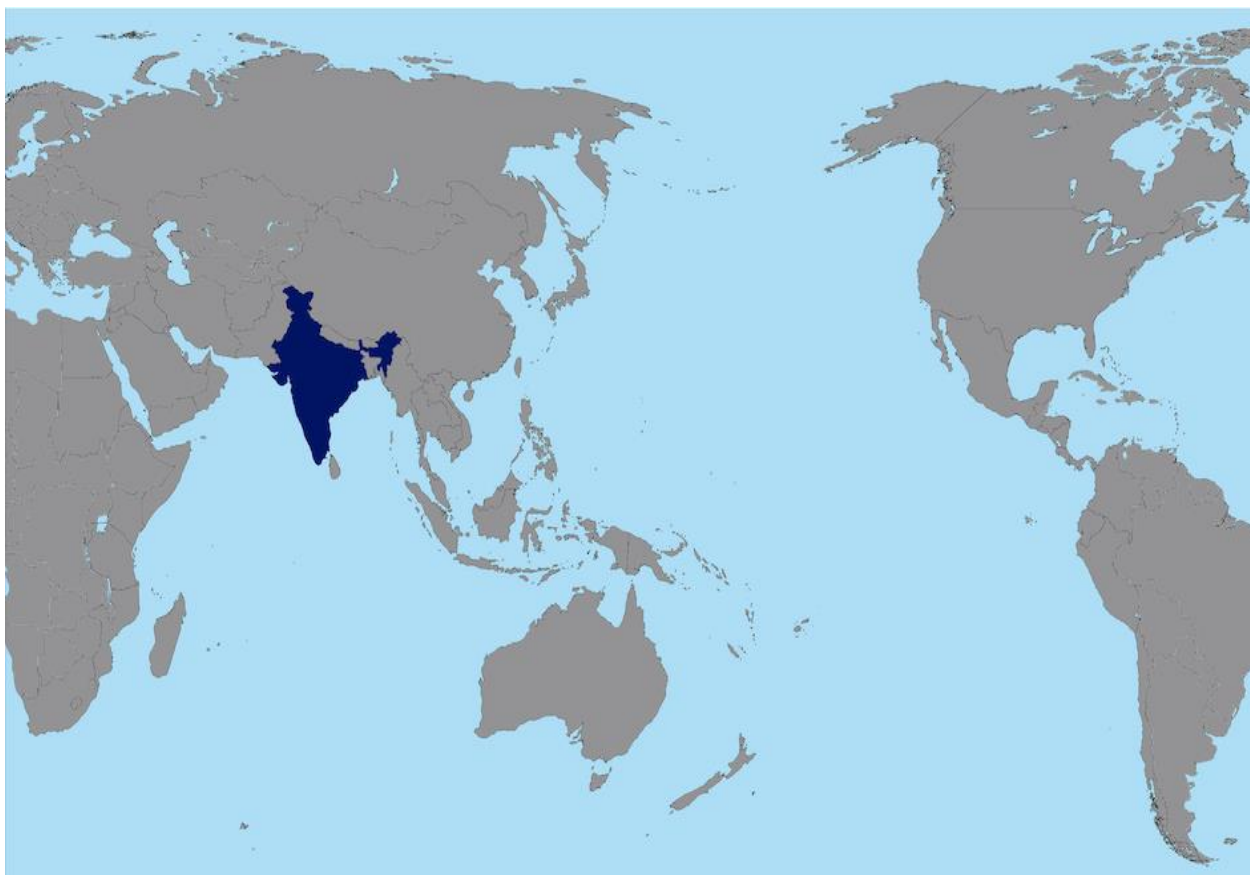




# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR AUGUST 2021



Volume II, Issue 8 | August 2021

Delhi Policy Group

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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, based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be send at [lalit@dpg.org.in](mailto:lalit@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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**DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR**  
**Volume II, Issue 8**  
**August 2021**

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## DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

August 2021

### Abstract

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired an open debate at the UNSC on August 09, 2021, marking not only the continuing evolution of India's maritime policies, but also the development of a forward-looking vision necessary for India's aspirations as a permanent member of the UNSC. The discussion resulted in a Presidential Statement focused on transnational criminal activity and measures to secure coastal and offshore infrastructure, while setting aside divisive issues such as state supported coercion and illicit activity. The statement provides the basis for the UNSC to address maritime security constabulary and disaster relief issues in a comprehensive manner.

ASEAN Foreign Ministers and those of partner countries came together virtually in a series of meetings in the first week of the month, to review progress of ASEAN's subsidiary forums and discuss new avenues of cooperation in preparation for the Leader's Summit in October 2021. Extra-regional nations continued their outreach towards ASEAN, with Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Oman, Qatar and the UAE acceding to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, UK being accorded the status of a Dialogue Partner, Switzerland, Norway and Turkey progressing their sectoral dialogue partnerships, and Chile, Germany, France and Italy moving ahead with developmental partnerships. The meetings highlighted ASEAN's convening power while showing up the limitations of its consensus based decision making. Incremental progress on shaping the easier aspects of the ASEAN community continues, while difficult issues are being shelved. Challenging times, shaped by China's assertions and great power geopolitical competition, lie ahead. The ability to retain strategic independence while managing these challenges will be the key to ASEAN's future.

Senior officials of the Quad met virtually on August 12 to continue their dialogue on developing meaningful cooperation among the member countries and prepare for a potential in person summit later this year. Individual country statements issued after this dialogue reflected continuity in similar though not identical strategic visions, including support for ASEAN centrality and the principles contained in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. While the progress of the Quad generates some concern in China, it is not yet sufficient

to deter its continuing assertions. In other meetings, Singapore and Australia moved ahead with their comprehensive strategic partnership through the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of their Joint Ministerial Committee on August 27, and the inaugural Australia-France 2 + 2 Dialogue was held on August 30.

Exercise Malabar 2021 took place in the Philippine Sea, off Guam, from August 26 – 29. While the scale appeared smaller than last year, the exercise included Special Forces Operations. Press releases from both the JMSDF and the US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet referred to another phase of Exercise Malabar 2021 in the Bay of Bengal in October this year. Ships from India's Eastern Fleet participated in Malabar, as well as in maritime partnership exercises with Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam, while ships of the Western Fleet participated in exercises with Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the UAE and UK. This included maiden exercises with Norway, Algeria and Saudi Arabia, as well as Exercise Konkan. India also participated as a trainer at this year's Exercise Cutlass Express, in Mombasa.

The Chiefs of the Indian and Australian Navies signed a Joint Guidance for the Australia- India Navy to Navy Relationship on August 18, spelling out areas and modalities to enable the two services to pursue cooperation. INS Airavat was deployed for Mission Sagar, delivering COVID relief supplies to Indonesia and Vietnam. IAC 1, the future INS Vikrant, sailed for her maiden sea trials from August 04-08, beginning a long process that could lead to her commissioning to coincide with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence next year. The keel of the first of 16 ASW shallow water craft being built for the Indian Navy was laid at L&T Shipyard, Kattupalli, while the service began afresh the process for procurement/lease of three to four Mine Countermeasures Vessels, as well as the indigenous construction of four Landing Platform Docks. The Director General of India's Coast Guard, K. Natarajan, was elected as the Executive Director of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against ships in Asia, convincingly defeating China's candidate. He will assume charge from the Japanese incumbent in January 2022.

The first Indonesia-US strategic dialogue was held during the visit of Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to the US on August 3, 2021, six years after the two nations had committed to its establishment. US Vice President Kamala Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam from August 22 – 26, continuing the US outreach in South East Asia. Admiral John C Aquilino, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, made his maiden visits to the Philippines and India after assuming command.

In other Indo-Pacific developments, the US Central Command released its investigation report into the UAV attack on MT Mercer Street off Oman on July 30. The report found that the vessel suffered damage and casualties from the third attack, with two other attempts the previous evening failing as the UAVs ditched in the water. It unequivocally blamed Iran for the incident. The USS Carl Vinson CSG commenced its forward deployment to the Western Pacific, participating in a large scale global exercise conducted by the USN, followed by exercises with the JMSDF and the Royal Navy. The UK's HMS Queen Elizabeth led CSG – 21 transited through the South China Sea and into the Philippine Sea on August 1. It thereafter participated in a series of exercises with INDO-PACOM units, including one which brought three flat-tops, all operating F-35 Lightning-II aircraft, together east of the Taiwan Straits.

## Meeting of Foreign Ministers of ASEAN and Related Organisations

As ASEAN moved towards its 54<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Foreign Ministers of ASEAN and partner countries came together virtually to review progress of the various ASEAN related forums.

The series of meetings kicked off with the 54<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, on August 2, 2021. The Joint Communiqué released on conclusion<sup>1</sup> covered six broad sections: ASEAN Community Building; ASEAN Political Security-Community; ASEAN Economic Community; ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community; ASEAN External Relations; and Regional and International Issues.

The Community Building section began with what has become ritual affirmation of ASEAN unity and centrality, promoting an ASEAN identity and of common values and principles, as enshrined in the ASEAN Charter. Among the key deliverables contained in the Communiqué are submission of the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the ASEAN Strategic and Holistic Initiative to link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters to the 38<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit (scheduled October 26-28, 2021); launch of the ASEAN village for rehabilitation of disaster struck Palu City in Indonesia's Central Sulawesi; a proposal to prepare an ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Upholding Multilateralism in 2021; submission of a Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy; development of the Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution for ASEAN; and establishment of a Junior Fellowship Programme

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Communiqué of the 54<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting 2 August 2021, <https://asean.org/storage/Joint-Communiqué-of-the-54th-ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-FINAL.pdf>



with the ASEAN Secretariat, to strengthen the quality of its intake in the coming years.



The 11<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers Meeting in Progress, August 04, 2021.

Source: ASEAN

They also welcomed contributions from ASEAN members states and external partners to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, looked forward to operationalisation of the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies; implementation of the Regional Strategic and Action Plan on ASEAN Vaccine Security and Self-Reliance 2021-2025; timely establishment and operationalisation of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases; and development and early operationalisation of the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework. The ministers reviewed implementation of the ASEAN Charter and Initiative for ASEAN Integration, took stock of sub-regional cooperation, welcomed progress in implementing the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity 2025; reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing sustainable development cooperation and emphasised the importance of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network as a platform for catalysing cooperation. They also resolved to strengthen the ASEAN Secretariat.

The ministers sought inclusion of monitoring of emerging issues such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific; collective response to COVID-19; developments in cyber security; and the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the ASEAN Political-Security Community blueprint. They reiterated that a collective and comprehensive approach on terrorism and violent extremism, illicit drugs, trafficking in persons and cyber security were focal areas, and that the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in South East Asia provides the key code of conduct governing interstate relations. They welcome the

accession of Denmark, Greece, Netherlands, Oman, Qatar and UAE to the TAC. They reiterated that UNCLOS 1982 sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out and noted the successful convening of the 10<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Maritime Forum and 8<sup>th</sup> Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. They also noted the proposal to hold an ASEAN Human Rights Dialogue in September 2021.

The Ministers agreed to a comprehensive review of the moratorium on new dialogue partnerships. They agreed to accord the status of Dialogue Partner to the United Kingdom and noted progress in sectoral dialogue partnerships between ASEAN and Switzerland, Norway and Turkey. They also reviewed progress on developmental partnerships between ASEAN and Chile, Germany, France and Italy; and on Timor Leste's application for full membership of ASEAN.

Regional and international issues covered encompassed the situation in the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East and in Myanmar. The statement on the South China Sea was a virtual replica of the statement of the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit in November 2020. The only visible changes were dropping of the reference to a common approach in fighting COVID 19 and resumption of negotiations on the Single Draft Negotiating Text of the long-awaited Code of Conduct, which had resulted in provisional agreement on the Preamble section. The Ministers welcomed Myanmar's commitment to the Five-Point Consensus of the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting of April 24, 2021: immediate cessation of violence and the exercise of restraint by all parties; commencement of a constructive dialogue to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people; appointment of a Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair to facilitate mediation (Brunei's second Minister for Foreign Affairs, Erywan Yusof, was appointed as the special envoy); the provision of humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and the visit of a delegation led by the Special Envoy to Myanmar to meet all parties concerned.

The contents of the regional and international affairs sections of the Chairman's Statement for the 11<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting<sup>2</sup>, as well as of the Chairman's Statement of the 28<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum<sup>3</sup> were identical to the contents of those of the 54<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting. No mention was made of rising tensions in the East China

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<sup>2</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 11<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-11th-EAS-FMM-4-August-2021-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 28<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-28th-ARF.pdf>



Sea, or over Taiwan. Evidently, ASEAN still continues to toe China's line on these issues.

ASEAN Foreign Ministers also met with their counterparts from Dialogue Partner Countries<sup>4</sup>. The ASEAN-India Ministerial Meeting noted satisfaction the progress in implementation of the Plan of Action to implement the partnership. It welcomed India's proposal for an ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the AOIP and looked forward to its adoption at the ASEAN-India Summit in October. It acknowledged the importance of increasing cooperation in the maritime domain, including plans to hold a workshop on the blue economy and another on combating marine pollution; appreciated India's support for ASEAN centrality and active involvement in ASEAN-led mechanisms; and agreed to further strengthen ASEAN-India economic relations. It agreed to strengthen cooperation in the fields of education, disaster management, health, sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, smart cities, technical and vocational education and training, digital transformation and the empowerment of youth and women. It appreciated India's grant of 1000 PhD fellowships for ASEAN students at the Indian Institutes of Technology, and the establishment of IT training centres in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam. Singapore took over as ASEAN's country coordinator for India.

The Ministerial Meetings provide a prelude to the ASEAN Summit in October, as well as to related meetings like the East Asia Summit. Notwithstanding its growing international stature, ASEAN remains primarily an inward looking organisation, that too one that has made limited progress in developing an integrated ASEAN community. Numerous internal fault lines highlight that development of both unity and centrality (both in internal matters, as well as in external relations) is work in progress, with a long way to go. Incremental progress, however, continues. Like any other bureaucratic organisation, ASEAN magnifies this incremental success, suppresses uncomfortable lack of progress or failure, and continuously expands its remit and the size of the organisation. However, the consensus-based decision-making limits its ability to handle difficult issues.

ASEAN's strength lies in its convening power and the continued economic growth of SE Asia. This continues to attract other nations towards the grouping. Challenging times generated by increasing geopolitical competition and China's assertion, however, lie ahead. ASEAN's continued holding out

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<sup>4</sup> Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 Sessions With the Dialogue Partners, <https://asean2021.bn/NewsDetails?id=4dac20d3-afc8-4d67-afbf-e999d52b6d2d>

against Chinese pressure regarding the Code of Conduct indicates that it will not easily surrender. The ability to retain its strategic independence will remain the key to ASEAN's future.

## Meeting of Quad Senior Officials

The Quad continued on its path towards developing meaningful cooperation, with senior officials from the four countries meeting virtually on August 12, 2021. Australia<sup>5</sup>, India<sup>6</sup>, Japan<sup>7</sup> and the US<sup>8</sup> issued different readouts of the discussion, bringing out both convergences and differences in their respective perceptions.

The discussions were intended to continue consultation regarding the vision propounded by foreign ministers at their meeting in February and leaders at their virtual summit in March this year. All statements agreed that cooperation in dealing with COVID-19 and the Quad Vaccine Initiative was discussed. The statements of India and the US extended discussion to economic recovery in the post-pandemic world. There was concurrence on firm support for ASEAN centrality, the ASEAN-led regional architecture and the principles contained in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

The statements also reflected similar, though not identical, strategic visions. Japan highlighted "the fact that the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' is a vision for peace and prosperity of the region, that FOIP's importance in the post-COVID world is increasing and that this vision has spread in the international community, including ASEAN and Europe". It reaffirmed the importance of broadening cooperation with more countries for its further achievement, but did not say anything about inclusivity. India reaffirmed the commitment towards a "free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region based on respect for international law". Australia touched upon the commitment of partners to support an open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific, while the US acknowledged that global security and prosperity depended on the region remaining inclusive, resilient and healthy.

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<sup>5</sup> Australia readout of Quad Senior Officials' Meeting, 12 August 2021, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/quad-senior-officials-meeting-12-august-2021>

<sup>6</sup> India readout of Quad Senior Officials Meeting, August 12, 2021, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34178/Quad\\_Senior\\_Officials\\_Meeting](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34178/Quad_Senior_Officials_Meeting)

<sup>7</sup> Japan – India – Australia – U.S. Consultations, August 12, 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e\\_000318.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press6e_000318.html)

<sup>8</sup> U.S.- Australia – India – Japan consultations (the "Quad") Senior Officials Meeting, August 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-australia-india-japan-consultations-the-quad-senior-officials-meeting/>

There was ambiguity on the discussion regarding regional developments. The Australian statement focused on Myanmar, while that of Japan included North Korea and the East and South China Seas in addition. The US statement added the importance of peace and security in Taiwan. India reflected discussion on "contemporary challenges", without identifying any specific country or region.

Ambiguities were also visible in the areas stated to have been discussed. Australia, India and Japan all said these included maritime security, cyber security, counter-terrorism, quality infrastructure and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Australia and the US also included the aspect of countering disinformation. India alone reflected discussion on resilient supply chains and higher education. The US reflected a discussion on strategic challenges confronting the region, promoting democracy and human rights, strengthening international institutions including the UN and related organisations, and supporting countries vulnerable to coercive actions in the Indo-Pacific. These likely constitute the areas where discussion on the modalities of cooperation is underway, with the common areas indicating where sufficient agreement may have developed to ensure their inclusion in the statement following the in person Summit.

The four partners looked forward to continuing regular consultation at all levels. Japan and the US mentioned holding the second Leaders' Summit later in the year, while India looked forward to the next Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

The list of participants contained in Japan's statement indicates that the meeting was at Additional Secretary level. What they agreed upon is probably reflected in the commonalities; essentially the similarities in vision, cooperation in tackling the pandemic, ASEAN centrality and cooperation in areas such as maritime and cyber security, counter-terrorism, infrastructure and HADR. The present status of cooperation in the areas of vaccine cooperation, critical technology and climate change was no doubt reviewed.

The discussions make it evident that the Quadrilateral Dialogue will continue to progress and build momentum. This will generate concern in China, due more to the potential for regional acceptance of a competing vision which jeopardises China's intent to impose a China-centric and China-determined "community with a shared future for mankind" on Asia, rather than the military component much discussed by the press. Secretary Blinken had made it abundantly clear that the Quad is not a military alliance during his visit to India last month. China's paranoia and penchant for projecting any differing views as adversarial, will, however, result in intensification of its efforts to oppose, denigrate, strengthen itself against the Quad and seek ways to break developing

cooperation. As it stands, the Quad is unlikely to deter China and its thirst for hegemony.

## Exercise Malabar 2021

IN ships Shivalik and Kadmatt arrived at Guam for the first phase of the 25<sup>th</sup> (Silver) edition of Exercise Malabar on August 21, 2021<sup>9</sup>. After replenishing their fuel and provisions, they took part in the exercise from August 26 – 29<sup>10</sup>, along with HMAS Warramunga, Japanese ships Kaga, Murasame and Shiranui, and US ships Barry, Rappahannock and Big Horn. Aircraft taking part included a P-8I from India, P-8A and C-17s from the US and a P-1 from the JMSDF<sup>11</sup>. The Australian Department of Defence specifically noted that this was the second consecutive year that Australia was invited to participate in Exercise Malabar<sup>12</sup>.



Warships from Australian, Indian, Japanese and the US Navies in Formation during Exercise Malabar 2021 in the Philippine Sea, August 26-29, 2021. Source: Australian Department of Defence

<sup>9</sup> Indian Navy Ships Shivalik and Kadmatt Arrive at Guam to Participate in Multilateral Maritime Ex Malabar, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1747992>.

<sup>10</sup> Indian Navy Participates in Exercise Malabar, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1749126>

<sup>11</sup> Australia, India, Japan and U.S. Kick-off Exercise Malabar 2021, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/2747130/australia-india-japan-and-us-kick-off-exercise-malabar-2021/>

<sup>12</sup> Australia back for Indo-Pacific maritime Exercise MALABAR, <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/australia-back-indo-pacific-maritime-exercise-malabar>

The scale of the exercise appeared reduced as compared to preceding years. Absence of the integral fixed wing air element was noticeable, even though both USS Carl Vinson and USS America were exercising with HMS Queen Elizabeth and CSG-21 in the same region days before Malabar 2021 began. Japan's JS Kaga, officially a helicopter destroyer, provided the only flat-top. Also noticeable was the presence of Special Forces from all four navies, indicating a focus on special operations. One JMSDF press release indicated the exercise duration as from August 23 – September 10<sup>13</sup>, with part of the first phase being conducted from August 26 - 29<sup>14</sup>. Intriguingly, both the JMSDF and the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet hinted at a second phase of the exercise to be held later this year. The JMSDF indicated this would be in October<sup>15</sup>, while the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet described this exercise as the first phase of Malabar 2021<sup>16</sup>.

It may be recalled that Tony Abbott, the former Australian Prime Minister, had written that Malabar 2021 would also involve the QE II Task Group<sup>17</sup>. This could still happen if a second phase of the exercise takes place later in the year.

The four navies have substantially built up the requisite level of interoperability required to deal with the lesser Constabulary and Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief needs of the maritime domain. When it comes to state level coercion involving a great power, however, they still have considerable way to go.

## India Related Developments

### Policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi became India's first prime minister to chair an open debate in the UNSC on August 09, 2021. The debate resulted in a Presidential Statement supported by all UNSC members<sup>18</sup>. It has been analysed in a separate Policy Brief<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Malabar 2021, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202108/20210823-1.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Malabar 2021, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202108/20210830.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Australia, India, Japan and U.S. Kick-off Exercise Malabar 2021, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/2747130/australia-india-japan-and-us-kick-off-exercise-malabar-2021/>

<sup>17</sup> Tony Abbott, "India the sensible substitute for belligerent Beijing", <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/india-the-sensible-substitute-for-belligerent-beijing/news-story/2d7940c990e38bb4c4574c38c2c45e79>

<sup>18</sup> Statement by the President of the Security Council, <https://undocs.org/S/PRST/2021/15>

<sup>19</sup> Lalit Kapur, "India Leads Maritime Security Discussion at the UNSC", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/india-leads-maritime-security-discussion-at-the-unscc.html>



Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of the Naval Staff and V Adm Michael J Noonan, Chief of the Australian Navy, signed a "Joint Guidance for the Australia – India Navy to Navy Relationship" on August 18, 2021<sup>20</sup>. Flowing from the 2020 comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between the two countries, the guidance aims at ensuring a common approach to regional and global security challenges. It outlines the shared intent to conduct regular talks, professional exchanges and joint training<sup>21</sup>, developing mutual understanding and cooperation for regional security, collaboration in mutually beneficial activities, the development of interoperability, and cooperation in regional and multilateral fora, including the IONS, WPNS, IORA and Expert Working Groups subordinate to the ADMM Plus framework.



INS Kochi and UAES Al-Dhafra during Exercise Zayed Talwar 2021 off Abu Dhabi, August 07, 2021. Source: Indian Navy

<sup>20</sup> 'Joint Guidance for the Australia – India Navy to Navy Relationship' signed between Indian Navy and Australian Navy, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/%E2%80%98joint-guidance-australia-%E2%80%93-india-navy-navy-relationship%E2%80%99-signed-between-indian-navy-and>

<sup>21</sup> Australia and India Reaffirm Their Commitment to Enhancing Naval Ties, <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/australia-and-india-reaffirm-their-commitment-enhancing-naval-ties>



## Capability

IAC I, the future INS Vikrant, began sea trials during the month. The trials and implications have been covered in a separate section of this Indo-Pacific Monitor.

The keels of the first of 16 ASW Shallow Water Vessels and the third large survey vessel being built for the Indian Navy were laid at the L&T Shipyard, Kattupalli, on August 06<sup>22</sup>. Eight ships of the class will be built by GRSE in collaboration with the L&T Shipyard, while another eight will be built by Cochin Shipyard Limited. The first is to be delivered by October 2022, with all deliveries being completed by 2026. The ships, equipped with hull mounted and towed variable depth low frequency sonars as well as torpedoes, ASW rockets and 12.7 mm guns, will strengthen the Indian Navy's ASW capability.

India's submarine-building plans<sup>23</sup> suffered a jolt as the German partner, ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, withdrew from the P-75I project<sup>24</sup> citing the unacceptably short time to respond to the RfP, the liability clause that holds ThyssenKrupp responsible for boats made in the selected Indian shipyard, and lack of clarity on the extent of technology transfer. This left Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering of South Korea, the only other vendor company which has a fuel cell AIP system that is already tested and installed on submarines, as the only contender in the race. As per MoD procedures, a single vendor situation results in the RfP being scrapped and a new one issued. Unless a quick solution is found, there is very real risk of the P75I project being further delayed; impacting India's already depleted submarine capability.

The Indian Navy sought information to enable procurement / dry lease of 3 – 4 Mine Counter Measure Vessels (MCMV) from a foreign shipyard backed / funded by a foreign government, which would offer sovereign guarantee through a G2G agreement<sup>25</sup>. Anticipated delivery time for the first vessel is a maximum of ten months, followed by a one every four months thereafter. The procurement option, if chosen, would be an outright purchase under the Buy (Global) category of DAP 20. The lease option would be for 10 years, extendable

<sup>22</sup> Keel Laying Ceremony for 1<sup>st</sup> Warship of ASW Shallow Water Craft Project and 3<sup>rd</sup> Warship of Survey Vessel Large Project, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/keel-laying-ceremony-1st-warship-asw-shallow-water-craft-project-and-3rd-warship-survey>

<sup>23</sup> Lalit Kapur, "Whither India's Submarines", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/whither-indias-submarines.html>

<sup>24</sup> Project 75 (I) hits a huge roadblock, one major contender pulls out", <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/project-75-i-hits-a-huge-roadblock-one-major-contender-pulls-out-know-more/2313976/>

<sup>25</sup> Request for Information (RFI) for Procurement / Leasing of Mine Counter Measures Vessels <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/RFI%20for%20MCMV.pdf>

to 15, with an option to acquire the vessel at the end of the lease period on price agreed upon at the beginning of the lease. The minimum residual life of leased vessels was specified as 20 years. The RFI marks yet another attempt to shore up the MCM capability of the Indian Navy. If successful, it would enable redevelopment of operational capability that has withered after the last Indian MCMV was decommissioned in April 2019.



HMS Westminster and INS Tabar Conduct Replenishment at Sea as Part of Exercise Konkan in the English Channel, August 16, 2021. Source: Indian Navy

The Indian Navy sought information to enable procurement of four Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) from registered Indian shipyards<sup>26</sup>. Anticipated delivery time for the first vessel is a maximum of 60 months, followed by one every 12 months thereafter. The procurement is intended under the Buy (Indian-IDD) / Buy (Indian) categories of DAP 20. A similar project had been scrapped last year. The IN operates only one LPD at present (INS Jalashwa, ex USS Trenton), which is over five decades old. LPDs are essential to provide India with the

<sup>26</sup> Request for Information for Procurement of Landing Platform Docks  
<https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/RFI%20for%20Procurement%20of%20four%20LPD%20for%20Uploading.pdf>

capability to land forces on a hostile shore from over the horizon. They have also proved invaluable in HA/DR operations.

## Operations

After representing India and the Indian Navy at Russia's 325<sup>th</sup> Navy Day Parade in St Petersburg last month, INS Tabar commenced its voyage back home. The route took her via Stockholm, Sweden<sup>27</sup>, where she became the first IN ship to visit the city in nearly two decades. Her next port of call was Bergen, Norway<sup>28</sup>. After participating in the maiden maritime partnership exercise between the Indian and Royal Norwegian Navies, she made her way to Portsmouth, England<sup>29</sup>. She celebrated India's Independence Day while in harbour and participated along with HMS Westminster in the annual IN – RN Exercise Konkan, conducted in two parts, the first before entering harbour, the second on leaving<sup>30</sup>. The first phase comprised a maritime interception exercise, while the second included manoeuvres, replenishment at sea, small arms firing, tracking and engagement of surface and air targets, as well as an anti-submarine exercise. The next port of call was Casablanca. On leaving harbour, she participated in a maritime partnership exercise with Moroccan Naval Ship Arrahman<sup>31</sup>, on August 26. On August 29, she participated in India's maiden maritime partnership exercise with the Algerian Navy, with the Chinese built Adhafer Class corvette Ezzadjer<sup>32</sup>.

INS Talwar and IFC-IOR participated in the annual multi-national exercise Cutlass Express, sponsored by the US Central Command and conducted by US Naval Forces Africa<sup>33</sup>. The exercise is intended to improve regional cooperation in support of the Djibouti Code of Conduct, intended to suppress piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Red Sea and East Coast of Africa. It focuses on maritime domain awareness, information sharing between maritime operations centres, maritime interdiction, adherence to the rule of

<sup>27</sup> INS Tabar at Port Stockholm, Sweden, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-tabar-port-stockholm-sweden>

<sup>28</sup> INS Tabar at Bergen, Norway <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-tabar-bergen-norway>

<sup>29</sup> INS Tabar at Portsmouth, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-tabar-portsmouth>

<sup>30</sup> Indian Navy's Visit to UK Ends With 'Jam-packed' Workout in the Channel, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/august/18/20210818-westminster-konkan>

<sup>31</sup> INS Tabar exercises with Moroccan Navy, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-tabar-exercises-moroccan-navy>

<sup>32</sup> Indian Navy's Maiden Exercise with the Algerian Navy, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy%E2%80%99s-maiden-exercise-algerian-navy>

<sup>33</sup> INS Talwar Conducts Training Onboard for Kenya Navy Personnel, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-talwar-conducts-training-onboard-kenya-navy-personnel>

law, and interdiction operations against suspected vessels by trained boarding teams. INS Talwar provided training lectures and demonstrations intended to acquaint Kenyan Navy trainees with aspects of ship borne operations. On completion, INS Talwar exercised with Kenya Navy Ship Shujaa<sup>34</sup>.

An Indian Naval Task Group comprising IN ships Ranvijay, Shivalik, Kadmatt and Kora began a two-month overseas deployment covering South East Asia, the South China Sea and the Western Pacific<sup>35</sup>. Shivalik and Kadmatt visited Muara, Brunei, from August 09 – 11, using the opportunity to interact professionally with the Royal Brunei Navy, culminating in a maritime partnership exercise at sea on August 12<sup>36</sup>. Ranvijay and Kora visited Cam Ranh commencing August 15, celebrating India's 75<sup>th</sup> Independence Day in Vietnam, and exercised with VPNS Ly Thai To on leaving harbour<sup>37</sup>. They then carried out a Maritime Partnership Exercise with BRP Antonio Luna of the Philippine Navy on August 23<sup>38</sup>. The Eastern Fleet ships are scheduled to exercise with Republic of Singapore Navy (SIMBEX), the Indonesian Navy (Ex SAMUDRA SHAKTI) and the Royal Australian Navy (AUSINDEX), and take part in Exercise Malabar – 2021 during their deployment.

Even as India's Eastern Fleet carried out its outreach in South East Asia, ships from the Western Fleet did the same in the Persian Gulf. On August 07, INS Kochi, mission deployed to the region, participated in Exercise Zayed Talwar 2021 with UAE Navy ship Al-Dhafra<sup>39</sup>. Exercises included over the horizon targeting, search and rescue and simulated missile engagement drills. Thereafter, she proceeded to Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia, where she participated in the maiden bilateral exercise Al-Mohed Al-Hindi, fulfilling the commitment of the 2019 Riyadh Summit<sup>40</sup> and beginning the chapter on enhanced defence

<sup>34</sup> INS Talwar Exercises With a Kenyan Naval Ship, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-talwar-exercises-kenyan-naval-ship>

<sup>35</sup> Eastern Fleet Ships on Overseas Operational Deployment, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/eastern-fleet-ships-overseas-operational-deployment>

<sup>36</sup> Indian Naval Ships Shivalik and Kadmatt at Brunei to Enhance Bilateral ties, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-naval-ships-shivalik-and-kadmatt-brunei-enhance-bilateral-ties>

<sup>37</sup> Indian Navy Undertakes Bilateral Maritime Exercise With Vietnam People's Navy, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-undertakes-bilateral-maritime-exercise-vietnam-people%E2%80%99s-navy>

<sup>38</sup> Maritime Partnership Exercise Between Indian Navy and the Philippine Navy, 23 August 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1748328>

<sup>39</sup> Indian Navy – United Arab Emirates Navy Bilateral Exercise "Zayed Talwar 2021", <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-united-arab-emirates-navy-bilateral-exercise-zayed-talwar-2021>

<sup>40</sup> Joint Statement on Visit of Prime Minister of India to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31982/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_India\\_to\\_the\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_Saudi\\_Arabia](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31982/Joint_Statement_on_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_the_Kingdom_of_Saudi_Arabia)



cooperation between the two countries. In parallel, INS Trikhand conducted the second Exercise Zair-Al-Bahr with the Qatar Emiri Naval Force (QENF), comprising a three day harbour phase and a two day sea phase with QENF missile boats and Rafale aircraft of the Qatar Emiri Air Force<sup>41</sup>. Rounding off the deployment in the Gulf, INS Kochi visited Bahrain and exercised with the Royal Bahrain Navy<sup>42</sup>. The Western Fleet Commander called on the Prime Minister and Crown Prince of Bahrain, the Chief of the Royal Bahrain Naval Force and the Commander of the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), Fifth Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces.

## Miscellaneous

The Director General of the Indian Coast Guard, Mr K Natarajan, was elected as the next Executive Director of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), receiving the support of 14 of the 21 member countries<sup>43</sup>. The Chinese candidate received four votes, while the Filipino candidate received three. Mr Natarajan will take charge in 2022. The election signifies increasing acknowledgement of India's role as a New Security Provider in the Indian Ocean.

INS Airavat continued with Mission SAGAR, delivering 10 Liquid Medical Oxygen (LMO) containers to Jakarta on August 24<sup>44</sup>. In the next stage of her mission, she delivered five LMO containers and 300 oxygen concentrators to Ho Chi Minh City, in Vietnam, on August 30<sup>45</sup>. She is scheduled to deliver COVID-19 relief supplies to other South East Asian countries later.

## The Resurrection of INS Vikrant

India acquired the partly built HMS Hercules in 1957. Four years later, fitting out of the ship was completed and she came to life as INS Vikrant on April 04,

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<sup>41</sup> Exercise Zair-Al-Bahr conducted between Indian Navy and Qatar Navy, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/exercise-zair-al-bahr-conducted-between-indian-navy-and-qatar-navy>

<sup>42</sup> Indian Navy and Royal Bahrain Navy Exercise Set to Begin, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-and-royal-bahrain-navy-exercise-set-begin>

<sup>43</sup> Election of Mr. K. Natarajan as next Executive Director of ReCAAP, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34138/Election\\_of\\_Mr\\_K\\_Natarajan\\_as\\_next\\_Executive\\_Director\\_of\\_ReCAAP](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34138/Election_of_Mr_K_Natarajan_as_next_Executive_Director_of_ReCAAP)

<sup>44</sup> Mission SAGAR – Indian Naval Ship Airavat Arrives at Jakarta, Indonesia to Deliver Medical Supplies, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1748478>

<sup>45</sup> INS Airavat Arrives at Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with COVID Relief Supplies, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1750478>

1961. The name, signifying power, courage and victory, suited India's most powerful ship for the more than three decades she served. The ship was decommissioned in 1997. In keeping with naval tradition, the process of resurrecting her name began in 2003 with the sanction of Project 71. It took a major step forward when IAC 1 (the future INS Vikrant) sailed for her maiden sea trials from August 04-08, 2021<sup>46</sup>.



IAC 1 (The Future INS Vikrant) Returns to Kochi on Completion of her Maiden Sea Trial, August 09, 2021. Source: Indian Navy

Unlike the old INS Vikrant, this one is designed and built indigenously. She is by far the most complex ship-building project ever undertaken in India. The ship has used over 20,000 tons of indigenously manufactured special grade steel, has more than 2300 compartments and 2300 Km of cabling, and accommodates a crew of more than 1700 personnel, including gender sensitive accommodation for lady officers. When fully operational, she will operate a mix of Mig-29K fighters, Ka-31 AEW and Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk helicopters. The LCA (Navy) Tejas will also form part of the mix once its development is completed. Her defensive armament includes two 32-cell Barak-8 SAM launchers, 4 Otobreda 76 mm cannon, and 4 AK-630 CIWS. Her top speed of 28 knots and range of over 7,500 nautical miles will enable her to show India's maritime power throughout the Indian Ocean, demonstrating the nation's action to fulfil the SAGAR commitment of working to "ensure a safe,

<sup>46</sup> "Commencement of Sea Trials of Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC (P71)) 'Vikrant'", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1742282>



secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all the shores of prosperity"<sup>47</sup>. Delivery of the ship is targeted to coincide with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence next August, after having completed both the contractor's and user sea trials.

Only eight other countries: China, France, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, UK and the US, have designed and built aircraft carriers before this. That India has joined this group speaks of the strides in the nation's ship construction capability. It speaks of advancement of the nation's maritime vision, as well as the vision of Atmanirbharta, with over 75% of the ship's content reported to be indigenous. The pride in this achievement is evident from the fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi saw fit to include it in his Independence Day speech to the nation<sup>48</sup>. This should have been a stepping stone to building more ships of the type. However, India's future aircraft carrier plans continue to be hamstrung by controversy born out of deleterious competition for budget share and lack of strategic clarity. Three broad aspects dominate this controversy: the strategic purpose of aircraft carriers, their survivability, and their cost.

The first two have been examined by this author separately<sup>49</sup>. Questions are repeatedly put forth about how maritime power will help India deal with the territorial challenges that it faces from the North and West; the ability of Air Force assets to undertake the same strike tasks that the Carrier Air Wing does; and the effectiveness of aircraft carriers in India's context, considering that INS Vikrant saw combat use only once in its life of over three decades, in 1971<sup>50</sup>.

The first stems from the land-centric, third-world outlook of India's military thinkers. It considers territorial challenges India faces to be 'existential and tangible', while those at sea are described as 'transitory and inconsequential'. How 'existential' the challenges of cross-border terrorism or China's attempt to assert its ownership of disputed territory are is a matter of opinion and can be the subject of a separate debate. Navies are not intended to deal with territorial challenges from continental neighbours – that is the function of land power,

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<sup>47</sup> Extracted from "Text of PM's Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda", 12 March 2015, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=116881>

<sup>48</sup> "PM's Address from the Red Fort on 75<sup>th</sup> Independence Day", [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news\\_updates/pms-address-from-the-red-fort-on-75th-independence-day/?comment=disable](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-address-from-the-red-fort-on-75th-independence-day/?comment=disable)

<sup>49</sup> Lalit Kapur, "Operationalising SAGAR: Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Execution", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/operationalising-sagar-bridging-the-gap-between-policy-and-execution.html>

<sup>50</sup> Bhartendu Kumar Singh, "How Many Aircraft Carriers Does India Need?", <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/how-many-aircraft-carriers-does-india-need/>

with the Army being the nation's tool of the last resort. By constantly seeking to know how naval assets can help in addressing coercive territorial challenges (the short answer is that they can't), they highlight a belief that the only challenges of consequences are territorial and limitations in understanding the impact of challenges in the maritime domain.

The reality is that failure to adequately deter coercion at sea threatens the nation with constriction of its economic lifelines as well as international standing. This in turn spells an end to India's aspirations: the ability to protect its own territory will not make India a consequential power. That can come only from developing the ability to extend protection to others, as was recognised by the Prime Minister's SAGAR vision<sup>51</sup>.

The strike argument distracts focus from the much more pressing need for air defence. The reality is that no force operating at sea can hope to effectively counter enemy air power without integral air, a fact that all blue-water navies have recognised. Land-based air power can certainly execute strike tasks at long ranges (though how effective they will be is called into question by the failure of US aviation to prevent the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan). It cannot possibly react in time to air defence needs, which are an inescapable necessity for both land and sea power today.

The third 'cost' argument loses sight of the fact that the effectiveness of a military force is tested primarily by its success in deterring potential adversaries. It is only when deterrence fails that the effectiveness is tested in operational usage. In the post-independence period, when great powers were withdrawing from Asia, India's only challenges were limited ones. Both Pakistan and China limited their targets to disputed territory. The coming era, where geopolitical competition has returned to the world, will play out primarily in Asia, including the Indian Ocean. It is one in which India has spelt out its intention of being a meaningful player. It would be short-sighted indeed to focus only on past experience in determining the future shape of forces required for defence of the nation. Aspiring strategic commentators must comprehend that non-usage of a force signifies effective deterrence and not be guided only by what can be easily measured – the number of days employed in conflict, in determining the utility of platforms.

Much is made of the fact that Project 71 had an initial sanctioned cost of Rs 3216 crores in 2003, which escalated to over Rs 20,000 crores now. The escalation works out to an annual rate of less than 11%. If domestic inflation and the

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

substantial depreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis the US dollar are factored in, as is the fact that the Visakhapatnam class destroyer scheduled to commission at the end of this year will cost nearly Rs 9000 crores, the cost of Project 71 cannot be considered excessive. Warships are expensive.

Moving up the value chain of the eco system required to build a credible navy requires substitution of the import content of a complex platform, designed to fight in the alien environment of the seas. The easiest substitution is labour, from the unskilled variety required for some tasks, to the high skilled variety. This has by and large been achieved. Next in order of complexity comes substitution of components, sub-assemblies, assemblies, sub-systems and systems involved with the 'float' requirement of a warship, followed by substitution of systems involved with the 'move' requirement. The substitution of weapons, sensors and electronics requires the highest levels of complexity, as does integration of the whole to make a cohesive fighting platform. These remain a work in progress. But true value lies even beyond, in the design and development of new concepts, which can improve or transform the capabilities of present-day fighting ships. It is this capability India must nurture. This necessitates prioritising sanction of the IAC II, which is still awaited. Continued delay risks loss of hard won experience and expertise in aircraft carrier design, apart from deprivation of vital maritime capability required to attain India's maritime vision. India's ship construction has no doubt come far, but still has a long way to go.

## Indonesia – US Strategic Dialogue

Nearly six years after Presidents Joko Widodo and Barack Obama committed to forging a partnership to expand cooperation on shared strategic interests and established an annual strategic dialogue at the foreign minister level<sup>52</sup>, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi met in the first Indonesia – US Strategic Dialogue on August 3, 2021.

The statements issued by the two sides reflected differing views on what was discussed. Both spoke of pandemic cooperation and the support provided by the US, including 8 million vaccine doses, 1000 ventilators and financial support (an additional US \$ 30 million as stated by Indonesia, a total of \$ 65 million as stated by the US). Both also mentioned cooperation during Indonesia's forthcoming G 20 presidency, as well as aspects related to

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<sup>52</sup> Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Indonesia, October 26, 2015, <https://usindo.org/assets/up/2017/07/Strategic-Partnership-Joint-Statement.pdf>

Afghanistan and Myanmar. The Indonesian readout<sup>53</sup> in addition spoke of scope for increased US investment in Indonesia and the importance of continuing discussion on the bilateral Limited Trade Agreement; Indonesia's expectation that it would meet its emission reduction commitments by 2030; and the expectation that the US and developed countries would fulfil their commitments, including the provision of a Climate Fund to support adaptation programmes. The US readout<sup>54</sup> alone stressed aspects of fundamental belief in democracy, economic growth driven by innovation and a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific, shared views on maritime security and peaceful resolution of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and continuing collaboration in cybersecurity and preventing cybercrime.



US Secretary of State Antony J Blinken with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi in Washington DC, August 03, 2021. Source: Secretary Antony Blinken/Twitter

The Indonesia – US strategic partnership agreement of October 2015<sup>55</sup> had envisaged cooperation in seven broad areas: forging a strategic partnership to expand cooperation on shared strategic interests; maritime cooperation (an

<sup>53</sup> "Indonesia – USA Holds First Strategic Dialogue", 04 August 2021, <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/id/read/2768/berita/indonesia-as-lakukan-dialog-strategis-pertama>

<sup>54</sup> Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, August 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-meeting-with-indonesian-foreign-minister-retno-marsudi/>

<sup>55</sup> Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Indonesia, October 26, 2015, Op Cit.

MoU on maritime cooperation was signed); defence cooperation (a joint statement on comprehensive and wide ranging defence cooperation was released); economic growth and development including a \$ 600 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact to advance energy and greenhouse gas reduction and deliver essential public services; energy cooperation; increased cooperation on global and regional issues; and strengthening people to people contacts. That there was little progress thereafter speaks of the cavalier attitude of the succeeding administration, including its neglect of Indonesia and ASEAN. The US regional approach is changing, as shown by the July visit of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines; and Secretary Blinken's engagement with ASEAN foreign ministers and the visit of Vice President Kamala Harris to Singapore and Vietnam during the current month.

Indonesia's character (it is the world's third largest democracy, with the world's largest Muslim population and a moderate, fiercely independent outlook), location (straddling the straits connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans), economic heft (it is a trillion dollar economy) and standing in the critical South East Asian region (it is the largest economy in the region and the driving force behind ASEAN) make it a key player in the Indo-Pacific great game. Both Indonesia and the US need each other, the former to ensure its sovereignty and leadership of ASEAN in the backdrop of China's quest for regional dominance, and the latter because of Indonesia's location and overall heft. This mutual need underlies resuscitation of the bilateral strategic dialogue. The fact that Indonesia will take over as ASEAN's country coordinator for the US next year could be a positive, to be exploited.

There are, however, mutual differences. As is evident from the Indonesian statement, Marsudi's focus was economic revival and US investment. The US focus, on the other hand, was obtaining Indonesia's cooperation in the ongoing geo-political competition and support for preservation of the rules-based order. There were some gestures by way of pandemic cooperation including financial assistance, but broader Indonesia – US bonhomie does not yet appear to be on the cards. China, another of Indonesia's strategic partners, will be concerned about the fact that the first strategic dialogue took place at all, but reassured by the fact that it appeared to have a limited agenda, touching only on the economic development and global and regional cooperation pillars of the 2015 Indonesia-US strategic partnership agreement. It will be confident of its ability to outflank the US on these two pillars.

Indonesia will continue balancing between China, India and the US, knowing its own criticality to the Indo-Pacific and vulnerability to Chinese coercion.



The US-Indonesia relationship will evolve slowly. For India, seeking to develop its own strategic partnership with Indonesia, the way ahead would appear to lie in focussing on strategic engagement and dialogue, pandemic, economic, regional cooperation and people-to-people/cultural pillars, while moving ahead on hard security cooperation aspects at a pace comfortable for Indonesia.

## The Visit by Commander INDO-PACOM

Even as Indian Naval ships and aircraft were in Guam for Exercise Malabar, Admiral John C Aquilino, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, made his first visit to India from August 24-26, 2021. The stated purpose was "to meet senior government and defense officials to further strengthen our Major Defense Partnership with India"<sup>56</sup>. His engagements included meetings with the Defence Secretary, Dr. Ajay Kumar; General Bipin Rawat, the Chief of Defence Staff; General MM Naravane, Chief of Army Staff; Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, Chief of Air Staff; Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of Naval Staff; and Minister of External Affairs, Dr. S. Jaishankar<sup>57</sup>. Issues discussed related to peace and security and bilateral defence cooperation<sup>58</sup>.



Admiral John C. Aquilino, Commander US Indo-Pacific Command, being received by General MM Naravane, PVSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, ADC at South Block on August 25, 2021. Source: US Embassy

<sup>56</sup> "U.S. INDOPACOM Commander Visits India", <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2745476/us-indopacom-commander-visits-india/>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command calls on Chief of Defence Staff, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1748917>



The Admiral's programme also included a public discussion with General Bipin Rawat<sup>59</sup>. Admiral Davidson spoke of having discussed India's security both to West and East with the CDS. The priority in Afghanistan was ensuring all citizens were safely extracted, for which there was close coordination between India and CENTCOM. General Rawat said that developments in Afghanistan had been anticipated; only the timelines had changed. He expressed confidence in being able to deal with any terrorist activity emanating from Afghanistan and flowing into India and sought support from Quad nations on identifying terrorists and getting intelligence inputs to fight them.

On the challenges facing the Indo-Pacific, Adm. Aquilino identified maritime security of the sea lanes, necessary to keep the global economy humming, as well as attacks on the international rules-based order that allows freedom of navigation, as the biggest challenge. Others included economic coercion, corruption, challenges to sovereignty, the events in Hong Kong and pressures on Taiwan. He identified partnerships and alliances between like-minded nations as the key to overcoming these challenges. General Rawat agreed, saying that India wanted complete neutrality on the seas and oceans and saying there was need for the Quad, amongst others, to think about the action to be taken when this neutrality was challenged.

The Admiral said he had no concerns about like-minded nations operating together; they did it all the time. Having the same equipment made it easier. The CDS highlighted the need to look at the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one seamless entity, with the Quad as a partnership to ensure freedom of navigation and disaster mitigation. He also sought frequent engagement between partners and agreed that commonality of equipment was important.

On China's aircraft carrier programme, the CDS acknowledged that India had to counter the threat of a Chinese carrier operating in the Indian Ocean. He said that the Navy had been given a fillip and its development was moving in the right direction. On other nations working with the Quad, Adm. Aquilino said that other nations could also plug in so long as the Quad leaders concurred. The CDS opined that the charter of the Quad had been very well spelt out and further expansion of this charter was contingent on discussion between the leaders.

Both speakers expressed concern about the grey zone challenges posed, among others, by China's maritime militia and cyber activities. It was important to expose this type of behaviour. They welcomed the recognition of

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<sup>59</sup> The India – U.S. Partnership: Securing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-us-partnership-securing-21st-century-2/>

European nations of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and said they welcomed the opportunity to work with them.

Admiral Aquilino's visit to India comes just over three months after he assumed charge of the Indo-Pacific Command on April 30, 2021. His physical visits to other countries as the Commander include Japan and South Korea in early June 2021, as well as to The Philippines en route to India. That these visits were undertaken despite the pandemic speaks of the importance ascribed to establishing personal rapport with Indian counterparts while taking forward cooperation with them.

The congruence in views expressed by the Admiral and the CDS on the Indo-Pacific is striking. Of particular note is the acknowledgement by both that a Chinese aircraft carrier task group can be expected to roam the Indian Ocean in the near future and the need for India to be able to balance it. In this context, the CDS' observation about the Navy having been given a fillip is noteworthy. The next budget will reveal whether this reflects reality, or was merely a statement for public consumption.

## **The US Vice President's Visit to Singapore and Vietnam**

Kamala Harris, the US Vice President, visited Singapore and Vietnam from August 22 – 26, 2021. In Singapore, she met President Halima Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong, participated in a joint news conference, visited Changi Naval Base and spoke to sailors on board USNS Tulsa (an Independence class Littoral Combat Ship), delivered a speech outlining the Biden Administration's vision for the Indo-Pacific, and met business leaders to discuss supply chain issues. In Vietnam, she met President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Prime Minister Pham Vihn Chinh and other leaders.

In Singapore, the two countries committed to undertaking bilateral consultations so as to launch a climate partnership and to expanding efforts to promote smart, sustainable cities and expand their Third Country Training Programme (TCTP) to include new courses on climate change and environmental sustainability. They finalised three agreements to expand cybersecurity cooperation with respect to the financial sector, military-to-military engagement and regional capacity-building. They agreed to launch new partnerships to enhance growth, innovation and resilient supply chains. They committed to working together to fight COVID-19 and prepare for the next pandemic. On the security front, they reiterated their commitment to upholding regional peace, security and stability. They also agreed on the creation of a safe and transparent environment to facilitate space exploration,

science and commercial activities for all humanity. They also agreed to strengthen ties in the field of higher education<sup>60</sup>.



US Vice President Kamala Harris and Vietnam's President Nguyen Xuan Phuc before commencement of their meeting at Hanoi, August 25, 2021. Source: The Japan Times

Speaking on the Indo-Pacific Region on August 24, VP Harris explained the Biden Administration's position on withdrawal from Afghanistan. Turning to the Indo-Pacific, she said that in a more interconnected and interdependent world, nations must be willing to take on challenges and create opportunities together. It was for this reason that the Indo-Pacific was a top priority for the US. The vision was one of peace and stability, freedom on the seas, unimpeded commerce, advancing human rights, a commitment to the international rules-based order and the recognition that common interests are not zero-sum. She highlighted Beijing's continuing coercion, intimidation and unlawful claims to the "vast majority of the South China Sea". Stating that the US stood by allies and partners in the face of these threats, she said that the US engagement was not against any one country, nor was it designed to make anyone choose between countries. It was about advancing an optimistic vision for partnership, and the economic vision was a critical part. She announced that

<sup>60</sup> Fact Sheet: Strengthening the US – Singapore Strategic Partnership, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/23/fact-sheet-strengthening-the-u-s-singapore-strategic-partnership/>

the US was offering to host APEC in 2023. She concluded her speech by expressing deep alarm at the military coup in Burma. She condemned the campaign of violent repression and said that the US was committed to supporting the people as they returned their national to the path of democracy<sup>61</sup>.

In Vietnam, she announced the donation of an additional one million doses of the Pfizer vaccine to Vietnam, support for vaccine distribution and the launch of South East Asia Regional Office of the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Hanoi. USAID signed an MOU with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry to boost Vietnam's competitiveness, expand market opportunities for US companies and strengthen Vietnam's environmental policy. A \$ 36 million project to transition Vietnam to a clean, secure and market-driven energy system was launched. The project will, inter alia, help Vietnam to scale up the adoption of electric motorbikes and allow business to procure electricity directly from private firms producing renewable energy. A Mekong Coastal Habitat Conservation project was launched. She highlighted the centrality of human rights in US foreign policy and emphasised the critical role of civil society as a driver of sustainable development and inclusive prosperity. Vietnam war legacy issues were addressed by the US committing an additional \$ 17.5 million to survey and clear unexploded ordnance as well as support for persons with disabilities. The two countries committed to a "high level of security cooperation", including visits by US ships and aircraft carriers, possible provision of a third US Coast Guard high-endurance cutter to bolster Vietnam's capacity to contribute to maritime security in the South China Sea, and expanding humanitarian and disaster response coordination. She announced the launch of Peace Corps Vietnam to enable young Americans to serve in Vietnam, with the initial batch of US volunteers arriving in 2022. A lease agreement for the new US Embassy Compound in Hanoi was signed in her presence. She also witnessed the USAID announcement of a partnership for higher education reform, which will provide opportunities for nearly 150,000 Vietnamese students in the next five years<sup>62</sup>.

The VP's arrival in Hanoi was delayed by three hours due to reports that someone in Hanoi may have been targeted by the Havana Syndrome<sup>63</sup>. This is

<sup>61</sup> Remarks by Vice President Harris on the Indo-Pacific Region, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/24/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-on-the-indo-pacific-region/>

<sup>62</sup> Fact Sheet: Strengthening the US – Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/25/fact-sheet-strengthening-the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-partnership/>

<sup>63</sup> US VP Harris forges on with Vietnam trip despite mystery 'health incident', <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/eve-harris-trip-vietnam-tells-china-it-does-not-pick-sides-2021-08-24/>

brain trauma suspected to be caused by an unknown ultrasound or microwave weapon, which results in dizziness, nausea, migraines, hearing loss and memory lapses. The name arises because it was first experienced by US and Canadian diplomats in Havana in late 2016; President Trump had accused Cuba of carrying out attacks causing these symptoms. Similar incidents have subsequently been reported at the US Consulate in Guangzhou. The delay provided time for Xiong Bo, China's Ambassador in Hanoi, to have an unannounced meeting with Vietnam's Prime Minister, during which he pledged the donation of two million doses of the COVID-19 to Vietnam and obtained the assurance that Vietnam will not align with one country against another<sup>64</sup>.

A media report indicates that the VP had sought upgrading of the US-Vietnam partnership from 'Comprehensive' to 'Strategic'<sup>65</sup>. She is also reported to have called for finding "ways to pressure and raise the pressure, frankly, on Beijing to abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and to challenge its bullying and excessive maritime claims" during her meeting with Vietnam's President<sup>66</sup>. Hanoi, however, does not appear to have been impressed.

While there does appear to be a concerted thrust by the Biden Administration to reach out to South East Asia, particularly Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, the region will not easily forget the decades of US neglect. The withdrawal from Afghanistan will only cement apprehensions regarding US reliability as an ally or partner. China's Global Times, in fact, pointed out the incongruity of Harris talking up the China threat in the land that witnessed the Saigon Moment in 1975, even as the US was experiencing the debacle of its withdrawal from Afghanistan<sup>67</sup>. The State of South East Asia Survey Report 2021 had indicated stronger levels of support in ASEAN for aligning with the US if forced to make a choice, consequent upon the advent of the Biden Administration<sup>68</sup>. These higher levels of support are unlikely to be reflected in the next survey. The continued US reluctance to join the CPTPP, even as the RCEP moves the region towards economic integration, remains a persisting handicap. Much more than symbolism and verbal assurances will be needed

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> US VP Harris seeks strategic upgrade to Vietnam ties, calls for pressure against Beijing in South China Sea, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3146356/us-vp-harris-seeks-strategic-upgrade-vietnam-ties-calls-pressure>

<sup>66</sup> US VP Kamala Harris makes historic visit to Vietnam, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-vp-kamala-harris-makes-historic-visit-to-vietnam/a-58975607>

<sup>67</sup> Harris' Vietnam visit 'wrong time wrong target, negative effect', <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232468.shtml>

<sup>68</sup> ISEAS The State of Southeast Asia: 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>



to convince the region that the US can provide effective political or strategic leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

## Other Indo-Pacific Developments

The US Central Command report of its investigation into the alleged Iranian UAV attack on MT Mercer Street said that the tanker was targeted by two unsuccessful UAV attacks on the evening of July 29<sup>69</sup>. Both UAVs impacted the sea near the vessel and fragments were retrieved by the crew. A third attack took place on the morning of July 30, wherein a UAV loaded with military grade explosive blew a hole of approximately six feet diameter on the top of the pilot house, extensively damaged the interior and killed the Romanian Master and a UK national who was part of the security detail. Pieces of this third UAV were recovered, and these were identical to samples collected from the earlier two attacks. The distance from Iran's coast to the vessel's location was within one-way range of Iran's UAVs. The evidence was shared with Israeli and UK explosive experts. G7 Foreign Ministers joined hands in condemning the attack, calling for vessels to be allowed to navigate freely in accordance with international law, stating they would do their utmost to protect all shipping from such irresponsible and violent acts, and calling on Iran to stop activities inconsistent with UNSC resolutions<sup>70</sup>.

USS Monterey became the first US warship to visit Egypt's new Berenice Naval Base on August 12. This Red Sea base officially opened in January 2020<sup>71</sup>. The US State Department notified the sale to India of one Harpoon Joint Common Test Set and one Harpoon Intermediate Level maintenance station, along with spares, test equipment, documentation and training valued at approximately \$ 82 million<sup>72</sup>. The equipment will provide India with missile maintenance capabilities to ensure maximum missile availability. USS Kidd and the USCG Cutter Munro conducted a routine transit of the Taiwan Strait on August 27,

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<sup>69</sup> US Central Command Statement on the Investigation into the Attack on the Motor Tanker Mercer Street, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2722418/us-central-command-statement-on-the-investigation-into-the-attack-on-the-motor/>

<sup>70</sup> G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the MV Mercer Street Attack, <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-mv-mercerc-street-attack/>

<sup>71</sup> First Visit by US Warship to Egypt's Berenice Naval Base, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2730984/first-visit-by-us-warship-to-egypts-berenice-naval-base/>

<sup>72</sup> India – Harpoon Joint Common Test Set (JCTS), <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/india-harpoon-joint-common-test-set-jcts>



demonstrating the US resolve to fly, sail and operate anywhere<sup>73</sup>, including in what China claims is part of its EEZ.



USS Carl Vinson, USS America and HMS Queen Elizabeth along with their escorts participate in Exercise Noble Union in the Philippine Sea, August 24, 2021. Source: Royal Navy

After exercising with ships of the Thai, Malaysian, Singapore and Brunei navies<sup>74</sup>, CSG 21 transited through the Malacca Straits and entered the South China Sea. A tweet from the Commander of CSG-21 said that the Group was close to the resting place of HM ships Prince of Wales and Repulse, off Kuantan, on the night of July 26/27<sup>75</sup>. The Chinese aircraft carrier Shandong was reported to be at sea with her own task group less than 600 nm North of CSG 21 at the time; a three ship US Surface Action Group was also reported in the same region<sup>76</sup>. On August 1, the Strike Group passed through the Luzon Strait and into the Philippine Sea<sup>77</sup>, arriving at Guam's Apra Harbour on August 06<sup>78</sup>. A

<sup>73</sup> US Navy, Coast Guard Transit Taiwan Strait, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/2753458/us-navy-coast-guard-transit-taiwan-strait/>

<sup>74</sup> Royal Navy Task Group Sails With Three Navies Near Strait of Malacca, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/august/05/210805-csg-trains-with-navies>

<sup>75</sup> <https://twitter.com/smrmoorhouse/status/1419911385799032834>

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Newdick, British and Chinese Aircraft Carriers Both Underway in the Tense South China Sea, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/41752/british-and-chinese-aircraft-carriers-both-underway-in-the-tense-south-china-sea>

<sup>77</sup> <https://twitter.com/smrmoorhouse/status/1421809645379735563>

<sup>78</sup> <https://twitter.com/smrmoorhouse/status/1423470156647305216>

two week long operational integration with US INDO-PACOM units followed<sup>79</sup>, culminating with a fire power demonstration along with ships from the US Expeditionary Strike Group 7<sup>80</sup>. CSG-21 then joined ships from the JMSDF and USN for Exercise Noble Union<sup>81</sup>, a part of the Large Scale Global Exercise conducted by the USN<sup>82</sup>. This was followed by the first phase of Japan – UK – US – Netherlands Exercise Pacific Crown 21-1 off Okinawa<sup>83</sup>.

The US Navy conducted a Large Scale Global Exercise 2021 (LSE 2021), involving three naval component commands (Fleet Forces Command, US Pacific Fleet and US Naval Forces Europe), five numbered fleets and spanning 17 time zones from August 03-15, 2021<sup>84</sup>. The exercise was intended to test the ability of fleet commanders “to deliver coordinated effects, from all directions, any time or all the time”. The USS Carl Vinson Strike Group departed San Diego on August 02, to begin an operational deployment in support of USN global maritime security operations<sup>85</sup>. The ship completed a 17-month refit last year, during which she was retrofitted to enable operation of F-35C Lightning II and CMV-22B Osprey aircraft. Other ships forming part of the strike group include the cruiser USS Lake Champlain, and destroyers Chafee, Dewey, Higgins, Michael Murphy, O’Kane and Stockdale. The strike group joined LSE 2021 from August 08<sup>86</sup>.

About 1000 personnel from the US Army and 850 from the Indonesian Army participated in Exercise Garuda Shield 2021 from August 04 – 14<sup>87</sup>. The exercise includes expert academic exchanges and professional development workshops that focus on training in combat against conventional,

<sup>79</sup> <https://twitter.com/smrmoorhouse/status/1426820756122398720>

<sup>80</sup> At my signal, unleash hell: Royal Navy task group’s firepower unleashed on Pacific ranges in a two-day blitz, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/august/20/210820-carrier-strike-live-firing>

<sup>81</sup> <https://twitter.com/smrmoorhouse/status/1430161901678329856>

<sup>82</sup> UK, Netherlands, United States and Japan complete intensive joint exercise in the Pacific, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/august/25/210825-pacific-exercises-for-carrier-strike-group>

<sup>83</sup> Japan – UK – US – Netherlands Multilateral Exercise Pacific Crown 21-1, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202108/20210827-2.pdf>

<sup>84</sup> US Navy Kicks Off Large-Scale Exercise 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/2717515/us-navy-kicks-off-large-scale-exercise-2021/>

<sup>85</sup> Carl Vinson Strike Group Departs on Deployment, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2718455/carl-vinson-carrier-strike-group-departs-on-deployment/>

<sup>86</sup> Carl Vinson Strike Group Joins Large-Scale exercise 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2726400/carl-vinson-carrier-strike-group-joins-large-scale-exercise-2021/>

<sup>87</sup> US and Indonesia Strengthen Partnership with Garuda Shield Military Exercise, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2716627/us-and-indonesia-strengthen-partnership-with-garuda-shield-2021-military-exerci/>

unconventional and hybrid threats, as well as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.

The 40<sup>th</sup> edition of Exercise Cobra Gold, among the world's longest running international exercises, took place in Thailand from August 3 – 13, 2021. It involved participants from seven nations: the US, Thailand, South Korea, Malaysia, Japan Indonesia and Singapore, as well as observers from the UN, ASEAN, Red Cross and Red Crescent, working together on joint military training across a range of military activities, taking part in a virtual tabletop disaster relief exercise and a civic action programme that resulted in construction of a new multipurpose facility at a school in Sa Kaeo Province. Participants abided by all Thai COVID mitigation requirements, including a mandatory 15-day quarantine period and COVID-testing throughout<sup>88</sup>.

Maritime forces from 21 partner nations including the four Quad partners, seven ASEAN nations (other than Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar), Bangladesh, Canada, France, Germany, the Maldives, New Zealand, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and the United Kingdom came together for the 20<sup>th</sup> iteration of Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) in Singapore as well as virtually, commencing August 10<sup>89</sup>. The exercise, centred on the International Fusion Centre in Singapore, is designed to enhance cooperation among Southeast Asian countries to address crises, contingencies and illegal activities in the maritime domain. International participants included the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, the EU's CRIMARIO and the ICRC.

Australia deployed a P-8A Poseidon to operate from Kadena airbase in Japan, to conduct monitoring and surveillance against illicit maritime activities, including ship-to-ship transfers with North Korean flagged vessels in violation of UNSC resolutions (Operation ARGOS) for the third time this year<sup>90</sup>. Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and the US are the other contributors towards this operation. Japan welcomed the deployment<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> US, Royal Thai Armed Forces Complete 40<sup>th</sup> Exercise Cobra Gold, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2744284/us-royal-thai-armed-forces-complete-40th-exercise-cobra-gold/>

<sup>89</sup> Indo-Pacific Forces from 21 Partners Nations Kick Off SEACAT, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2726439/indo-pacific-forces-from-21-partner-nations-kick-off-seacat/>

<sup>90</sup> Australia's continued commitment to Operation ARGOS, <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/australias-continued-commitment-operation-argos>

<sup>91</sup> Monitoring and surveillance activities by Australia against illicit maritime activities including ship-to-ship transfers, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e\\_000227.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000227.html)

The 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Singapore – Australia Joint Ministerial Committee took place virtually on August 27. The ministers committed to strengthening the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership, with a focus on economics, trade and investment; the digital economy; foreign affairs, defence and security; science and innovation; people-to-people links; and regional cooperation and global developments<sup>92</sup>. The inaugural Australia – France 2 + 2 Ministerial Consultations took place on August 30<sup>93</sup>. The Joint Statement released on completion focused on International and Regional Security, including for closer cooperation on implementation of their respective Indo-Pacific Strategies, and on enhancing bilateral cooperation including in military exercises, defence industry, space, secure, reliable and sustainable supply chains, and in Antarctica.

Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, visited the Philippines on August 22 to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty and build on the breakthrough made by General Lloyd Austin last month<sup>94</sup>. He continued by making his maiden visit to India<sup>95</sup>, which has been covered separately in this edition of the Indo-Pacific Monitor.

The month has witnessed a substantial pickup in US maritime activity throughout the region, ranging from Egypt's new Berenice Naval Base to the Western Pacific. The presence of three flat-tops, all equipped with F-35 Lightning aircraft off Asia is noticeable. This is evidently intended to deter any attempt by China to invade Taiwan, closing the window of opportunity that arose with deployment of the Ronald Reagan CSG to the North Arabian Sea. The month also witnessed a 2 + 2 virtual meeting between Japan's Liberal Democratic Party and the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party, intended as consultation regarding Taiwan's defence, without officially transgressing the One-China Policy<sup>96</sup>. The talks may pave the way for closer relations between Japan and Taiwan, and serve as a model for engagement of Taiwan

<sup>92</sup> Joint Communiqué of the 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Singapore-Australia Joint Ministerial Committee, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/joint-communication-12th-meeting-singapore-australia-joint-ministerial-committee>

<sup>93</sup> Inaugural Australia – France 2 + 2 Consultations, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/inaugural-australia-france-22-ministerial-consultations>

<sup>94</sup> US INDO-PACOM Commander Visits the Philippines, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2741598/us-indopacom-commander-visits-the-philippines/>

<sup>95</sup> US INDO-PACOM Commander Visits India, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2745476/us-indopacom-commander-visits-india/>

<sup>96</sup> To China's Chagrin, Japan – Taiwan talks could pave the way for closer ties, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/08/29/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-taiwan-relations-ldp/>

by other countries, including Australia and India. China's spokesperson expressed China's concern, said in a relatively restrained response, "The Taiwan question concerns the political foundation of China-Japan relations. On the Taiwan question, the Japanese side bears historical responsibilities to the Chinese people for its past crimes and should especially be prudent with its words and actions. We seriously ask Japan to stop interfering in China's domestic affairs, and refrain from sending wrong signals to 'Taiwan independence' forces"<sup>97</sup>. All in all, China – US competition continued to dominate the Indo-Pacific during the month.

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<sup>97</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on August 27, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1902496.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1902496.shtml)





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