

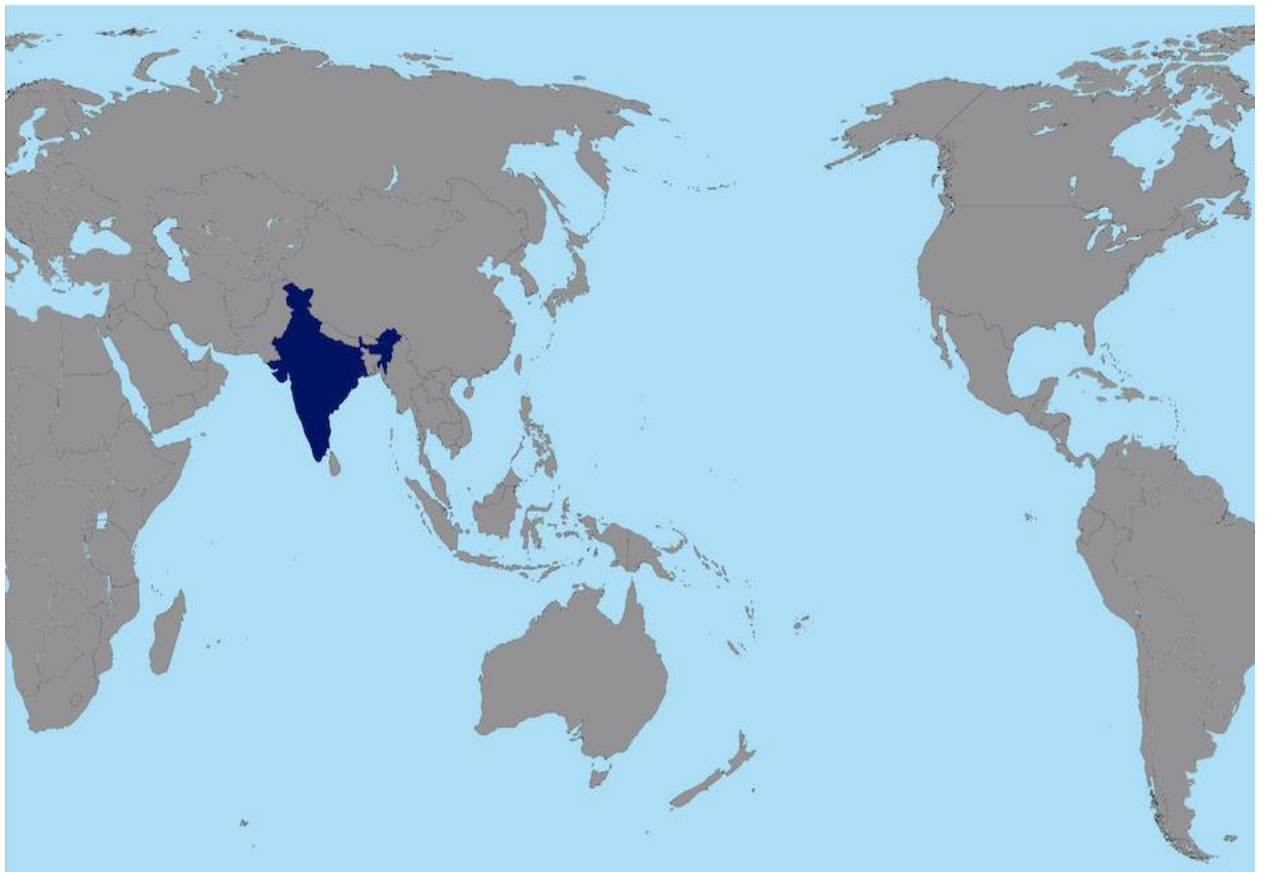


# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR APRIL 2021



Volume II, Issue 4 | April 2021

Delhi Policy Group  
Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003  
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### ABOUT US

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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### DPG 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, with the assistance of a team of DPG Research Associates comprising Anushka Nair and Angana Guha Roy based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Anushka Nair at [anushka@dpg.org.in](mailto:anushka@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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**DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR**  
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**Contents**

<b>Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>US Response to the Pandemic Upsurge in India</b> .....	2
<b>The Lavrov Visit</b> .....	5
<b>India France Australia – The New Trilateral</b> .....	11
<b>The Indo-Pacific at Raisina</b> .....	14
Samudra Manthan: The Indo-Pacific in Churn .....	15
In Conversation: Admiral Phil Davidson and Samir Saran .....	17
In Conversation: Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Professor Rory Medcalf .....	19
Keynote Address: Scott Morrison .....	20
<b>Biden-Suga Summit Puts Japan’s China Policy Under Stress</b> .....	21
<b>The EU Indo-Pacific Strategy</b> .....	26
<b>Exercise La Perouse</b> .....	29
<b>Exercise Varuna</b> .....	32
<b>The China Factor</b> .....	34
Boao Forum Speech .....	34
The Climate Summit .....	36
<b>Whitsun Reef Update</b> .....	37
<b>The USS John Paul Jones FONOP</b> .....	38
<b>Sinking of Indonesian Submarine KRI Nanggala 402</b> .....	38
<b>Queen Elizabeth Task Group deployment to Indo-Pacific</b> .....	39



## DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

April 2021

### Abstract

Politically, the most impactful Indo-Pacific event from India's perspective was the massive upsurge of COVID-19 infections in India and the response of our key strategic partner. This month's Indo-Pacific Monitor begins with an analysis of the US response to the pandemic upsurge in India.

India hosted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the beginning of the month, to prepare for the India-Russia summit later this year and to exchange perceptions on geopolitical developments. The India-Russia relationship has not kept pace with the development of China-Russia relations. Nevertheless, its importance was underscored by the decision, publicised at the end of the month, to establish a new 2 + 2 dialogue comprising Foreign and Defence Ministers of both sides. The second analysis this month is on the Lavrov visit.

The developing India-France-Australia trilateral dialogue would have been upgraded to the ministerial level but for the resurgence of COVID-19 in India. The three ministers did, however, come together virtually at the Raisina Dialogue. This issue explores the emerging trilateral and its underlying objectives.

The Raisina Dialogue, India's flagship annual event on international affairs, devoted a substantial part of its time to the Indo-Pacific. This issue provides a snapshot of sessions on the Indo-Pacific at the dialogue.

A significant development was the summit meeting between US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. From the perspectives of the US and Japan, the summit was a success. For India, the summit highlighted that the focus of the alliance remains the Asia-Pacific, with the Indian Ocean as a subsidiary theatre. Also, Japan's role as a security provider even in the Asia-Pacific will remain circumscribed. This month's Indo-Pacific Monitor showcases the Biden-Suga summit and its impact on Japan's China Policy.

The month also saw the European Union publishing some conclusions on its strategy for the Indo-Pacific. These are explored in the sixth section of the issue.

Two international exercises involving the Indian Navy took place during the month. These are covered in the sections on Exercise La Perouse and Exercise Varuna.

This issue also covers speeches made by China's President Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum and at the climate summit convened by US President Joe Biden.

## US Response to the Pandemic Upsurge in India

The surge in India's COVID-19 infection rates became statistically visible when the 7-day average of new cases reported daily rose from just over 11,000 per day in mid-February to over 15,000 on March 02, 2021. By the end of March, the 7-day average had shot up to over 65,000<sup>1</sup> (it has crossed 350,000 at the time of writing). In early March, Adar Poonawalla, the CEO of the vaccine maker Serum Institute of India, drew attention to the fact that invocation of the US Defense Production Act was resulting in a shortage of critical raw materials, causing serious bottlenecks in vaccine production<sup>2</sup>. When diplomatic intervention in the US did not solve the problem, he resorted to a public tweet on April 16, 2021, appealing to US President Joe Biden to lift the embargo on export of raw materials needed for the production of the Covishield vaccine in India<sup>3</sup>. Telephonic intervention by India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar with his American counterpart on April 19, 2021 had so little impact that it was not even reflected on the website of India's MEA. A bland readout on the US State Department website said that the two ministers discussed "climate change, COVID-19 and other global challenges and pledged to remain in close contact on these and other issues of mutual concern"<sup>4</sup>.

India's request to lift the ban on export of critical raw materials for vaccine production came up at the State Department Press Briefing on April 20, 2021<sup>5</sup>. When asked when the administration would decide on the matter, the State Department spokesperson first said that this was a question for USTR. He then said, "we have a special responsibility to the American people ... this country

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<sup>1</sup> Based on statistics from Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>2</sup> "Largest Vaccine Maker Warns of Delays as US Prioritizes Pfizer", <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-04/largest-vaccine-maker-warns-of-delays-as-u-s-prioritizes-pfizer>

<sup>3</sup> "Respected POTUS ... : Serum Institute's Adar Poonawalla Makes A Request", <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-vaccine-respected-potus-adar-poonawalla-on-vaccine-raw-materials-export-ban-2415167>

<sup>4</sup> "Secretary Blinken's Call with Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar", <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-indian-external-affairs-minister-s-jaishankar-2/>

<sup>5</sup> Department Press Briefing – April 20, 2021", <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-april-20-2021/#post-236525-INDIA>

has been hit harder than any other country around the world". The same position was repeated in a press briefing two days later<sup>6</sup>.



President Biden Answers Questions on COVID-19 Policy on April 27, 2021

Source: AP News

On April 25, 2021, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval spoke telephonically to his counterpart, Jake Sullivan. This tilted the scales. The NSC readout on the call states, "Just as India sent assistance to the United States as our hospitals were strained early in the pandemic, the United States is determined to help India in its time of need"<sup>7</sup>. It went on to identify the assistance: making available the specific raw material urgently required for Indian manufacture of the Covishield vaccine that would immediately be made available; immediate provision of therapeutics, rapid diagnostic test kits, ventilators and PPE; options to provide oxygen generation and related supplies on an urgent basis; funding substantial expansion of manufacturing capability for BioE, to enable it to ramp up to produce at least 1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the

<sup>6</sup> "Department Press Briefing – April 22, 2021", <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-april-22-2021/#post-237339-INDIA>

<sup>7</sup> "Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Call with National Security Advisor Ajit Doval of India", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/25/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-call-with-national-security-advisor-ajit-doval-of-india/>

end of 2022; deploying an expert team of public health advisers from CDC and USAID to work in close collaboration with the US Embassy, India's health ministries and India's Epidemic Intelligence Service staff; and supporting fast-track mobilization of emergency resources available to India through the Global Fund.

On April 26, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi apprised President Biden of India's ongoing efforts to contain the second wave of COVID-19 through expedited vaccination efforts and ensuring supply of critical medicines, therapeutics and healthcare equipment<sup>8</sup>. He particularly "underscored the need to ensure smooth and open supply chains of raw materials and inputs required for manufacture of vaccines, medicines and therapeutics related to COVID-19"<sup>9</sup>. "He also informed President Biden about India's initiative at the WTO for a relaxation in the norms of the Agreement on TRIPS to ensure quick and affordable access to vaccines and medicines for developing countries"<sup>10</sup>. President Biden, on the other hand, reportedly "pledged America's steadfast support for the people of India who have been impacted by the recent surge in COVID-19 cases". The US undertook to provide "a range of emergency assistance, including oxygen-related supplies, vaccine materials, and therapeutics"<sup>11</sup>. A Press Briefing by a senior administration official the same day clarified an interpretation that the Defense Production Act only required US companies to prioritise US government contracts ahead of other contracts for US manufacturing. It did not constitute an export ban or apply to export contracts<sup>12</sup>. A day later, speaking on the North Lawn of the White House on COVID-19 response<sup>13</sup>, President Biden responded to a question by saying that the US was sending drugs and actual mechanical parts needed for the machinery India had to build a vaccine, and hoping that the US would be able to share vaccines as well as know-how with other countries who were in real

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<sup>8</sup> PM's telephone conversation with President Biden of the United States of America".  
[https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/pm-speaks-to-assam-cm-regarding-earthquake-assures-all-possible-help/?comment=disable](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-speaks-to-assam-cm-regarding-earthquake-assures-all-possible-help/?comment=disable)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> "Readout of President Joseph R Biden, Jr. Call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-prime-minister-narendra-modi-of-india-2/>

<sup>12</sup> "Background Press Call by Senior Administration Official on COVID-19 in India", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/04/26/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-covid-19-in-india/>

<sup>13</sup> Remarks by President Biden on the COVID-19 Response, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/27/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-covid-19-response/>

need. He added that when the US was in a bind at the very beginning, India had helped.

The US has, thereafter, begun providing a range of emergency COVID-19 assistance to India<sup>14</sup>. This includes oxygen cylinders, concentrators and generation units, PPE, supplies for manufacturing over 20 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines in India, rapid diagnostic tests, therapeutics and public health assistance. Help is now pouring in from all over the world, with more than 40 governments having committed to help with essential medical requirements<sup>15</sup>. Private sector entities and diaspora groups are also pitching in.

The most charitable interpretation which has been cited for US tardiness in responding to an urgent request from a "strategic partner" facing a critical situation is bureaucratic inertia and thoughtless application of rules. The episode has provided fresh fuel to perceptions of the US as being self-centred, transactional and insensitive in its dealings with friends and allies. A similar perception had arisen earlier this month following the USS John Paul Jones FONOP. A brewing storm<sup>16</sup> in India-US ties has been avoided for the time being, but unless there is greater mutual sensitivity, trust and benefit, it will be difficult for the India-US relationship to grow and secure the Indo-Pacific in the years ahead.

## The Lavrov Visit

The failure to hold the annual India-Russia summit in 2020 had generated a speculative report attributing this to Moscow's reservations about New Delhi Indo-Pacific outlook and joining the Quad<sup>17</sup>. India's spokesperson had responded with, "The India-Russia Annual Summit did not take place in 2020 because of the COVID pandemic. This was a mutually agreed decision between the two Governments. Any imputation otherwise is false and misleading.

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<sup>14</sup> "Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Delivers Emergency COVID-19 Assistance for India", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-delivers-emergency-covid-19-assistance-for-india/>

<sup>15</sup> Indrani Bagchi, "Covid-19: Over 40 govts commit to help India with medical essentials", <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/as-40-countries-step-up-jaishankar-dials-envoys-to-amp-up-efforts-to-procure-indias-medical-needs/articleshow/82315248.cms>

<sup>16</sup> Kanwal Sibal, "A Brewing Storm in India-US Ties Avoided, but Prickly Issues Still Need to be Resolved", <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/a-brewing-storm-in-india-us-ties-avoided-but-prickly-issues-still-need-to-be-resolved-3684911.html>

<sup>17</sup> Nayanima Basu, "India-Russia annual summit postponed for 1<sup>st</sup> time in two decades amid Moscow's unease with Quad", <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-russia-annual-summit-postponed-for-1st-time-in-two-decades-amid-moscows-unease-with-quad/572160/>



Spreading false stories on important relationships is particularly irresponsible<sup>18</sup>." Russia's Ambassador in New Delhi had chipped in, finding the report "far from reality"<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the visit of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to India on April 06, 2021 generated considerable interest.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar address a joint press conference at New Delhi, April 06, 2021.

Source: MEA/Flickr

The foreign ministers addressed a joint press conference following their interaction. The statement by India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, noted that the countries were "cognisant of the multi-polar and rebalanced nature of international relations today, and both understood the importance of the bilateral relationship for global peace, security and stability"<sup>20</sup>. He added that much of the discussion covered preparation for President Putin's visit for the

<sup>18</sup> Official Spokesperson's response to a media report regarding the India-Russia Annual Summit", [https://mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/33333/Official\\_Spokespersons\\_response\\_to\\_a\\_media\\_report\\_regarding\\_the\\_IndiaRussia\\_Annual\\_Summit](https://mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/33333/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_a_media_report_regarding_the_IndiaRussia_Annual_Summit)

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/NKudashev/status/1341755840068374528?s=20>

<sup>20</sup> Statement by Minister of External Affairs at the Joint Press Conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33771/Statement\\_by\\_Minister\\_of\\_External\\_Affairs\\_at\\_the\\_Joint\\_Press\\_conference\\_with\\_the\\_Minister\\_of\\_Foreign\\_Affairs\\_of\\_the\\_Russian\\_Federation](https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33771/Statement_by_Minister_of_External_Affairs_at_the_Joint_Press_conference_with_the_Minister_of_Foreign_Affairs_of_the_Russian_Federation)

Annual Summit later this year and dwelt upon the numerous “energetic and forward-looking” elements of the relationship. He noted the appetite for greater investments in each other by both countries, appreciated Russia’s support for the ‘Gaganyaan’ programme, and the prompt addressing of India’s defence sector requirement during the last year. According to him, the discussion also encompassed exchange of views and assessments on important regional and global matters, including West Asia, Iran and the Gulf.

Two issues on which Dr. S Jaishankar briefed his counterpart were Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific. On the former, he highlighted that what happens in Afghanistan impacts India’s security directly. He shared India’s approach that a durable peace would require harmonising interests of all, both within and around Afghanistan. The peace process must be based on foundational principles to which all subscribed, and a political solution should mean an independent, sovereign, united and democratic Afghanistan. On the Indo-Pacific, he highlighted that India’s outlook was inclusive and reflected the multi-polar and rebalanced character of global politics. India was strongly committed to ASEAN centrality and this was underlined by the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative it had been advocating at the East Asia Summit. India saw Russia as an important partner, whether in its Far East or through the Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor.

According to the statement by the Russian Foreign Minister<sup>21</sup>, his talks were “constructive, useful and trustworthy as is usual in relations between Russia and India”<sup>22</sup>. Among the outcomes he identified were agreement to step up efforts to overcome the pandemic-induced decline in trade, including in the nuclear energy, peaceful space exploration and transport infrastructure in the Russian Far East and Arctic; stepping up updating of the intergovernmental agreement on mutual protection of investments and increasing the share of national currencies in mutual settlements; and deepening military technical cooperation including joint production of the latest weapons in India. He noted that Moscow was the only partner providing India cutting-edge military technology, but respected India’s right to diversify its sources. He hoped for early start of dialogue on a free trade zone between the Eurasian Economic Union and India and noted the near identity of views on Afghanistan, the Syrian crisis, the situation around Iran’s nuclear programme, events in Myanmar, and ASEAN’s central role. He also cited the close cooperation in the UN, SCO, G20 and at BRICS, which India was chairing this year and noted the

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<sup>21</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media queries at a joint news conference following talks with Minister of External Affairs of India Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, New Delhi, April 6, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4665966](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4665966)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

demand for cooperation in the RIC format and in the EAS. He expressed gratitude to India for its responsible role in world affairs and close coordination of positions on issues that are important to both nations.



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar at Hyderabad House on April 06, 2021. Source: Twitter (@mf\_a\_russia)

Questioned about movement between China and Russia towards a military alliance, he replied that while Russia-China relations were at their best ever level, they were not aimed at a military alliance. He likened such speculation as akin to speculation about a "Middle East NATO" and an "Asian NATO". India and Russia both had an interest in making their cooperation inclusive and not directed against anyone. On US pressure on India regarding its military technical cooperation with Russia, he said that everyone knew India's response to the pressure. It was not discussed in his interaction with Dr Jaishankar. He reaffirmed Russia's commitment to further developing military technical cooperation including discussing prospects for additional production of military equipment in India as part of the Make in India and Self-Sufficient India concepts.

Questioned in a separate interview<sup>23</sup> on India-China relations, he expressed respect for the intentions of New Delhi and Beijing to act independently and within frameworks of established multilayer dialogue mechanisms without interference from outside. He expected both to find mutually acceptable political and diplomatic ways to remove existing differences at the earliest. On India's participation in the Afghanistan peace process, he said India is an important player in settlement in Afghanistan and should be engaged in international efforts. He also said India is part of the Moscow format uniting Afghanistan's neighbouring states, key regional countries and the US.

Although more than 75% of Russia's territory lies in Asia, more than 75% of its population lives in Europe. Russia is a member of the P-5, and has a Pacific (Asian) coast of over 4500 Km. Economic linkages due to globalisation and ease of transportation have changed the Asia of the past, which could be separated into West, Central, South, Southeast and East Asia. The Asia of today is bound together as never before. Russia's dogmatic opposition to the "Indo-Pacific" (Lavrov had described it as a construct aimed at containing China during the Fifth Raisina Dialogue) is based not on geographical or economic realities, but on the Cold War thinking of placing the Euro-Atlantic at the geopolitical forefront, rather than the Asia-centric future that lies ahead. Interestingly, among the factors underlying Russian opposition to the Indo-Pacific is the geographical description used by the US. Lavrov is on record as having questioned the 'Indo' part not including East Africa or the Persian Gulf, and focusing on East Asia<sup>24</sup>.

It is these suspicions that result in Russia's growing partnership with China, with its strong economic linkages. Russia-China trade exceeded \$ 110 billion in 2019 (in contrast the target for India-Russia trade by 2025 is just \$ 30 billion<sup>25</sup>). China is the top investor in the Russian Far East and is also the top trading partner for the Eurasian Economic Union.

For a Russia deeply influenced by the need to balance the US, strategic linkages with China will supersede bilateral differences. The two countries signed a

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<sup>23</sup> Interview by Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to Hindustan Times, April 06, 2021, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4665351](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4665351)

<sup>24</sup> "Discussed Indo-Pacific with 'good friend' S Jaishankar: Russian FM Lavrov; calls India 'very close partner'", <https://zeenews.india.com/india/discussed-indo-pacific-with-good-friend-s-jaishankar-russian-fm-lavrov-calls-india-very-close-partner-2336584.html>

<sup>25</sup> "India – Russia Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Vladivostok", September 05, 2019, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31795/India\\_\\_Russia\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Vladivostok#:~:text=Both%20Sides%20welcomed%20that%20Russia,to%20further%20promote%20the%20Russian](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31795/India__Russia_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Vladivostok#:~:text=Both%20Sides%20welcomed%20that%20Russia,to%20further%20promote%20the%20Russian)

road map for military cooperation in 2017<sup>26</sup>. Russia is helping China develop a missile launch detection system. Russian and Chinese ships exercise together in a trilateral format with regional partners<sup>27, 28</sup>. They also conduct large scale military exercises together<sup>29</sup>. According to Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu, 12% of Russia's arms exports go to China<sup>30</sup>. Russia has already conducted two joint aerial patrols with China over the East China Sea and Sea of Japan<sup>31</sup>. The China factor also leads to convergence between Russia and Pakistan (Lavrov visited Islamabad immediately after his visit to New Delhi, with a view to developing a Greater Eurasian Partnership involving all states on the continent, implicitly excluding the US<sup>32</sup>). These factors will undoubtedly weigh on the India-Russia relationship.

There is, nevertheless, enough substance to prevent either from burning its bridges with the other. Confirmation regarding this came when India announced on April 28, 2021, the decision to establish a new 2 + 2 dialogue comprising Foreign and Defence Ministers of both sides<sup>33</sup>. Russia is aware that India enables balancing of China's power in Asia, preventing it from becoming overwhelming. There is substantial convergence between India and Russia for both sides to build upon. Diplomats of both countries will have to think and engage creatively, both to overcome dogmatic positions and to find mutually beneficial middle ground. The divergences in their strategic outlook due to China will be more than offset by potential areas of mutual benefit. So long as

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<sup>26</sup> "Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level", <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136>

<sup>27</sup> "China, Russia and Iran hold joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman", <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/27/asia/china-russia-iran-military-drills-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>28</sup> China, Russia and South Africa team up for first joint naval drill", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3039469/china-russia-and-south-africa-team-first-joint-naval-drill>

<sup>29</sup> "Russia and China hold the biggest military exercises for decades", <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/09/06/russia-and-china-hold-the-biggest-military-exercises-for-decades>

<sup>30</sup> "Shoigu said that military cooperation between Russia and China Strengthens global security", <https://www.militarynews.ru/Story.asp?rid=1&nid=485641&lang=RU>

<sup>31</sup> Russia, China conduct 2<sup>nd</sup> Joint Air Patrol over Sea of Japan', <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/12/9f04b578fd28-update2-russia-china-conduct-2nd-joint-air-patrol-over-sea-of-japan.html>

<sup>32</sup> Interview by foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to a major English-language newspaper of Pakistan The News International, April 7, 2021, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4666211](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4666211)

<sup>33</sup> "PM's telephonic Conversation with President Putin of Russian Federation", [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/1-lakh-portable-oxygen-concentrators-to-be-procured-from-pm-cares-fund/?comment=disable](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/1-lakh-portable-oxygen-concentrators-to-be-procured-from-pm-cares-fund/?comment=disable)

China continues trying to seek supremacy in Asia, the China – Russia – India tango will continue.

## India France Australia – The New Trilateral

The Joint Strategic Vision of India – France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region asserts<sup>34</sup>, “The two leaders are desirous of associating other strategic partners in the growing cooperation between India and France, as and when required and, in this regard, would establish trilateral dialogues.

The vision statement on the Australia – France relationship of May 02, 2018<sup>35</sup> states: “The two leaders committed to strengthening the Indian Ocean region's architecture and enhance regional collaboration on shared security and other challenges. They resolved in particular to cooperate closely and with like-minded partners to bolster regional maritime security. They agreed to involve other strategic partners more broadly in the growing cooperation between France and Australia in the Indo-Pacific, when and where appropriate, and are open to forming trilateral and other high-level dialogues to this end”. The ‘trilateral’ both visions talk about came nearer fruition this month.

The India – France – Australia trilateral dialogue emerged when Foreign Secretaries of the three countries met virtually on September 09, 2020<sup>36</sup>. A meeting at senior officer level followed on February 24, 2021<sup>37</sup>. The dialogue was to be upgraded to ministerial level on April 13, 2021<sup>38,39</sup>. However, cancellation of the visit by the Australian Foreign Minister to New Delhi due to an upsurge in COVID-19 infections in India forced postponement. The three Foreign Ministers did, nevertheless, come together virtually in a session titled

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<sup>34</sup> Joint Strategic Vision of India – France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (New Delhi, 10 March 2018), [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint\\_Strategic\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaFrance\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Region\\_New\\_Delhi\\_10\\_March\\_2018](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint_Strategic_Vision_of_IndiaFrance_Cooperation_in_the_Indian_Ocean_Region_New_Delhi_10_March_2018)

<sup>35</sup> Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/france/Pages/vision-statement-on-the-australia-france-relationship>

<sup>36</sup> First Senior Officers’ India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st\\_Senior\\_Officials\\_IndiaFranceAustralia\\_Trilateral\\_Dialogue](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st_Senior_Officials_IndiaFranceAustralia_Trilateral_Dialogue)

<sup>37</sup> Senior Officials’ India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st\\_Senior\\_Officials\\_IndiaFranceAustralia\\_Trilateral\\_Dialogue](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st_Senior_Officials_IndiaFranceAustralia_Trilateral_Dialogue)

<sup>38</sup> India, France and Australia to hold trilateral talks, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-france-and-australia-to-hold-trilateral-talks/articleshow/81876068.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>39</sup> India, France, Australia trilateral meet on April 13; Indo-Pacific on agenda, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-france-australia-trilateral-meet-on-april-13-indo-pacific-on-agenda-101617350103103.html>

“Crimson Tide, Blue Geometries: New Partnerships for the Indo-Pacific” at the Raisina Dialogue on April 14, 2021.



Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Dr S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister at the Raisina Dialogue, April 14, 2021. Source: Twitter (@DrSJaishankar)

Asked about the role of plurilaterals and the objectives of the trilateral in the under-institutionalised Indo-Pacific, France's Jean-Yves Le Drian focused on France's Indo-Pacific interests and likened the 'troika' to Europe's Economic Community for Coal and Steel, which had laid the foundations for the EU. He said that institutional formats already existed in the form of IORA, India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative, initiatives regarding illegal and sustainable fishing and financing of terrorism. These enabled practical cooperation in a number of areas. Minister Marise Payne talked of Australia's practical approach and cited pandemic response and recovery, maritime safety and security, sustainability of the oceans, climate change and disaster response as areas in which the three countries could work together.

India's Dr S Jaishankar responded in three parts. First, on plurilaterals, he observed that both multilaterals and treaty based structures had not delivered as was expected of them. Individual nations and bilaterals were too weak. There was thus a need, fulfilled by plurilaterals, for groups of countries, comfortable with each other, to come together to make the world a better place.

On the Indo-Pacific construct, he described it as a return to what had been fact throughout history except during the Cold War period. It should be seen as overcoming the Cold War, not returning to it. On areas of cooperation, he identified 10 subjects discussed by the Quad: vaccine collaboration, higher education and student mobility, climate action, HADR, emerging technology, resilient supply chains, semi-conductors, disinformation, counter terrorism and maritime security. These also defined the purpose of the trilateral. He was careful to highlight that the trilateral was not a threat or messaging, it was just coming together to achieve shared objectives. He also described use of descriptions such as "Asian NATO" as "mind games", and said that India could not allow others a veto over what it discussed, with whom, or how much it would contribute. That was a sovereign national choice.

Geographically, France has territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including an EEZ of over 9 million Km<sup>2</sup>. Australia (along with Indonesia) straddles the junction between the two oceans, while India lies at the heart of the Indian Ocean. The three thus have numerous shared interests in the Indo-Pacific. They also have substantial commonality in their shared visions for this space. Moreover, they can bring sizeable economic, technological and military capability to bear, to fulfil the needs of regional development, ocean governance and preserving regional stability. This capability becomes of great import in an era when China's hegemonic aspirations are generating increasing concern, while the political will of the US to go beyond its own interests and underwrite regional security and stability is in question.

It thus makes considerable sense for the three countries to come together and synergise their capability to build the common future they desire for the Indo-Pacific. This will necessitate developing increased mutual understanding through people-to-people exchanges, economic and technological cooperation, enhancement of regional influence, and diplomatic cooperation in regional and multilateral institutions. The security and stability aspect of the partnership cannot be considered in isolation, it must be part of a composite relationship. A partnership addressing security alone is unlikely to work.

In the security domain, the partners will need to develop the ability to address regional challenges including pandemic response, supply chain resilience, maritime security and ocean governance, piracy and terrorism, and grey zone coercion in a coordinated manner. This will necessitate the creation of structures for sharing of intelligence about the key challenges, domain awareness, presence and the ability to scale up presence as required, so as to deter as well as take to task those who violate international rules and norms.



Cooperation in these areas at the bilateral level has been developing over the years. The three cooperate to share information bilaterally on terrorism and related challenges. They have ongoing cyber dialogues. Bilateral white shipping agreements already exist. India and France are developing a satellite-based maritime surveillance satellite system focused on the Indian Ocean and related data fusion mechanisms, thus strengthening domain awareness<sup>40</sup>. Bilateral reciprocal logistics support agreements involving all three already exist, extending the reach of each. Their maritime forces work together, through bilateral exercises such as AUSINDEX and VARUNA.

The China factor does loom large, but only if China tries to impose its unilateral vision of “a community with a shared future for mankind”. The reality is that this China-centric vision is not shared by mankind, or indeed other Indo-Pacific nations. Australia, France and India have time and again expressed their preference for an inclusive architecture, based on ASEAN-centrality. Only China seeks to enforce its vision on ASEAN and to run down potential partnerships that could oppose its unilateralism. Dr Jaishankar’s observation regarding statements about an ‘Asian NATO’ being a mind-game highlights that such observations are designed for propaganda purposes.

Many of the structures created for dealing with security challenges can be upgraded to deal with geopolitical challenges at relatively little cost. The key here will be political will, and for the time being at least, none of the members of the trilateral appear interested in an anti-China alliance. They can, however, help to balance China’s asymmetric power and penchant for using it unilaterally. What the trilateral eventually turns out to be will be shaped as much by China’s actions as by the intent of the three partners.

## The Indo-Pacific at Raisina

In a continuation of past precedent, the annual Raisina Dialogue focused extensively on the Indo-Pacific. Six sessions included “Indo-Pacific” in their title, while others covered related subjects. Of these, the “Crimson Tide, Blue Geometries: New Partnerships for the Indo-Pacific” has been covered separately under the India-France-Australia Trilateral, while the subject of Europe and the Indo-Pacific is dealt with under the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy section. This brief dwells on “Samudra Manthan: The Indo-Pacific in Churn”, the conversations with Admiral Phil Davidson and Singapore’s Foreign

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<sup>40</sup> Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (New Delhi, 10 March 2018), [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint\\_Strategic\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaFrance\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Region\\_New\\_Delhi\\_10\\_March\\_2018](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint_Strategic_Vision_of_IndiaFrance_Cooperation_in_the_Indian_Ocean_Region_New_Delhi_10_March_2018)

Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, and the keynote address by Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

### Samudra Manthan: The Indo-Pacific in Churn

The Samudra Manthan session witnessed Admiral Karambir Singh, India's 24<sup>th</sup> Chief of the Naval Staff, joining Admiral Philip S Davidson, the 25<sup>th</sup> Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, to discuss Indo-Pacific challenges and security.

In his opening remarks, Admiral KB Singh described the Indo-Pacific as being in a churn and was optimistic that the churn would have positive results for the region. India's outlook towards the region had been spelt out by the Prime Minister's SAGAR vision and External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar's book (*The India Way*<sup>41</sup>). He described the Indian Navy's objective in the region as being the preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean, the credible first responder to developing situations, and to build regional capacities and interoperability and trust with other navies.



Admiral KB Singh, India's Chief of the Naval Staff and Admiral Phil Davidson, Commander US INDO-PACIFIC Command, at Raisina Dialogue on April 14, 2021. Source: MEA

In his opening remarks, Admiral Davidson described relations with India as being one of his command's highest priorities; India as a vital partner; and a strong Indo-Pacific partnership as indispensable for peace, security and stability throughout the region. He was forthright about the developing

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.amazon.in/India-Way-Strategies-Uncertain-World/dp/9353579791>

challenge from China, basing his outlook on the Pompeo strategy of targeting the CCP and not China as a whole; describing the Indo-Pacific competition as between Beijing's closed and authoritarian model and the free and open vision of most other countries in the region.

On being asked as to what he saw as the most serious challenge, Admiral KB Singh observed that the trend towards usage of grey zone coercion and asymmetric means had blurred the dividing line between war and peace and posed a danger that was not easy to confront. Moreover, deliberate misinterpretation of international laws and rules was turning the seas into contested zones. He expressed concern about non-traditional challenges, such as conflicts on land spilling over into the sea by way of deniable actions, the rise of non-state actors, economic divides and forced migration. Admiral Davidson, on the other hand, described China as the greatest strategic threat to the rules-based order and a major concern, followed by Russia and North Korea in that order. His other concerns were violent extremism and the fact that the Indo-Pacific was a disaster-prone region.

On how to overcome differences and strengthen cooperation and interoperability amongst navies, Admiral Davidson saw the PLA's actions and provocation throughout the region, as well as its using the COVID crisis to advance its strategic aims, as the biggest impediment. He was enthused by the commonality of Indo-Pacific visions of regional countries and said the US sought to expand cooperation, increase partnership, and improve interoperability by meeting allies and partners in the areas of their primary security challenge. He saw great potential in Quad cooperation, as well as in exercises such as Malabar and Tiger Triumph. Admiral KB Singh, on the other hand, said that states may have different perceptions of some threats, but most were transnational and necessitated all working together, so different perceptions was not an issue. He felt that cultural differences were mitigated by the common maritime nature of the seas. Nations operated and trained together, and could thus leverage their strengths. The way ahead involved sharing information, generating a common operating picture, moving from interoperability to interchangeability, and building collective maritime competence to handle all challenges.

On China's aircraft carriers being deployed in the Indian Ocean, Admiral Davidson said that the potential for a Chinese carrier to operate in the Indian Ocean by the end of this decade was real. Admiral KB Singh was also clear that China would send its carriers into the Indian Ocean as their energy, resources and markets were here. He foresaw the Chinese Carrier Battle Group (CBG) as

replicating the US model. They already had the support ships and were moving quickly to develop competence and capability of their carrier air wings.

On the threat to Taiwan, Admiral Davidson reiterated that the US supports peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues and its engagement with Taiwan was intended to enable Taiwan to delay and deny aggression. He carefully refrained from committing the US to intervention in the event of an invasion by the PLA.

Both Admirals were optimistic about the potential of the Quad for cooperation, including far beyond the security sphere. Pandemic cooperation, 5G, space, cyber and artificial intelligence were cited as areas of convergence. The navies had developed a high degree of interoperability and could come together for joint military operations if the need arose.

The session makes clear the identity of views between the two navies on objectives the maritime domain, as well as substantial commonality in operational thinking. It was, in short, the perfect endorsement of the growing India-US partnership in the Indian Ocean.

### **In Conversation: Admiral Phil Davidson and Samir Saran**

During this session, Admiral Davidson responded to five questions from the moderator.

On how the pandemic had impacted his command, he identified three focal priorities: ensuring the health of his personnel; readiness with an eye towards both short and long-term needs, and the use of prepared force to support all of government efforts to assist others. All three had worked out.

He saw the Quad as an exceptional opportunity for all four nations to ensure that the principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific were met. He described it as a diamond of democracies, with shared interests going far beyond just a security focus, wherein the Quad could set an example and help the world meet with challenges. To a specific question about the description of the Quad as an Asian NATO, he thought the description was unfortunate. NATO was born from a strategic Soviet threat in Eastern Europe. The Quad was about opportunity to come together and not just for security purposes. He opined that people who compared it to an Asian NATO were trying to undermine the opportunity.

On what had given him most satisfaction during his tenure, he identified three things. First, the people of INDO-PACOM had done much to mitigate the brewing strategic threat. This had resulted in the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, with allocation of funds to address key concerns. A clear articulation of the threat had also generated dialogue among allies and partners. Second, a strategy had been articulated about how the joint US armed forces would come together to deter China. Third was overcoming the COVID challenge and helping the international community work together for a common purpose. He was very enthused about the return of the Quad and felt that ASEAN should remain at the centre of the strategy towards the Indo-Pacific.

On how real the threat from China was, he cited his recent testimony to Congress. He felt that the threat was already manifest within the region and would grow within the decade, perhaps in as little as six years. Coming together for the FOIP was all too important for nations that had mutual security concerns, a common set of values and economic interests. The need was to prevent Xinjiang from happening to the international community.

Finally, on the USS John Paul Jones FONOP on April 07, 2021, he said that even families could have disagreements. The US conducted these operations throughout the world. Its approach was not about individual countries, but about the freedom of the seas that all enjoy as per UNCLOS. A detailed analysis of the FONOP and its implications for India has been published separately<sup>42</sup>.

Notwithstanding Admiral Davidson's satisfaction with institution of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, the reality is that the initiative is designed primarily to protect forward deployed US assets. The annual battle for funds between theatre commands will continue. Moreover, an operational concept for dealing with China's grey zone coercion and how the US will deal with asymmetric capabilities, including A2AD, is yet to become clear. His successor, Admiral John Aquilino, currently Commander US Pacific Fleet, was confirmed by the US Senate on April 21, 2021<sup>43</sup>. How he carries forward the US Indo-Pacific vision remains to be seen.

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<sup>42</sup> Lalit Kapur, "Reading the USS John Paul Jones FONOP Right", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/reading-the-uss-john-paul-jones-fonop-right.html>

<sup>43</sup> Megan Eckstein, "Senate Confirms Aquilino to Serve as Next INDO-PACOM Commander", <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/21/senate-confirms-aquilino-to-serve-as-next-indo-pacom-commander>

## In Conversation: Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Professor Rory Medcalf

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs<sup>44</sup>, began by asserting that COVID-19 had accelerated and accentuated pre-existing trends with significant implications for the world. First, it had turbocharged protectionism and nationalism all over the world. The imposition of lockdowns had significantly disrupted trade flows and supply chains, sharpening the tendency of policymakers to turn inwards and underscoring the importance of upholding open and connected supply chains, free trade, and a multilateral, rules-based order. Second, it had sped up adoption of technologies, especially digital, for managing the pandemic. Efforts were now underway to develop mutual recognition of health certificates and to ensure there is interoperability and verification across borders and health systems. This underscored the need to establish common rules to facilitate cross-border digital transactions, extending to e-payments and data flows. Third, COVID-19 had heightened and sharpened tensions within the US-China relationship, enhancing friction over trade, the contest over emerging technologies, divergence in human rights and issues relating to defence, finance and cyber-security. He saw that both ASEAN and India had a crucial role to play amidst these trends, in shaping a post-pandemic world. He saw great potential for Indian companies, particularly digital, in stimulating global recovery. He hoped that India would reassess regional trade pacts like RCEP and even CPTPP and provide its companies a platform to showcase their strength and access even larger markets. He also saw India as being able to make major contributions to regional affairs and helping to keep the regional architecture open, inclusive and competitive.

On how ASEAN was prepared to deal with pandemic and post-pandemic economic challenges and realities, he spoke of the shift in focus of supply chains from just-in-time to just-in-case. He identified three response strategies to achieve supply chain resilience: stockpiling in advance, onshoring and diversification. Countries used a combination of these responses. Singapore had, throughout the pandemic, continued complying with the sanctity of contracts. The habits, agreements, processes and experience gained provided greater confidence for the post-COVID world.

On vaccine nationalism vs multilateralism, he identified the US, EU, India and China as major manufacturing sites. Both India and China had exported a large number of doses while also administering them domestically. He

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<sup>44</sup> Transcript of the session available at <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2021/04/20210414-Raisina-Dialogue>

acknowledged, however, that it was unrealistic to expect a major manufacturer to disregard domestic circumstances and export.

On the use of scientific and medical expertise to guide policymaking during the crisis, he said that each country had experienced at least three stress tests: of healthcare infrastructure within each country; of government competence in marshalling all resources and making decisions; and of the people's sense of collective responsibility for each other. Divergent responses to these three stresses would shape the trajectory of each country.

On Myanmar, he described the situation as tragic. ASEAN wanted stoppage of violence, followed by honest, direct dialogue between the two sides, leading to some form of reconciliation. It was trying to provide a supportive environment for this dialogue.

### **Keynote Address: Scott Morrison**

Addressing the Raisina Dialogue virtually for the second time (his visit last year was cancelled due to the Australian bushfires), Prime Minister Scott Morrison observed<sup>45</sup> that Australian participation this year included his Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, the Chief of Australian Defence Forces General Angus Campbell and former Prime Minister Tony Abbott. He identified the Indo-Pacific as the region that would shape our prosperity, security and destiny, individually and collectively. It was also the epicentre of strategic competition, with territorial claims, foreign threats and interference, cyber attacks and economic coercion all in play, leading to polarisation and strain between authoritarian regimes and democracies.

The pandemic had accelerated many of the strategic trends that created the strain. It had also created new opportunities to build a durable strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. Such a balance was necessary for freedom, where like-minded nations could pursue their interests cohesively, guided by rules based solutions that ensured peace, stability and prosperity for all.

Australia was doing its part to defend and shape an Indo-Pacific underpinned by rules of law and respect for sovereignty. This included its Defence Strategic Update, which committed \$ 270 billion to strengthening defence capability over the next decade. No one country could take on all challenges alone. This had resulted in the Quad Summit last month, where four leaders had come together to shape a positive and inclusive agenda for the Indo-Pacific. The

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<sup>45</sup> For a transcript of the address, see <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-6th-raisina-dialogue>

leaders had pledged to cooperate on the defining challenges of the times, to realize a shared vision as expressed through ASEAN for an open, inclusive and resilient region.

Australia was working with Japan and ASEAN, as well as with Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, all key partners. It saw India as a natural partner in shaping the future of the region. Australia admired India's taking on an increasingly active role in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific; its leadership in manufacturing and distribution of critical vaccines, and helping developing countries of the region. India was building economic capability, maritime security and advocating regional cooperation. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement of last year was a declaration of shared values and interests, capabilities and the deep trust for each other. It would result in cooperation in new ways – commerce, critical minerals, science and research, technology, as well as on defence, maritime, cyber and critical technology issues. Australia continued to look forward to ways to deepen the economic relationship and looked forward to working together to shape a stable, prosperous and healthy region.

## **Biden-Suga Summit Puts Japan's China Policy Under Stress**

"China has expressed grave concern to the US and Japan over their negative moves including collusion against China ... I'd like to point out that China-US and China-Japan relations both stand at an important juncture. The world is closely watching what signals the visit will send"<sup>46</sup>, said China's wolf-warrior spokesperson when asked about the summit between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on April 16, 2021.

China's concerns had been evident when Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Motegi Toshimitsu spoke for 90 minutes to each other on April 05, 2021. The Japanese readout of the conversation<sup>47</sup> focused on China's intrusions into Japan's territorial sea surrounding the Senkaku Islands, China's Coast Guard law, the situation in the South China Sea and in Hong Kong, and the human rights situation in Xinjiang. Motegi also called for the prompt removal of restrictions on import of Japanese food products<sup>48</sup> by China and the building

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<sup>46</sup>[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1869451.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1869451.shtml)

<sup>47</sup>Japan – China Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e\\_000182.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000182.html)

<sup>48</sup>China bans or restricts the import of almost all categories of Japanese food products. See [https://www.maff.go.jp/j/export/e\\_info/pdf/thrm\\_en.pdf](https://www.maff.go.jp/j/export/e_info/pdf/thrm_en.pdf)



of a truly fair, equitable and stable business environment<sup>49</sup>. China's readout was prescriptive, calling on the two countries to "conform with the trend of the times and the international trend, respect and trust each other and cooperate for mutual benefit, and jointly play a positive role in the cause of peace and development of the region and the world at large"<sup>50</sup>. China sought to safeguard the telephonic consensus between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga last year, abiding by the principles and spirits established in the four bilateral political documents, and reminded Japan that while it had an alliance with the US, it also had the obligation to fulfil the Japan-China Treaty of Peace and Friendship. It urged Japan to respect China's internal affairs and refrain from interfering in them. Another release from China called on Japan to "view China's development with more positive mentality"<sup>51</sup>.



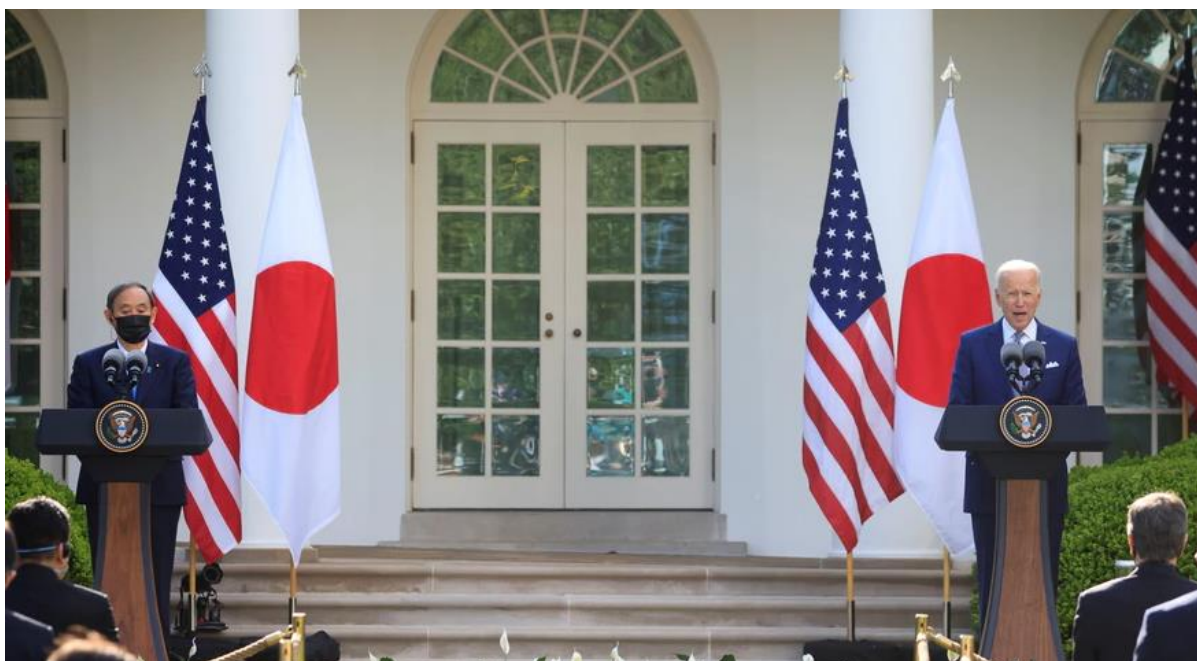
President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in the State Dining Room of the White House, April 16, 2021. Source White House (Twitter: @WhiteHouse)

<sup>49</sup>Japan – China Foreign Ministers' Telephone Talk,  
[https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e\\_000182.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press1e_000182.html)

<sup>50</sup>Wang Yi Speaks with Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi on the Phone,  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/t1867100.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1867100.shtml)

<sup>51</sup>Wang Yi: Japan Should View China's Development with More Positive Mentality,  
[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/t1867096.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1867096.shtml)

The Biden-Suga Joint Statement<sup>52</sup> recommitted both countries to “an indelible alliance, to a rules-based approach to regional and global order founded on universal values and common principles, and to cooperate with all those who share these objectives”. Its priority was forging a free and open Indo-Pacific, in support of the shared vision based on universal values and common principles; promotion of inclusive economic prosperity; respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; and peaceful resolution of disputes and shared norms in the maritime domain. The US restated its unwavering support for Japan’s defence using the full range of capabilities including nuclear, and reaffirmed the applicability of the treaty to the Senkakus. Both countries resolved to enhance deterrence and response capabilities in line with the increasingly challenging security environment; highlighted the importance of strengthening bilateral cyber security and information security, and shared concerns over Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order. The two agreed to continue working with allies and partners, including Australia and India through the Quad, and supported ASEAN’s unity and centrality as well as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.



President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga Address at Joint Press Conference at the White House Rose Garden, April 16, 2021. Source: Reuters

The two countries launched a new Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership<sup>53</sup> seeking to secure competitive advantage in a range of high-tech

<sup>52</sup>US-Japan Joint Leaders’ Statement: “US-Japan Global Partnership for a new Era”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>

<sup>53</sup>Fact Sheet: US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/fact-sheet-u-s-japan-competitiveness-and-resilience-core-partnership/>

areas, help the region recover from the pandemic and to address climate change, and promote green, sustainable global growth and recovery. They also launched a US-Japan Climate Partnership with three pillars: Paris Agreement implementation and achievement of 2030 targets and nationally determined contributions; clean energy technology development, deployment and innovation; and efforts to support decarbonisation in other countries, especially in the Indo-Pacific. They agreed to strengthen cooperation to advance health security, respond to future public health crises and build global health, including through reform of the WHO, a transparent and independent evaluation of the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak and support to the COVAX initiative.

The Joint Press Conference witnessed President Biden talking of the commitment of both to work together to take on the challenges from China and on issues like the East China Sea, South China Sea and North Korea<sup>54</sup>. He identified the priority as getting the pandemic under control and helping friends and neighbours throughout the Indo-Pacific to recover. Next came investing together in and protecting the technologies that “maintain and sharpen our competitive edge”<sup>55</sup>. His third priority was climate change.

Prime Minister Suga was circumspect and cautious in his public remarks. While committing to promote the shared Indo-Pacific vision and oppose any attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion, he also cited agreement to engage in a frank dialogue with China to pursue the stability of international relations while upholding universal values. He was guarded in responding to a question regarding what Japan would do in the event of a contingency in the Taiwan Straits.

The joint statement sent out a strong signal about the primacy of the Indo-Pacific in US perceptions, as well as of Japan's special place in the US outlook towards Asia. The commitment to use the full range of US capabilities, including nuclear, for Japan's defence and the applicability of Article V to the Senkaku Islands will provide comfort to the pacifist constituency but questions regarding US resolve will persist amongst Japan's hawks. Japan will remain heavily dependent on the US for its security for the foreseeable future. Business interests coupled with concerns about continuity of American policy will, however, force Japan to keep its options open (visible through the increased

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<sup>54</sup>Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Suga of Japan at Press Conference, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/16/remarks-by-president-biden-and-prime-minister-suga-of-japan-at-press-conference/>

<sup>55</sup>Ibid

defence budget) and continue hedging with China. The fact that the US extensively uses sanctions against China, while Japan doesn't, speaks for itself.

The inclusion of controversial elements in the Joint Statement despite China's call for Japan to abide by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship<sup>56</sup> and the "telephonic consensus" will be viewed unfavourably by China. These elements include the Free and Open Indo-Pacific; shared concerns about Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order including the use of economic and other forms of coercion; unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea; South China Sea issues; human rights in Xinjiang and Quad cooperation; and the inclusion of the reference to Taiwan Straits in a US-Japan Joint Statement. In response, China's spokesperson made three points<sup>57</sup>. First, that there is only one international system with the UN at its core, the only set of rules governing international relations are based on the UN Charter and the US and Japan have no right to define the international order, let alone impose their own standards on others. Second, that on human rights, Japan owes a debt to the Chinese people and Asia for its wars in the 1930s, and that wars launched by the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> century alone have caused over 800,000 deaths, including of 300,000 civilians. Denigrating China by citing human rights as an excuse is not something that the international community will allow. Third, combating COVID-19 requires a science-based spirit and the concerted efforts of all, not politicisation. He also reiterated that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and both US and Japan should abide by the one-China principle and stop interfering in its internal affairs. Thus, the joint statement is unlikely to deter China or result in a moderation of its patented salami-slicing strategy. Moreover, nations in the Indo-Pacific will watch closely to see whether US-Japan commitments result in concrete action or remain limited to diplomatic signalling. Even as the summit was taking place, Biden's special envoy was in Shanghai discussing a grand bargain with China on climate.

For India, the solely Asia-Pacific/East Asia centric focus of the Biden-Suga Joint Statement is evident. The extent of US-Japan interest in the Indian Ocean will remain limited. In fact, Suga's guarded response to a question at the press conference about a Taiwan Straits contingency indicates that Japan's role as a security provider itself will remain heavily circumscribed.

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<sup>56</sup>Treaty of Peace and Friendship Between Japan and the People's Republic of China, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/treaty78.html>

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[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1869850.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1869850.shtml)

As the China-US confrontation plays out, Japan's approach towards China will not always coincide. It may join the US in calling out China's actions, but without burning its economic bridges and interdependence with Beijing. Questions of Japan's ambivalence and US reliability will continue to persist in relation to the US-Japan "indelible alliance".

## The EU Indo-Pacific Strategy

More than a decade after Japan's Shinzo Abe laid the foundations of the Indo-Pacific concept through his 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech<sup>58</sup>, the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) "approved conclusions on an EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific"<sup>59</sup>. In doing so, they set out their intention of reinforcing their "strategic focus, presence and actions in this region of prime strategic importance for EU interests"<sup>60</sup>.

The EU strategy fact sheet defines the Indo-Pacific as "spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States"<sup>61</sup>. It "recommits" the EU politically to the region with the aim of "contributing to its stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law"<sup>62</sup>. It describes the region as vital for the EU's economic growth; producing almost 60% of global GDP; contributing to two thirds of global growth; home to 90% of the 2.4 billion expected new middle class members by 2030; having three of the four largest economies outside the EU (China, Indian and Japan); at the forefront of the digital economy and technological developments; and central to global value chains, international trade and investment flows. It claims the position of the region's top investor, top development assistance provider and a big trading partner.

The strategy observes that the EU has, over the years, contributed significantly to the region in areas such as development cooperation and humanitarian assistance; tackling climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution; partnership and free trade agreements; disaster risk reduction; and upholding international law including human rights and freedom of navigation. It identifies seven thrust areas for future cooperation: ocean governance; research and technology; connectivity; health; strengthening regional

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<sup>58</sup> "Confluence of the Two Seas" Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

<sup>59</sup> "Indo-Pacific: Council adopts conclusions on EU strategy for cooperation", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/indo-pacific-council-adopts-conclusions-on-eu-strategy-for-cooperation/>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific\\_factsheet\\_2021-04\\_v.5.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-indo-pacific_factsheet_2021-04_v.5.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

organizations; intensifying cooperation in multilateral fora; and reinforcing work on tackling global challenges such as climate change. On security and defence, it says the EU will protect critical maritime routes through capacity-building for partners to improve their maritime domain awareness; organize more joint exercises and port calls between Indo-Pacific naval units and the EU counter-piracy Naval Force Operation Atalanta; encourage increased participation of partners in EU military and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions; strengthen cooperation with certain partners on counter-terrorism, cyber-security, maritime security and crisis management; and expand its security and defence dialogue to include more partners and engage strongly in the ASEAN Regional Forum. It acknowledges that a meaningful European naval presence in the Indo-Pacific is important for the future.

The strategy commits to work with all partners in the region who share common objectives, in specific policy areas where partners can find common ground based on shared principles, values or mutual interest. It seeks to join other partners who have declared Indo-Pacific approaches, with a view to strengthening synergies in the region towards the common goals of stability and prosperity.

France became the first European country to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy, unveiled by President Macron in his speech at Australia's Garden Island Naval Base on May 2, 2018<sup>63</sup>. Germany released its Indo-Pacific guidelines on September 01, 2020<sup>64</sup>. The Netherlands followed on November 13, 2020<sup>65</sup>. With the pullout of the UK from the EU, this left Spain and Italy as the only EU maritime powers without a declared Indo-Pacific outlook. That the three lead states have been able to prevail on the 27-member EU to recognize the economic attractions of the Indo-Pacific and declare a strategy for the region is noteworthy.

The strategy indicates that the EU intends to reinforce its role as a cooperative partner with all in the region. The wording is carefully chosen. The driving

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<sup>63</sup> "The Indo-Pacific Region: A Priority for France", <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/#:~:text=In%20an%20international%20context%20marked,the%20heart%20of%20his%20strategy>.

<sup>64</sup> "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region", <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> "Indo-Pacific Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with Partners in Asia", <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>

factor for the EU to work with Indo-Pacific partners is mutual interest. Despite the stated focus on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights, freedom of the seas and UNCLOS, the strategy is careful not to convey an impression of excluding China. The fact that it talks of taking further steps towards the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China (for which in-principle agreement was reached on December 30, 2020<sup>66</sup>) as well as of pursuing bilateral summits at the Asia-Europe Meeting indicates the inclusive approach.

The focus is on economic issues and non-traditional security challenges. The EU aims to strengthen regional governance, promote economic integration and growth, ensure the safety and security of maritime and aviation routes, prevent trafficking, tackle migration and ensure sustainable management of maritime resources, working with the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Pacific Islands Forum. The absence of mention of India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative and SAGAR outlook is noteworthy. Moreover, the high quality and sustainable connectivity initiative in the strategy will bring the EU into competition, perhaps confrontation with China. How the EU will handle this remains to be seen.

While engaging actively in pursuing trade and investment agreements such as those concluded with Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam, the strategy aims to conclude free trade agreements with Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand, and take further steps towards the Comprehensive Agreement on investment with China. It also states that the EU will continue to explore deepening economic relations with India, but does not convey the same optimism as it does for other countries.

On the security and defence front, the strategy focuses on developing partnerships and strengthening synergies with likeminded partners on maritime security, malicious cyber activity, disinformation, emerging and disruptive technologies, countering and improving resilience to terrorism, violent extremism and hybrid threats, and countering organised crime and illicit trafficking. It aims to increase cooperation within the framework of CSDP<sup>67</sup> missions, the Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia project, and through expanding the area of operations of EUNAVFOR Atalanta and the scope of the CRIMARIO<sup>68</sup> II activities into South and Southeast Asia. However,

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<sup>66</sup> "EU and China reach agreement in principle on investment", <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2233>

<sup>67</sup> Common Security and Defence Policy.

<sup>68</sup> Critical maritime Routes Indian Ocean.

none of the 18 CSDP missions listed on the EU website<sup>69</sup> are presently East of Somalia. The Enhanced Security Cooperation in and with Asia project<sup>70</sup>, established in 2018, already covers East, Southeast and South Asia and encompasses only non-traditional challenges to security. It does not address the era of geopolitical contestation that has dawned on the region. Operations of EUNAVFOR Atalanta are currently limited to the East Coast of Africa, as are CRIMARIO activities in the Indian Ocean. Expansion to the wider Indo-Pacific will entail commitment of substantial additional resources including maritime platforms. It remains to be seen whether the EU can find them.

In sum, the strategy seems an attempt to jump onto the Indo-Pacific economic bandwagon while restricting EU participation to soft security issues. It assumes it can find a way to cooperate with China, ignoring the rising power asymmetry that is fuelling its assertiveness. The content related to common values is best described as aspirational, with ensuring realisation of the stability aspects of the future left to others. But given that the EU involves 27 players with divergent outlooks and relationships, expecting more would perhaps have been over-optimistic.

## Exercise La Perouse

“Indian Navy Ships INS Satpura (with an integral helicopter embarked) and INS Kiltan along with P8I Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft are participating, for the first time; in multi-lateral maritime exercise La Pérouse, being conducted in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region from 05 to 07 Apr 2021” said a press release from India’s Ministry of Defence<sup>71</sup>. The statement went on to say, “The Indian Navy ships and aircraft will exercise at sea with ships and aircraft of French Navy (FN), Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) and United States Navy (USN) during the three day exercise at sea”, and “The exercise will showcase high levels of synergy, coordination and interoperability between the friendly navies. Participation by the Indian Navy in the exercise demonstrates the shared values with friendly navies ensuring freedom of seas and commitment to an open, inclusive Indo-Pacific and a rules-based international order”.

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<sup>69</sup> “Military and Civilian Missions and Operations”,  
[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en)

<sup>70</sup> “Deepening EU security cooperation with Asian Partners: Council adopts conclusions”,  
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/05/28/deepening-eu-security-cooperation-with-asian-partners-council-adopts-conclusions/>

<sup>71</sup> Indian Navy Ships and Aircraft to participate in exercise La Perouse,  
<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1709626>



The multinational exercise resulted in commentary linking it with expansion of the Quad to include other democracies such as France and the UK<sup>72</sup>; the beginning of a series of Quad-plus naval engagements with European countries<sup>73</sup> who saw a clear interest in maintaining a stable Indo-Pacific, manifestation of a Quad-plus framework<sup>74</sup>, and demonstration of shared values with friendly navies ensuring freedom of the seas and commitment to an open, inclusive Indo-Pacific<sup>75</sup>.



FS Tonnerre enters Kochi port on March 30, 2021, before participating in Exercise La Perouse. Source: Embassy of France, New Delhi

Named for the 18<sup>th</sup> century French naval explorer Francoise de Galaup, Comte de Lapérouse, the exercise brought together HMAS Anzac and HMAS Sirius, FS Tonnerre and FS Surcouf, JS Akebono and USS Somerset, apart from the Indian

<sup>72</sup> France to lead Quad naval drill in Indo-Pacific challenge to China, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/France-to-lead-Quad-naval-drill-in-Indo-Pacific-challenge-to-China>

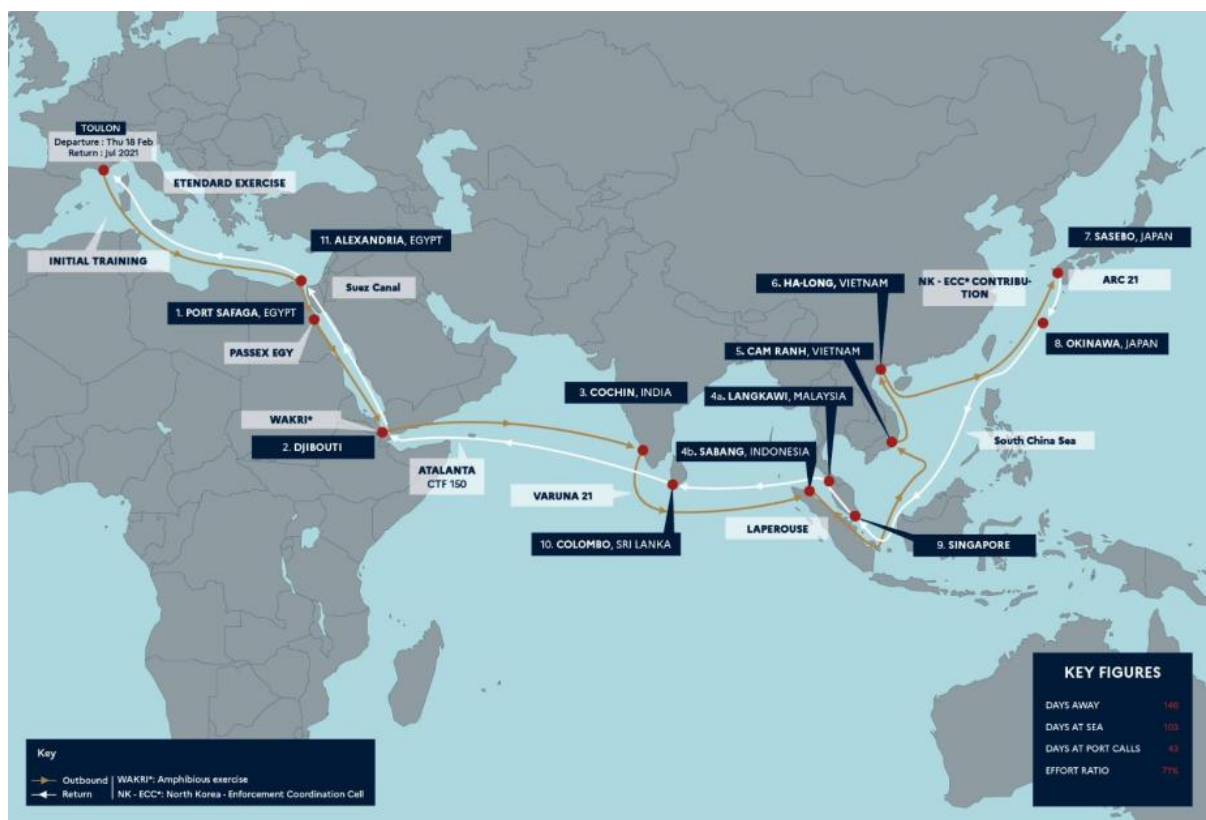
<sup>73</sup> A Proactive Indian Navy: Upcoming Naval Exercises, <https://thediomat.com/2021/03/a-proactive-indian-navy-upcoming-naval-exercises/>

<sup>74</sup> La Pérouse – Quad naval exercise and India's strategic partnership with France, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/la-perouse-quad-naval-exercise-and-indias-strategic-partnership-with-france/>

<sup>75</sup> Indian Navy Ships and Aircraft to Participate in Exercise La Perouse, <https://theguardian.com/indian-navy-ships-and-aircraft-to-participate-in-exercise-la-perouse/>

participants identified above. India did not participate in the first La Pérouse exercise in 2019. The 2021 exercise encompassed anti-air warfare, surface warfare, replenishment<sup>76</sup>, maritime manoeuvres, air defence operations and live firing exercises. The facts that the exercise was led by France<sup>77</sup> and formed part of the French Mission Jeanne D'Arc were glossed over in commentary.

Mission Jeanne d'Arc has three stated goals<sup>78</sup>: to train future generations of French Navy officers; to deploy operational capacities in areas of strategic interest (thus familiarising trainees with such areas); and to build interoperability and international cooperation. The five-month mission marks the culmination of training for officer cadets and takes its name from the French helicopter carrier Jeanne d'Arc, which participated in all such missions from 1964 onwards till it retired from service in 2010.



Areas covered by Mission Jeanne D'Arc 2021. Source: French Ministry of Defence

The current mission, with 147 officer cadets embarked, departed Toulon on February 18, 2021. It includes cadets from Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia,

<sup>76</sup> Multinational Maritime Exercise La Perouse 21, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202104/20210406.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/operations/points-de-situation/point-de-situation-des-operations-du-2-au-8-avril>

<sup>78</sup> Press Kit, Mission Jeanne D'Arc 2021, [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/dossiers-de-presse/dossier-de-presse\\_mission-jeanne-d-arc-2021](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/dossiers-de-presse/dossier-de-presse_mission-jeanne-d-arc-2021)

Germany, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Malaysia, Morocco, Togo and Vietnam. Their voyage will take them through the Mediterranean, Suez Canal, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, South China Sea and East China Sea to Sasebo in Japan, before returning along the same route. Ports being visited include Alexandria and Safaga in Egypt, Djibouti, Kochi, Sabang, Cam Ranh, Ha-long, Sasebo, Singapore and Colombo. The voyage will also expose trainees to numerous international operations and exercises.

"Beyond the Varuna Exercise, France and India commit to utilising every opportunity of their naval ships calling at each other's ports for holding passage exercises (PASSEX)", according to the Joint Strategic Vision of India – France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region<sup>79</sup>. Exercise La Perouse is just a little beyond the PASSEX the 2018 vision had committed to. The fact that it formed part of an annual training mission will not have been lost on professional observers, including in China. The participation of India for the first time is an indicator of strengthening cooperation between the navies involved. It may, however, be premature to see this as an indicator of the emergence of a Quad-plus framework.

## Exercise Varuna

"The two leaders recalled the importance of the Varuna bilateral exercise initiated in 1983 between the Navies of the two countries and agreed to deepen it further to enhance interoperability between the two navies", states the Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region<sup>80</sup>. The 19<sup>th</sup> edition of Exercise Varuna<sup>81</sup>, held in the Arabian Sea from April 25-27, 2021, fulfilled this commitment.

India's representation in the exercise included IN ships Kolkata, Tarkash, Talwar and Deepak with their integral helicopters; a Kalvari-class submarine; and P-8I aircraft under the command of R Adm Ajay Kochhar, NM, who had assumed command of the Western Fleet on February 24, 2021. French representation comprised the aircraft carrier Charles-de-Gaulle, French ships Chevalier Paul, Provence and Var and integral aircraft, under the command of R Adm Marc Aussedat, Commander Task Force 473.

<sup>79</sup> [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint\\_Strategic\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaFrance\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Region\\_New\\_Delhi\\_10\\_March\\_2018](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint_Strategic_Vision_of_IndiaFrance_Cooperation_in_the_Indian_Ocean_Region_New_Delhi_10_March_2018)

<sup>80</sup> "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region", [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint\\_Strategic\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaFrance\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Ocean\\_Region\\_New\\_Delhi\\_10\\_March\\_2018](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint_Strategic_Vision_of_IndiaFrance_Cooperation_in_the_Indian_Ocean_Region_New_Delhi_10_March_2018)

<sup>81</sup> "Exercise Varuna – 2021", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1713839>

The three day exercise witnessed a number of high-end naval operations, including advanced anti-submarine and air defence exercises, cross-deck operations, tactical manoeuvres, surface and anti-air weapon firing, underway replenishment and other operations designed to hone the skills of the two fleets. Significantly, on completion of the exercise, INS Tarkash was to remain with the Charles-de-Gaulle strike group from April 28 – May 01, 2021.



FS Charles de Gaulle and an Indian Kalvari Class Submarine During Ex Varuna 2021.  
Source: Indian Navy

The content of Exercise Varuna has expanded substantially since it was instituted in 1983. The 2018 edition, after articulation of the bilateral joint strategic vision for the Indian Ocean, was conducted over three phases, in the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and off Reunion. The 2019 edition had two phases, in the Arabian Sea and off Djibouti. Though the pandemic resulted in cancellation of the 2020 edition, the 19<sup>th</sup> Varuna continues the trend towards increased cooperation in building capability for high-end warfare.

The Charles-de-Gaulle Carrier Strike Group (CSG), however, deploys to the Indian Ocean intermittently and does not constitute a reliable permanent presence. It was last here in 2019. The current deployment began in February 2021 and will, according to the French Ministry of Defence, cover the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Northern Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf before the CSG returns to France in June 2019. Accompanying ships include a nuclear attack submarine, as well as escort vessels from allied nations such as

Belgium, Greece and the US. These ships did not, however, take part in Exercise Varuna.



Indian and French Naval Ships During Exercise Varuna 2021.  
Source: Indian Navy

Of particular significance is the effective attachment, for the first time, of an Indian warship to the French CSG. Exercise Varuna provides the Indian Navy an opportunity to enhance interoperability while benchmarking itself tactically against the French navy. The attachment also provides opportunity to imbibe operational experience of working with an advanced Western navy, with different doctrinal and tactical procedures. The experience gained will help the IN improve its overall warfighting skills.

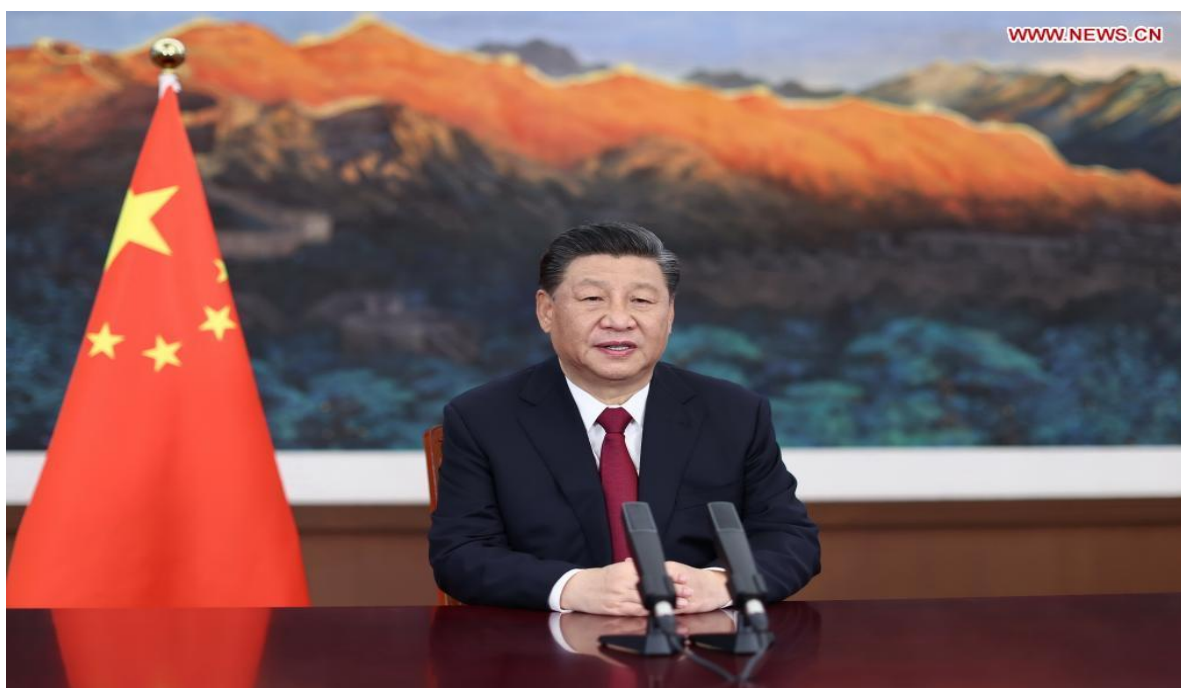
## **The China Factor**

Two speeches by President Xi Jinping in April 2021 are relevant for the Indo-Pacific: at the Boao Forum on April 20, 2021, and at the Climate Summit on April 22, 2021.

### **Boao Forum Speech**

Delivering the keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021, Xi spoke on "Pulling Together Through

Adversity and Toward a Shared Future for All" via video link<sup>82</sup>. He made four calls. The first was for consultation on equal footing to create a future of shared benefits, upholding true multilateralism, and making the global governance system more fair and equitable. He said what we need in today's world is justice, not hegemony, with big countries behaving in a manner befitting their status and with a greater sense of responsibility. The second was for openness and innovation to create a future of development and prosperity, promotion of trade and investment liberalization and facilitation, deeper regional economic integration, and enhanced supply, industrial, data and human resources chains. Attempts to erect walls or decouple would hurt the interests of others without benefitting oneself. The third was for solidarity and cooperation to create a future of health and prosperity and advanced international cooperation on climate change. The fourth was for a commitment to justice to create a future of mutual respect and understanding. This included placing the principles of equality, mutual respect and mutual trust front and centre, and advocating peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom, and encouraging exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations. He stressed that the Belt and Road Initiative was a public road open to all, not a private path owned by one single party. He also stressed that China will never seek hegemony, expansion or a sphere of influence, or ever engage in an arms race.



President Xi Jinping Delivers Keynote Address at The Boao Forum, April 20, 2021. Source: Xinhua

<sup>82</sup> Xi Jinping Delivers Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1870417.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1870417.shtml)

The incongruity between these words and China's demonstrated actions is evident. The community with a shared vision that he speaks of rests on a Chinese vision, not a shared one. The equal footing and shared benefits he seeks seems to apply only to equality and sharing benefits between China and the US. Others are excluded, as became evident from the remark of Yang Jiechi at the East Asia Summit in 2012. The true multilateralism he talks of is a recipe for inaction unless there is unanimity, difficult to achieve in the face of intransigence. The justice he seeks is China's unilateral vision of what constitutes justice, at odds with international laws and norms, as evidenced by its flouting the binding award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016. And China's sense of responsibility and hegemonic ambitions are on clear display in its confrontational approach in Ladakh<sup>83</sup>, as well as in the East and South China Seas.

Similarly, there is a wide gulf between his words on trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation and its coercive / punitive approach when its interests are infringed upon. The examples of China's unannounced sanctions on the Philippines, South Korea, Japan and Australia speak far more loudly than Xi's words. The future of health and security he seeks necessitates a thorough and unbiased inquiry into the causes of the pandemic, not the visible obfuscation of facts and attempts to punish those who call for such an inquiry. His call for trade and investment liberalisation flies in the face of China's using non-tariff barriers to barricade its own market while seeking opening up by other countries. And his calls for democracy and freedom fly in the face of China's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The principles of openness and extensive consultation he cites are certainly not evident in the Belt and Road Initiative. And finally, his belief that the CPC "has kept pursuing happiness for the Chinese people" is belied by China's massive internal security expenditure, which exceeds what it spends on external security.

The reality is that but for the US and its role as an offshore balancer, China would have ridden rough-shod over Taiwan and Southeast Asia, and probably much of East and South Asia. At the very least, it would have necessitated a larger number of countries acquiring a nuclear deterrent. This factor must be kept in mind when determining relationships for the future.

### The Climate Summit

Xi called for six commitments at the climate summit: to harmony between man and nature; to green development, to systemic governance, to a people-

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<sup>83</sup> "For Man and Nature: Building a Community of Life Together", [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1870852.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1870852.shtml)

centred approach, to multilateralism, and finally to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. He said that the Chinese civilisation has always valued harmony between man and nature as well as observance of the laws of nature. He said China would strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. China would strictly control coal-fired power generation projects, strictly limit the increase in coal consumption over the 14<sup>th</sup> plan period and phase it down over the 15<sup>th</sup> plan period. China had decided to accept the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol and tighten regulations over non-carbon dioxide emissions, and its national carbon market would start trading.

Experience indicates that China follows treaty commitments only so long as it suits its interests, and disregards them, using lawfare, when it sees benefit in doing so. The speech indicates that China has an interest in engaging the current US administration on an area the latter considers a priority. The price it will extract for this engagement will become clear over the course of time.

## Whitsun Reef Update

The month witnessed heightened tensions in the South China Sea, as the Philippines found itself facing a repeat of the 2012 Scarborough Shoals incident at Whitsun Reef. Large numbers of Chinese maritime militia vessels and fishing boats occupied the lagoon, effectively barring Filipino fishermen from operating there and generating tension between the Philippines and China. The geopolitical implications of this have been covered by the author separately<sup>84</sup>. On April 24, 2021, the European Union External Action Service observed, "Tensions in the South China Sea, including the recent presence of large numbers of Chinese vessels at Whitsun Reef, endanger peace and stability in the region"<sup>85</sup>. The statement voiced "strong<sup>85</sup> opposition to any unilateral actions that could undermine regional stability and the international rules-based order". It urged all parties to resolve disputes through peaceful means in accordance with international law, particularly UNCLOS and its dispute settlement mechanisms. It pointedly recalled "in this regard the Arbitration Award rendered under UNCLOS on 12 July 2016"<sup>86</sup>, and supported "the ASEAN-led process towards an effective, substantive and legally binding Code of Conduct, which should not prejudice the interests of third parties". China's

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<sup>84</sup> Lalit Kapur, "Déjà vu in the South China Sea", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/dj-vu-in-the-south-china-sea.html>

<sup>85</sup> "South China Sea: Statement by the Spokesperson on challenges to peace and stability", [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97194/south-china-sea-statement-spokesperson-challenges-peace-and-stability\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97194/south-china-sea-statement-spokesperson-challenges-peace-and-stability_en)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid



Mission to the EU was quick to urge “the EU side to respect the efforts of countries in the region in properly addressing differences and maintaining stability in the South China Sea, and stop sowing discord”<sup>87</sup>.

The continued occupation of Whitsun Reef, as also of the Gogra and Hot Springs area in Eastern Ladakh, loudly proclaims the gulf between China’s proclamations of being a peace-loving, law-abiding nation and its coercive activity on ground. Whether the EU will join hands with others to implement its stated strategy and stand up against China’s unilateral assertions or will let it pass will determine the EU’s credibility as an independent actor.

## The USS John Paul Jones FONOP

On April 07, 2021, USS John Paul Jones conducted Freedom of Navigation operations directed against India and the Maldives, generating considerable anger in India. The operation has also been covered by this author separately<sup>88</sup>. The disagreement appears to have blown over. It will, hopefully, lead to corrective action from both sides.

## Sinking of Indonesian Submarine KRI Nanggala 402

The Indonesian Submarine KRI Nanggala 402, with a 53-man crew, dived off the coast of Bali in the early morning hours on April 21, 2021 – and disappeared thereafter<sup>89</sup>. On April 24, 2021, Admiral Yudo Margono, the Indonesian Navy’s Chief of Staff, announced that debris had been found a couple of miles from where the submarine dived. A day later, Indonesian officials confirmed that the submarine had broken into three pieces, which were at a depth of 838 metres, well below the crushing depth<sup>90</sup>. There were no survivors.

The cause of the disaster remains to be ascertained. The event did, however, illustrate the bonds between mariners the world over. Help poured in from regional countries, including India, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and the US<sup>91</sup>. The event highlights the need for submarine operators, whose numbers in the Indo-Pacific are growing, to acquire submarine rescue capability.

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<sup>87</sup> “Spokesperson of Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning the EEAS Statement on the South China Sea”, <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/fyrjh/t1871332.htm>

<sup>88</sup> Lalit Kapur, “Reading the USS John Paul Jones FONOP Right”, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/reading-the-uss-john-paul-jones-fonop-right.html>

<sup>89</sup> Debris from Indonesian Submarine is Found, Ending Hopes of Rescue”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/24/world/asia/indonesia-submarine-missing.html>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56893700>

## Queen Elizabeth Task Group deployment to Indo-Pacific

The Royal Navy announced<sup>92</sup> on April 26, 2021, that the UK's Carrier Strike Group, led by HMS Queen Elizabeth, will sail next month for a deployment to the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific. The task group, which includes four British and one each Dutch and US warships, two auxiliaries and one nuclear submarine, will visit 40 nations, including India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore in the deployment covering 26,000 nautical miles. The deployment provides opportunity to project influence, signal power, engage with friends and reaffirms the British commitment to address security challenges, including in distant places. It will be the most significant British deployment in more than two decades and is indicative of the UK's desire to position itself as an independent power with global reach.



The HMS Queen Elizabeth Strike Group which will deploy in the Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific. Source: Royal Navy

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<sup>92</sup> "Carrier Strike Group Deployment to visit 40 Countries", <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/april/26/210426-csg21-deployment>



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