the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States<sup>47</sup>. China, however, is unlikely to wait till the US is ready to confront its challenge: it will act when it judges it is ready, preferably while US attention is diverted.

For India, the choices remain stark: strengthen its own capability and influence in the Indian Ocean, or risk China's gaining an unassailable lead in the region's affairs. Relying on the US or other external powers to balance China in the Indian Ocean is unlikely to be a viable strategy, given their preoccupation with challenges in other regions they consider a higher priority. The window of opportunity India presently has is probably shrinking, and India must accord greater priority towards stabilising the Indian Ocean in the years ahead.

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<sup>46</sup> Peace in the Pacific: A conversation with Former Indo-Pacific Commanders, October 16, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/231016-Peace-in-the-Pacific-A-Conversation-with-Former-Indo-Pacific-Commanders-Transcript-1.pdf?x91208>

<sup>47</sup> America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/services/files/8F9BE603-032B-4B21-82D8-8E9A62A751C8>

## Change of Guard in the IORA

An inter-governmental organisation established by 14 founder-members in March 1997, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has become the only body that can be considered as representative of an Indian Ocean security architecture. IORA's apex body is the Council of Foreign Ministers (COM). It meets annually and elects a chair for a period of two years based on the voluntary offer of member states to lead. A troika comprising the incoming, outgoing and elected chair guide IORA's affairs. Membership has grown to 23 members and 11 dialogue partners. IORA's focus is six priority areas identified by the Bangalore Communique of 2011<sup>48</sup>: maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk management; academic, scientific and technological exchanges; and tourism and cultural exchanges; as well as two cross cutting areas: blue economy and women's economic empowerment.

Notwithstanding the threat from China, the retreat of US primacy and US preoccupation with challenges in the Euro-Atlantic as well as the Middle East mean that the Indo-Pacific has been shunted into third place in the US security calculus. Within this vast region, the focus is inevitably on the Pacific and allies therein, leaving no bandwidth for the Indian Ocean. Two major challenges have to be reckoned with in the years ahead: great power coercion and peacetime governance of the vast ocean space, securing it against sub-national and non-traditional threats. The former requires balancing mechanisms, both internal and external, involving states that possess or can develop the requisite capacity. The latter, however, necessitates a multilateral security architecture. IORA provides a solid platform for this purpose: creating an alternative structure is a long-term process, though China may have begun developing one it can steer through the November 2022 China-Indian Ocean Region Forum for Development Cooperation<sup>49</sup>. Notably, both the Quad and ASEAN have decided to strengthen cooperation with IORA.

IORA made a beginning towards adapting itself to new geopolitical realities through the announcement of its outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP) at the last COM meeting in Dhaka<sup>50</sup>. The outlook comprises four agreed principles and 12 objectives marking a step towards realisation of the SAGAR vision and its

<sup>48</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IOR-ARC Bengaluru Communique, November 15, 2011, [https://www.iora.int/media/8227/bengaluru\\_communicu\\_.pdf](https://www.iora.int/media/8227/bengaluru_communicu_.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, November 21, 2022, [http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2022-11/23/c\\_835101.htm](http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2022-11/23/c_835101.htm)

<sup>50</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The IORA Indo-Pacific Outlook", Indo-Pacific Monitor, Volume IV, Issue 5, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4906.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4906.pdf)

premise that “those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean”<sup>51</sup>. IORA’s troika now has the responsibility of actualising this vision.

The COM witnessed a change of guard at its meeting in Sri Lanka on October 11. Sri Lanka assumed the chair<sup>52</sup>, Bangladesh became a member of the troika as the past vice-chair, and India was inducted as the new vice-chair<sup>53</sup>. UAE went out of the troika. Sri Lanka pledged a strong commitment to IORA principles and to reinforce the identity of the Indian Ocean Region<sup>54</sup>.

The COM emphasised the need to strengthen the capacity of the IORA Secretariat to support member states in addressing complex and multi-dimensional challenges of the future<sup>55</sup>. It recorded its appreciation of India’s initiative to formulate a Roadmap for implementation of the IOIP. It welcomed Saudi Arabia as IORA’s 11<sup>th</sup> Dialogue Partner, and agreed that some IORA members will serve as coordinating countries for dialogue partners. It welcomed IORA’s signing of MoUs with ASEAN and IOC of UNESCO, and looked forward to finalising MoUs with the PIF, BIMSTEC and the IFC-IOR. It acknowledged with appreciation Sri Lanka’s offer to host an IORA Leaders’ Summit in Colombo in 2024 to reflect on the war forward for IORA towards 2030 and beyond.

In his opening remarks<sup>56</sup>, India’s External Affairs Minister spoke of the central position of the Indian Ocean in the resurgence of Asia and global rebalancing, and of its crucial role in the development and prosperity of littoral nations by supporting trade, sustaining livelihoods, offering immense possibilities of connectivity and resource utilisation. He identified as a priority India’s effort to develop an Indian Ocean community that is stable and resilient, strong and resilient, and able to cooperate closely within and respond to happenings

<sup>51</sup> Text of PM’s Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda, March 12, 2015, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erelcontent.aspx?relid=116881>

<sup>52</sup> Sri Lanka assumes the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Council of Ministers in Colombo, <https://mfa.gov.lk/sl-assumes-the-chair-223rd-iora/>

<sup>53</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) – the 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Council of Ministers, the Colombo Communiqué, 2023, 11 October 2023, <https://www.dirco.gov.za/indian-ocean-rim-association-iora-the-23rd-meeting-of-the-council-of-ministers-the-colombo-communicue-2023-11-october-2023/>

<sup>54</sup> Welcome Statement – M.U.M Ali Sabry PC, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers, Colombo, <https://mfa.gov.lk/welcome-statement-fm-sl-23rd-iora/>

<sup>55</sup> IORA Colombo Communiqué, Op Cit.

<sup>56</sup> Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the opening session of 23<sup>rd</sup> IORA Council of Ministers, October 11, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37181/Remarks\\_by\\_EAM\\_Dr\\_S\\_Jaishankar\\_at\\_the\\_opening\\_session\\_of\\_23rd\\_IORA\\_Council\\_of\\_Ministers](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37181/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_opening_session_of_23rd_IORA_Council_of_Ministers)

beyond the ocean. He reiterated the importance of maintaining the ocean as a free, open and inclusive space based on UNCLOS as the Constitution of the Seas. He said India would continue to build capacity and secure safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region, including as first responder and net security provider. India's Neighbourhood First Policy, SAGAR and approach to the Indo-Pacific formed the basis of India's commitment to the Indian Ocean, along with its pursuit of a multilateral rules-based international order based on sincere respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. He committed that India would work with member states to strengthen the institutional, financial and legal framework of IORA, and that India's focus would be in the areas of Maritime Safety and Security and the Blue Economy, for which it is the coordinating country. India would also contribute to other priority and cross-cutting areas as required. Notably, in his remarks to the media after the COM, he said, "We should be equally clear where the dangers are, be it in hidden agendas, in unviable projects or in unsustainable debt. Exchange of experiences, sharing of best practices, greater awareness and deeper collaboration are part of the solution"<sup>57</sup>.

India takes on a role in the functioning of IORA for the second time since the organisation's inception. It was the chair in 2011-2012. This was long before the formulation of India's first integrated ocean policy (SAGAR), when the Indian Ocean was still a strategic backwater, the world was decidedly unipolar and India's nominal GDP was less than half its current level. Hillary Clinton had just written that the future of global politics would be decided in Asia, the delusion of China as a responsible stakeholder still prevailed, Abe's Confluence of the Seas vision had not yet transformed into the Indo-Pacific construct, China had just begun its Horn of Africa deployments, Galwan had not happened and the hope was that India and China could accommodate each other while rising together. In its first essay at IORA leadership, India obtained regional agreement on the six priority and two cross-cutting areas that still guide IORA's working.

The global and regional situation has evolved beyond recognition since then. Great power competition has re-established itself. Asia may have become the world's factory and its most economically dynamic region, but the centres of wealth and consumption, as well as sources of energy are widely separated and require the Indian Ocean as a secure connector. If regional countries cannot cooperate with each other to provide this security, extra-regional powers will

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<sup>57</sup> Remarks by EAM, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Press Conference of the 23<sup>rd</sup> IORA Council of Ministers Meeting, October 11, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37183/Remarks\\_by\\_EAM\\_Dr\\_S\\_Jaishankar\\_at\\_the\\_Press\\_Conference\\_of\\_the\\_23rd\\_IORA\\_Council\\_of\\_Ministers\\_Meeting](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37183/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Press_Conference_of_the_23rd_IORA_Council_of_Ministers_Meeting)





inevitably step in, as they did in the Horn of Africa, keeping their own interest uppermost.

The Indian Ocean is at least six decades behind East Asia and three decades behind Southeast Asia in building effective regional security architectures. It has a larger and much more diverse group of countries, the vast majority of which are under-developed and lack the capacity to govern even their own economic zones, leave alone the larger Indian Ocean. Yet they must be taken along: leaving them out would provide fertile ground for extra-regional powers to exploit.

It is with this backdrop that India will have to move ahead in IORA. The SAGAR policy necessitates India taking on a lead role, while political compulsions dictate a multilateral, consensus-based approach. The 23<sup>rd</sup> COM Meeting was notable in that all 23 IORA members attended, along with all 11 dialogue partners. India will have to move carefully, at measured pace, to ensure IORA remains similarly united. The habit of consultation ingrained in India's democracy and the 'Vasudhaiva Kuttumbakam' approach will pay rich dividends. At the same time, India will have to assume greater responsibility for the funding of IORA as well as of ensuring the security and development of all in the region.

The proposed summit in 2024, only the second after the Jakarta IORA leaders' summit in 2017, will be an important step in the evolution of IORA. The contribution of other member nations who can shoulder greater financial and security responsibility, including Australia, Indonesia, Oman, Singapore (which has not yet volunteered to lead even once) and the UAE, will be vital, as will the collaborative efforts of extra-regional partners, including ASEAN, the Quad, the US and France. China can be expected to oppose. India's diplomacy faces the task of harnessing the capabilities of these nations towards IORA objectives in the years ahead.

## India's Maritime Outreach October 2023

Dates	Location	Participating Units	Event	Remarks
01-October	Tanjung Priok, Indonesia <sup>58</sup>	ICGS Samudra Prahari	Visit	To display India's pollution response capability
01-03 October	Port Klang, Malaysia <sup>59</sup>	INS Tir, Sujata, ICGS Sarathi	Training Visit	
04-06 Oct	Changi, Singapore <sup>60</sup>	INS Tir, Sujata, ICGS Sarathi	Training Visit	
13 Oct	Lagos, Nigeria <sup>61</sup>	INS Sumedha	Gulf of Guinea Patrol	
02-13 Oct	Simonstown, South Africa <sup>62</sup>	Team from Flag Officer Sea Training	Operational Sea Training and Safety Audit of SAS Mendi	
17 Oct	Visakhapatnam <sup>63</sup>	Representatives of friendly foreign navies, 50 invitees	Mid-Planning Conference for Ex MILAN-2024	Ex is scheduled 19-27 February 2024
24 Oct	Gulf of Guinea <sup>64</sup>	INS Sumedha, one ship each from Italy, France and Spain	First India-EU Maritime Exercise in the Gulf of Guinea	Followed by knowledge sharing session at Accra, Ghana

<sup>58</sup> India Coast Guard Pollution Control Vessel Samudra Prahari visits Tanjung Priok Port, Indonesia, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1963349>

<sup>59</sup> First Training Squadron in Port Klang, Malaysia, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1963195>

<sup>60</sup> First Training Squadron Visits Changi, Singapore <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1965129>

<sup>61</sup> INS Sumedha at Lagos, Nigeria <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1968203>

<sup>62</sup> Conduct of Operational Sea Training of South African Ship SAS Mendi by Team from Headquarters Sea Training, Indian Navy, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1968879>

<sup>63</sup> Mid-Planning Conference for Multilateral Naval Exercise (Milan) – 24, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1969483>

<sup>64</sup> Gulf of Guinea: EU and India Carry out Maiden Joint Naval Exercise, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/gulf-guinea-eu-and-india-carry-out-maiden-joint-naval-exercise>

## Other Developments Impacting the Indo-Pacific

### Global

Minerals Security Partnership. India joined the US, Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the EU in a joint statement announcing support for mining, processing and recycling projects following the conclusion of the Minerals Security Partnership's ministerial meetings in London<sup>65</sup>.

Implementation Plan for US Arctic Strategy. The US had, in October 2022, issued its National Strategy for the Arctic. One year later, it published an implementation plan<sup>66</sup> for the four strategic objectives it had identified: develop capabilities for expanded Arctic activity; build resilience and advance adaptation to climate change and environmental protection; build sustainable economic development in the region; and foster international cooperation and governance in the region. Resources for implementation of this plan will, however, become clear only after the next National Defense Authorisation Act is published.

US Strategic Posture Commission Report. Responding to the range of global challenges, the US Congress had directed a review of the US strategic posture, including nuclear weapons policy, strategy and force structure. The commission set up for this purpose submitted its report on October 18<sup>67</sup>. The report observes that neither the 2018 nor the 2022 National Defense Strategies prepare the US for a two-front war against peer adversaries, the threat of which has now become reality. It makes a series of recommendations to achieve strategic stability, the strategic posture required, the nuclear security enterprise infrastructure and organisation, non-nuclear capabilities, allies and partners and risk reduction. If accepted, the report's recommendations will add substantially to US defense spending and could exacerbate the arms race with Russia and Iran.

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<sup>65</sup> Joint Statement on the Minerals Security Partnership Announce Support for Mining, Processing and Recycling Projects, October 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-minerals-security-partnership-announce-support-for-mining-processing-and-recycling-projects/>

<sup>66</sup> Implementation Plan for the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region, October 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/NSAR-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/services/files/8F9BE603-032B-4B21-82D8-8E9A62A751C8>

SSN-AUKUS. The UK awarded £4 billion contract to BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock for the Detailed Design and Long Leads (D2L2) phase of SSN-AUKUS<sup>68</sup>. The contracts progress the programme through the design, prototyping and purchase of the main long lead components for the first UK submarines. The aim is for the first UK submarines to enter service in the late 2030s and the first Australian submarine in the early 2040s. Rolls-Royce will supply the nuclear reactors for all UK and Australian submarines.

US Force Posture. The Pentagon directed the USS Dwight D Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group (CSG) to deploy to the Eastern Mediterranean on October 14 to deter hostile actions against Israel and any attempt to widen the war<sup>69</sup>. Three days later, the US approved extension of the deployment of the USS Gerald R Ford CSG in Sixth Fleet area of operations<sup>70</sup>. Earlier, on October 12, the USS Carl Vinson CSG was sailed on October 12 to deploy to the Indo-Pacific<sup>71</sup>. This is the first time in recent memory that four US CSGs have deployed simultaneously.

Integrated Air and Missile Defence Capability. In a significant display of Integrated Air and Missile Defence Capability on October 26, USS Carl M Levin successfully engaged two SRBM targets while concurrently engaging two subsonic anti-ship cruise missile targets<sup>72</sup>. This was the first time a test of this type had been carried out.

USN and USMC Strategic Guidance. US Secretary of the Navy released his strategic guidance to advance the Department of the Navy priorities: strengthening maritime dominance, building a culture of warfighting excellence and enhancing strategic partnerships, on October 26<sup>73</sup>. The

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<sup>68</sup> £4 Billion UK contracts progresses AUKUS submarine design, October 01, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/4-billion-uk-contracts-progresses-aukus-submarine-design>

<sup>69</sup> Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Deployment of USS Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean, October 14, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3557560/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-deployment-of-uss-eis/>

<sup>70</sup> Statement From Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh on Force Posture, October 17, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3559148/statement-from-deputy-press-secretary-sabrina-singh-on-force-posture/>

<sup>71</sup> Carriers USS Dwight D Eisenhower, USS Carl Vinson Deploy; Ike Will Join Carrier Ford in Eastern Mediterranean, October 14, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/10/14/carriers-uss-dwight-d-eisenhower-uss-carl-vinson-deploy-4-strike-groups-now-underway>

<sup>72</sup> US Navy and MDA Successfully Intercept Multiple Targets in Integrated Air and Missile Defense Test, October 26, 2023, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/3570213/us-navy-and-mda-successfully-intercept-multiple-targets-in-integrated-air-and-m/>

<sup>73</sup> SECNAV Del Toro Released One Navy-One Marine Corps Team: Advancing Department of the Navy Priorities, October 26, 2023, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press->

document provides an overview of the activities of the Department of the Navy including planning, investments, budgeting and prioritisation of personnel and resources.

## India and the Indian Ocean Region

Tanzania becomes India's 33<sup>rd</sup> strategic partner during the visit of its President, Samia Suluhu Hassan to India October 08-10<sup>74</sup>. The partnership encompasses political relations, defence cooperation, maritime security, the blue economy, trade and investment, the developmental partnership, education, skill development and the development of ICT, space cooperation, health, people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and regional and international issues. India now has a bilateral strategic partnership with 11 IORA member states.

RM visit to Italy and France. Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh visited Italy, India's 32<sup>nd</sup> strategic partner in March this year, on October 9-10. In Italy, he signed an agreement to promote defence cooperation with his Italian counterpart<sup>75</sup> and discussed opportunities for co-development and co-production in India with Italian defence industry leaders<sup>76</sup>. In France, he conducted the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Defence Dialogue with French Minister of the Armed Forces Mr. Sebastien Lecornu on October 11, with a focus on enhancing defence industrial cooperation<sup>77</sup>. He had earlier met French defence industry leaders<sup>78</sup>.

India-UK 2+2 Foreign and Defence Official Dialogue. The inaugural India-UK 2+2 Foreign and Defence Dialogue was held in New Delhi on October 16<sup>79</sup>. The two sides discussed possibilities for greater collaboration across the board,

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[Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/3567034/secnav-del-toro-releases-one-navy-marine-corps-team-advancing-department-of-the/](#)

<sup>74</sup> Joint Statement During the State Visit of the President of Tanzania to India and launch of the Strategic Partnership between India and Tanzania, October 09, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966074>

<sup>75</sup> Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh holds talks with Italian Defence Minister Mr Guido Crosetto in Rome; Discusses opportunities in defence industrial cooperation, October 10, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966172>

<sup>76</sup> Raksha Mantri meets top Italian defence industry leaders, October 10, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966364>

<sup>77</sup> Raksha Mantri and French Minister of Armed Forces hold 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Defence Dialogue in Paris, October 12, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966922>

<sup>78</sup> Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh meets CEOs of top French defence companies in Paris, October 11, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966810>

<sup>79</sup> Inaugural India-UK Foreign and Defence Dialogue, October 16, 2023,

[https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37191/Inaugural\\_IndiaUK\\_22\\_Foreign\\_and\\_Defence\\_Dialogue](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37191/Inaugural_IndiaUK_22_Foreign_and_Defence_Dialogue)

including in pursuit of their shared vision for peace, stability and prosperity in a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue. The third India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue took place in Brussels on October 5, 2023<sup>80</sup>. The two sides discussed ways to sustain a secure maritime environment conducive for inclusive growth and reviewed cooperation initiatives in the maritime domain. They discussed cooperation in advancing maritime domain awareness and avenues to strengthen shared efforts in countering illicit maritime activities, maritime law enforcement and capacity building.

Exercise Sagar Kavach. Coastal security Exercise Sagar Kavach 2023-2 was conducted on the East Coast of India on October 11-12<sup>81</sup>. The exercise is intended to assess the efficacy and robustness of coastal security mechanisms in dealing with asymmetric threats from seawards and involves coordination between the Indian Navy, Coast Guard, State and Union Territory administrations, marine police, the fisheries department, customs intelligence agencies, lighthouses and others.

Sea Training for SAS Mendi. An eight-member team from the Indian Navy's Headquarters Sea Training undertook the operational sea training and safety audit of SAS Mendi at Simonstown, South Africa, from October 02-13<sup>82</sup>. This is the first time the IN has conducted such an activity; it opens up opportunities for new avenues of training collaboration with international partners.

Indian Shipbuilding. Mazagon Docks Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) delivered Yard 12706, Imphal, the third of India's Project 15B destroyers, to the Indian Navy on October 20<sup>83</sup>. Construction time for the ships has reduced from over eight years for the first to six and a half years for the third. The ship, the first in the Indian Navy with dedicated accommodation for women officers and sailors, is expected to commission later in the year. Separately, the Ministry of Defence signed a contract worth Rs 310 crores to build the first dedicated Coast

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<sup>80</sup> Third India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue, October 05, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37164/Third\\_IndiaEU\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Dialogue](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37164/Third_IndiaEU_Maritime_Security_Dialogue)

<sup>81</sup> Coastal Security Exercise – East Coast, October 14, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1967695>

<sup>82</sup> Conduct of Operational Sea Training of South African Ship Mendi by Team from Headquarters Sea Training, Indian Navy, October 18, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1968879>

<sup>83</sup> Third Project 15B Indigenous Destroyer Imphal Delivered to the Indian Navy, October 20, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1969435>

Guard Training Ship<sup>84</sup>. It also signed a contract with Cochin Shipyard for the mid-life upgrade and re-powering of INS Beas at a cost of Rs 313.42 crores<sup>85</sup>. The upgrade, to be completed by 2026, will change the ship's propulsion system from steam to diesel and provide it a modernised weapon suite.

Chinese Escort Force Visits Doha. China's 44<sup>th</sup> Naval Escort Task Force paid a goodwill visit to Doha from October 24-28. This is the third visit by the escort task force to Doha<sup>86</sup>.

Sri Lanka Visit to Beijing. Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe visited Beijing for the Third Belt and Road Forum from October 16-20<sup>87</sup>. The two sides agreed to maintain the momentum of high-level interactions, expand exchanges and cooperation between governments and other stakeholders, and strengthen strategic communications. There was, however, nothing about defence and security cooperation in their joint statement.

## East Asia

Japan US Defence Engagement. Just over two weeks after taking over as Japan's 25<sup>th</sup> Defence Minister, Kihara Minoru headed to Washington DC to meet his American counterpart<sup>88</sup>. He once again obtained confirmation that Article 5 of the MDT applies to the Senkaku Islands<sup>89</sup> and resolved to strengthen alliance capability<sup>90</sup>. Other interaction included a meeting with Dr Hamre, the President and CEO of CSIS Washington DC, a roundtable with distinguished

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<sup>84</sup> Defence Ministry signs contract for construction of the first Indian Coast Guard Training Ship with Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Ltd, Mumbai, October 17, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1968467>

<sup>85</sup> Ministry of Defence signs contract with Cochin Shipyard Limited for Mid Life Upgrade and Re-Powering of INS Beas, October 16, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1968058>

<sup>86</sup> 44<sup>th</sup> Chinese naval escort taskforce wraps up Doha visit, October 30, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16263163.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16263163.html)

<sup>87</sup> Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Beijing, October 20, 2023, <https://mfa.gov.lk/joint-statement-china-sl-2023/>

<sup>88</sup> Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Meeting with Japanese Minister of Defense Kihara Minoru, October 4, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3548348/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-meeting-with-japanese-minis/>

<sup>89</sup> Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Remarks Welcoming Japanese Defense Minister Kihara Minoru to the Pentagon, October 4, 2023, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-10-19/republic-korea-australia-defence-ministers-breakfast-meeting>  
<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3548356/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-remarks-welcoming-japanese-defense-mini/>

<sup>90</sup> Japan-US Defense Ministerial Meeting (Summary), October 5, 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/10/41f53aa84afe7d9b1e12f41fe7e3e8de59df8aa7.html>

defense and security experts, a meeting with NSA Jake Sullivan and one with Senator Hagerty, the former US Ambassador to Japan<sup>91</sup>. He announced that Japan was considering acquiring its Tomahawk cruise missiles a year earlier, thus strengthening stand-off defense capability<sup>92</sup>.

Australia's Defence Engagement with South Korea and Japan. Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister visited Seoul and Tokyo for interaction with his counterparts on October 18 & 19. In Seoul, he exchanged signed MoUs with his counterpart for the three armed forces to create additional opportunities for interoperability and more complex exercises<sup>93</sup>. He also addressed the 2023 Seoul Defense Dialogue, reiterating Australia's continued support to Ukraine, drawing a parallel with Australian support to the ROK during the Korean War. Highlighting the risk of conflict across the Taiwan Strait, he said that Australia did not take a position on the final status of Taiwan other than it must be arrived at peacefully and not through the use of force or coercion. Australia's approach towards dealing with growing challenges was deepening strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific, investing in an effective balance of military power including through substantial expansion of defence spending to 2.3% of the GDP by 2032-33, diversifying supply chains without decoupling, building norms and committing to transparency. In Japan, he discussed measures to deepen operational cooperation and exercises with his counterpart<sup>94</sup>.

Taiwan Strait Transit. A 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet P-8A Poseidon transited the Taiwan Strait on October 12, remaining in international space throughout<sup>95</sup>. China said that its warplanes had monitored and followed the trespassing US aircraft according to law and regulations<sup>96</sup>.

China Expels Japanese Boats and Canadian Aircraft from Diaoyu Islands. Days after Japan's new Defence Minister Kihara Minoru had obtained reassurance

<sup>91</sup> Defense Minister Kihara's Visit to the United States (Summary), October 06, 2023, <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/10/d5b46649f35b654bf3188d5a3dfc953384d8df5b.html>

<sup>92</sup> Japan Accelerating \$ 1.4B Tomahawk Strike Missile Buy After Pentagon Meeting, October 5, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/10/05/japan-accelerating-1-4b-tomahawk-strike-missile-buy-after-pentagon-meeting#more-106113>

<sup>93</sup> Republic of Korea – Australia Defence Ministers' Breakfast Meeting, October 19, 2023,

<sup>94</sup> Japan-Australia Defence Ministerial Meeting (Summary), <https://www.mod.go.jp/en/article/2023/10/b00931508a63b74c9f819e18412bcf65bc5df8bb.html>

<sup>95</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet Aircraft Transits Taiwan Strait, October 12, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3555701/7th-fleet-aircraft-transits-taiwan-strait/>

<sup>96</sup> China denounces US P-8A aircraft's transit of Taiwan Strait, October 12, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16258197.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16258197.html)



that Article 5 of the US-Japan MDT applied to the Senkaku Islands, China's Coast Guard claimed to have expelled several Japanese patrol boats and fishing vessels from their vicinity on October 17. China urged Japan to immediately cease all illegal activity and ensure such incidents do not occur again<sup>97</sup>. A day earlier, China had intercepted a Canadian aircraft carrying out a reconnaissance mission in the region and expelled it<sup>98</sup>.

Xiangshan Forum. The 10<sup>th</sup> Beijing Xiangshan Forum began on October 29, with official delegations from over 90 countries claimed to be participating in the event. This includes more than 30 ministerial representatives and military chiefs<sup>99</sup>.

### Southeast Asia and Southern Pacific

Darwin Port. Australia decided that China's Landbridge Group could continue operating the port in Darwin<sup>100</sup>. A review launched by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese found that it wasn't necessary to change or cancel, the lease, saying that the regulatory system for critical infrastructure was sufficient to manage risks. The decision came as China relaxed its barriers against imports of barley and wine from Australia. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is scheduled to visit China November 04-07<sup>101</sup>. This will be the first visit by an Australian Prime Minister to China since 2016.

Australia PNG Defence Ministers' Meeting. Defence Ministers of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Australia met in Geelong, Victoria, on October 5, 2023<sup>102</sup>. They looked forward to timely completion of negotiations for a Bilateral Security Treaty, welcomed the growing interoperability between their defence forces, recognised the inaugural rotational deployment of RAAF aircraft to PNG, reiterated the strategic significance of the joint initiative to redevelop Lombrum Naval Base and Manus Island, noted the delivery of the fourth

<sup>97</sup> China Coast Guard expels Japanese boats near Diaoyu Islands, October 18, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16259536.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16259536.html)

<sup>98</sup> China defense spokesperson refutes Canada's hype of military aircraft encounter, October 18, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16259850.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16259850.html)

<sup>99</sup> Beijing Xiangshan Forum kicks off, provides platform for 'communicating in a frank manner, better resolving questions', October 29, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16262929.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16262929.html)

<sup>100</sup> Australia decides against canceling Chinese company's lease of strategically important port, October 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/darwin-port-chinese-australia-lease-6d5a1928942eeb184e29aaa5d064d13a>

<sup>101</sup> Visit to People's Republic of China, October 22, 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/visit-peoples-republic-china>

<sup>102</sup> Joint Statement, Australia and Papua New Guinea Defence Ministers' Meeting, October 5, 2023, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-10-05/australia-and-papua-new-guinea-defence-ministers-meeting>

Guardian-class patrol boat thus strengthening PNG maritime security capability, and agreed to continue engaging regularly.

Indonesia-US 2+2 Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue. The first ever US – Indonesia Senior Officials Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue at Senior Officials level took place in Washington DC on October 23<sup>103</sup>. Both sides reaffirmed the intent of their leaders to elevate the US-Indonesia relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and further deepen cooperation across a range of sectors.

Unsafe B-52 Intercept. A USAF B-52 aircraft carrying out “routine operations in international airspace over the South China Sea in international waters” at night was intercepted by a Chinese J-11 fighter on October 24, in a manner the US described as ‘unsafe’<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>103</sup> Joint Statement on the United States-Indonesia Senior Officials’ 2+2 Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue, October 23, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-united-states-indonesia-senior-officials-22-foreign-policy-and-defense-dialogue/>

<sup>104</sup> Unprofessional Intercept of US B-52 over South China Sea, October 26, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3569987/unprofessional-intercept-of-us-b-52-over-south-china-sea/>



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