

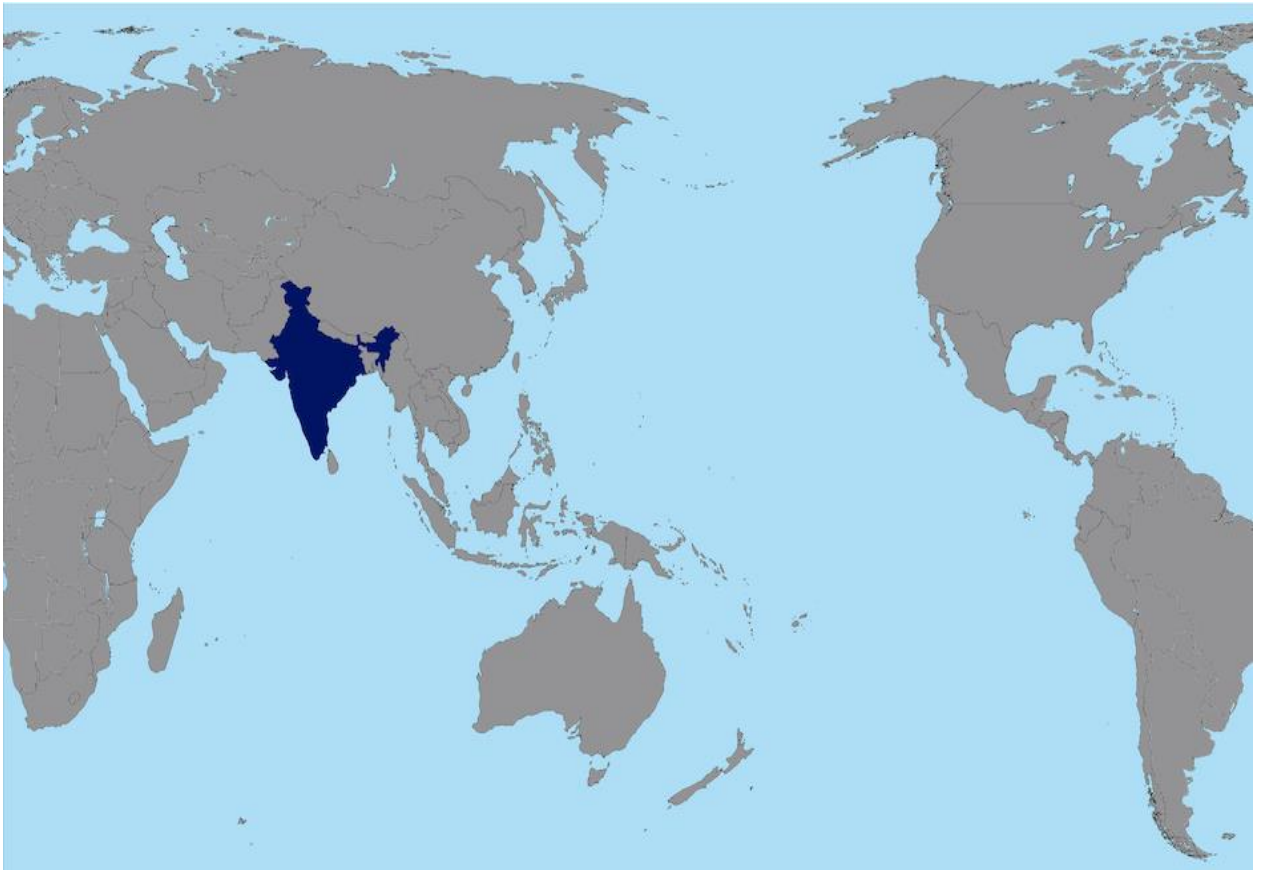


Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR OCTOBER 2021



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Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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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. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

October 2021

Abstract

The month began with the publication of a Strategic Guidance from Secretary of the Navy to the US Navy and Marine Corps. Given the salience of maritime power in maintaining US global presence, this document was expected to provide an insight into how the current administration intends to tackle growing maritime challenges, but instead identified the most pressing challenges as the four Cs: China, Culture, Climate Change and COVID, mingling old policies with current 'woke' concerns, which seem to have become elements of US military strategy. If the guidance reflects elements of Defense Secretary Austin's forthcoming National Defense Strategy, the latter is likely to be disappointing.

USS Connecticut, the second of the USN's Seawolf Class attack submarines, struck an object while submerged in the South China Sea on October 2 and was forced to limp back to Guam on the ocean surface. The incident generated considerable commentary and China tried to exploit it to generate anti-US sentiment while also propagating its own revisionist version of the laws of the sea.

Early October also witnessed a sharp rise in the number of intrusions by PRC aircraft into Taiwan's South-western ADIZ, with a record 140 intrusions being reported in just the first four days of the month. Numbers tapered off to more normal levels of 2-5 aircraft per day thereafter. Tensions in the region rose, with President Biden appearing to commit the US to Taiwan's defence in the event of a Chinese attack, only for the White House to retract and clarify that there is no change in the US policy of strategic ambiguity. Japan and Australia also expressed concern about China's actions towards Taiwan. China on its part continued to test the ground and maintain pressure on Taiwan.

The fifth Japan India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (JIMEX) was conducted in the Arabian Sea from October 06-08, 2021. It indicated that while there has been growth in expanding the levels of interoperability and reach of the two navies, much more needs to be done to fulfil the promise of the bilateral strategic partnership.

The second phase of Exercise Malabar was held in the Bay of Bengal from October 12-15. Admiral Michael Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations of the USN, visited India during the same period and hosted the senior leadership of the Indian Navy on board USS Carl Vinson.

Media reports on October 17 indicated that China had tested hypersonic missiles in July and August this year, displaying a new military capability that was described by the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff as close to a 'Sputnik moment'. An arms race involving hypersonic missiles is dawning, and will impact India.

As Exercise Malabar ended, CSG-21 led by HMS Queen Elizabeth entered the Bay of Bengal and took part in a Multilateral Partnership Exercise from October 15- 18, involving ships that had participated in Malabar, except those from the Indian Navy. Ships of CSG-21 then dispersed to different South Asian ports, with HMS Queen Elizabeth going on to Mumbai where the British Foreign Secretary, Elizabeth Tuss; the Chief of Defence Staff General Sir Nicholas Carter and the First Sea Lord Admiral Tony Radakin all came together to host the Indian military and business leaders on board. The ships thereafter took part in the maiden India-UK tri-service Exercise Konkan Shakti.

Late October saw ASEAN holding its annual summit and projecting hopes for a future in which it retains 'centrality'. For India, notable aspects were the agreement to strengthen ASEAN-India economic relations including through enhanced utilisation and effective implementation of the ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement, the full ratification of the ASEAN-India Investment Agreement by all parties, implementation of the ASEAN-India Trade in Services Agreement by all parties, and an invitation to India to join RCEP when it determined it was able to. India and ASEAN also sought to deepen the ASEAN-India strategic partnership by exploring potential cooperation between the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative, for which 21 potential areas of cooperation were identified.

Strategic Guidance for US Maritime Forces

The month witnessed publication of strategic guidance for the US maritime forces, titled "One Navy-Marine Corps Team: Strategic Guidance From The Secretary of the Navy"¹. As maritime power underpins the global US presence,

¹ https://media.defense.gov/2021/oct/07/2002870427/-1/-1/0/secnav%20strategic%20guidance_100721.pdf

the document provides an insight into the some aspects of its forthcoming National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy.



Ships and aircraft from the USN, RAN, JMSDF and RN in formation as part of the Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX 2021) in the Bay of Bengal on October 17, 2021.
Source: US Indo-Pacific Command

Secretary (SecNav) Carlos Del Toro's intent is to guide strategic planning, investments, budgeting and personnel decisions of the USN and USMC so as to "build, train and equip the world's most powerful naval force to meet both current and future operational demands and warfighting needs"². He identifies the most pressing challenges facing the Department of the Navy as the four Cs: China, Culture, Climate change, and COVID, thus conflating a sentient, adaptive and competitive adversary with structural issues. He identifies China as the most pressing challenge, a strategic competitor whose capabilities rival those of the US, and who seeks to aggressively employ its forces to challenge US principles, partnerships and prosperity. He desires that his Department contribute its "unique warfighting potential to compete in the gray zone, deter further aggression, and prepare to prevail in conflict as part of an integrated warfighting approach with our fellow Services"³. His stated highest priority is to develop concepts of operations and capabilities that bolster deterrence and expand warfighting advantages vis-à-vis the PRC.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The strategic approach adopted to do this rests on three pillars. The first is maritime dominance, to be achieved by expanding forward presence, enhancing warfighting readiness, innovating and modernising, and combating climate change (how combating climate change helps in achieving maritime dominance is not explained). The second is empowering the team, through eliminating harmful behaviour (sexual assault or harassment, racism, extremism and all forms of discrimination), leveraging national education as a critical enabler, cultivating talent and teamwork, and taking care of the people that form the team. The third pillar is strengthening strategic partnerships and efficiency, by building trust and collaboration within the service and with other domestic stakeholders, modernising business systems to enhance performance and affordability, and strengthening alliances and partnerships. He concludes by saying that department “will make difficult trade-offs, but also fight tenaciously for the resources needed to properly fulfil our national security responsibilities”⁴.

The strategic guidance generates more questions than answers. It acknowledges the need to compete in the gray zone, but beyond a statement that the Department will prioritise development of concepts of operations and capabilities that bolster deterrence and expand warfighting advantages vis-à-vis the PRC, there is little to reassure regional nations that these concepts will work. Deterrence, particularly in the gray zone, necessitates the bringing together of situational awareness, presence and the will to act to either deny the achievement of strategic objectives, or to impose sufficient punishment to force a rollback. The erstwhile commander of US Indo-PACOM has stated on record that surveillance assets are not sufficient to keep even the Pacific covered adequately, let alone the Indo-Pacific. There is no indication of how, or even if, the gap will be bridged. Presence necessitates an increase in forward deployed forces to prevent fait accompli situations. But the USN is overstretched, with the number of ships available failing to keep pace with requirement. It hasn't even been able to achieve the 355-ship goal that is mandated by law. The PLA (N), on the other hand, has added more surface combatants to its fleet than the USN every year since 2012. The gap was most pronounced in 2020, when the PLA (N) added 26 ships, as against just 3 by the USN⁵. The projected flat US defence budget does not indicate action to bridge this gap. Finally, a paucity of the will to act decisively created the current situation in the South China Sea in the first place. Mere statements will not engender confidence that the US will develop the requisite political will. Continued hedging on Taiwan fosters this doubt. Thus, the strategic guidance

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Jerry Hendrix, “Sea Power Makes Great Powers”, *Foreign Policy*, Fall 2021, pages 38-39.

is unlikely to convince either partner nations or even the USN itself that significant change is in the offing.

The guidance has covered tackling the cultural and climate change challenges, but amounts to nothing beyond a statement of intent at present. The COVID challenge finds mention only in the introduction and is forgotten thereafter. The US Coast Guard, also a maritime force, comes under the purview of the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security and thus is not included in this strategic guidance.

In sum, the strategic guidance seems more like political rhetoric than a viable action plan to address the challenges facing the USN. Perhaps the only signal of consequence is that the SecNav remains focused on competing with China, and this is likely to be the pattern adopted by the ensuing National Defence Strategy and National Security Strategy. The emphasis on strengthening cooperation with allies and partners will provide the assurance of continuity in policy towards India. Discerning watchers in other nations are, however, likely to see the guidance as old wine in a new bottle. Allies and partners will wait and observe whether it remains rhetoric, or results in meaningful and visible action.

The USS Connecticut Incident

USS Connecticut (SSN 22), the second of the USN's Seawolf Class attack submarines, "struck an object while submerged on the afternoon of October 2, 2021"⁶. The incident was reported through a statement by the US Pacific Fleet on October 07⁷. The statement clarified that the incident occurred in international waters in the Indo-Pacific Region, there were no life-threatening injuries, the submarine remained in a stable and safe condition, the nuclear propulsion plant and spaces were not affected and remained fully operational, and the extent of damage was being assessed⁸. US officials were reported to have subsequently confirmed that the incident had occurred in the South China Sea⁹. The boat arrived Guam on October 8, and 11 sailors reportedly received injuries described as minor to moderate, including scrapes and

⁶ Statement regarding USS Connecticut (SSN 2), <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/News/Article/2797630/statement-regarding-uss-connecticut-ssn-22/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ US nuclear submarine USS Connecticut damaged in an underwater collision with unknown "object" in South China Sea, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nuclear-submarine-uss-connecticut-south-china-sea-collision-unknown-object/>

bruises¹⁰. China's spokesperson observed that the US had "long been making trouble in the South China Sea" (SCS) and this was the "root cause of the incident"¹¹. He also said that the US had "deliberately stalled and concealed the specifics of the incident", and countries "surrounding the South China Sea could not help but ask what truly happened and what the US intention is"¹². China's Global Times launched an online petition demanding that the US military reveal information on the collision¹³. It also spoke of "intensive, hidden US military activities beyond freedom of navigation in the region, which could seriously damage navigation safety, fishing work, ecological environment, not to mention sovereignty violations in the South China Sea"¹⁴.



USS Connecticut Arrives at Yokosuka, July 31, 2021. Source: US Pacific Fleet

How could one of the most advanced submarines in the world experience an accident of this type? Navigating a submarine underwater is somewhat like driving a vehicle cross-country through uncertain terrain on a pitch dark night. Hydrographic survey limitations mean that there can often be large gaps between soundings, resulting in the possibility of large rocks, small sea mounts, wrecks or other objects remaining uncharted. Moreover, positional accuracy

¹⁰ USS Connecticut in port after collision in South China Sea; China expresses 'serious concern', <https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/2021/10/08/uss-connecticut-port-after-collision-south-china-sea/6053690001/>

¹¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on October 8, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1913254.shtml

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Truth on US nuke sub collision in South China Sea demanded in GT's petition, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1237320.shtml>

¹⁴ Ibid

suffers underwater, depending on how long it has been since the last 'positional fix'. The use of active sensors (akin to headlights on a vehicle) to observe the surrounding environment results in the submarine becoming 'visible' to others long before it can detect them. This is unacceptable: the key requirement is to remain hidden. Active sensors are thus used only rarely, perhaps in the final stages of attack. Passive sensors, on the other hand, rely on sound made by other objects. Sensor operators are trained to identify a variety of underwater sonic signatures, including those generated by machinery noise and even fish. They are, however, limited by the external environment. The SCS being an environment with high traffic density, the sheer volume of sound generated would have masked any telltale sonar signatures from all but the most alert of operators. A stationary underwater object, on the other hand, may not generate a signature and would thus remain undetected by passive sonars. Passive sensors have limitations: it may be recalled that in February this year, JS Soryu had inadvertently surfaced underneath a commercial vessel¹⁵, resulting in extensive damage to its sail.

What did the submarine collide with? Satellite imagery of USS Connecticut in Guam after the incident indicates no damage to the sail or part of the boat visible above the water. This indicates that the object was below the submarine at the time of the accident. While a report on the investigation is still awaited, possibilities include collision with a wreck, a container or other uncharted object, or even the sea bed. An unmanned underwater vehicle is also a possibility, although less likely.

Are China's complaints about USS Connecticut's presence and activities in the SCS legitimate? Irrespective of China's claims, the SCS comprises international waters. UNCLOS or other existing international law does not limit the operation of warships (including submarines) in such waters in any way. China's domestic law, on the other hand, does. The reality is that furtherance of its illegitimate claims lies behind China's loud protests.

The incident thus exposes both the hazards and limitations of submarines in operations, particularly in crowded environments. Those who suggest that submarines should be prioritised over surface platforms do so without this understanding.

¹⁵ Japan: Submarine crew phone for help after crash, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56000531>

Taiwan Faces Increased Coercion

Nixon's outreach to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1972 resulted in the Shanghai Communiqué. The US acknowledged, "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The US government does not challenge that position"¹⁶. Jimmy Carter stepped up the relationship by switching diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) to the PRC, in the process terminating the Mutual Defence Treaty¹⁷ between the ROC and the US. To safeguard its erstwhile ally, the US passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which raised the possibility of US intervention in case the PRC tried to assimilate Taiwan by force. In 1996, Clinton deployed the Nimitz and Independence Carrier Strike Groups when China stepped up coercion, forcing Chinese leadership to acknowledge its inability to prevent US intervention. As China's military ability and coercion surged, Donald Trump signed into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2020, to upgrade US – relations with Taiwan to advocate Taiwan's inclusion in international organisations in which statehood is not a requirement¹⁸.

China's coercive campaign against Taiwan increased sharply this month, with record military aircraft intrusions into Taiwan's South-western ADIZ. 136 intrusions were reported in the first four days alone, with a peak of 56 on October 04^{19,20} and 39 on October 2^{21,22}. Speaking on the 110th anniversary of the Revolution of 1911 days later, President Xi Jinping said that the Taiwan question arose out of the weakness and chaos of the Chinese nation and it would be resolved as national rejuvenation became a reality²³. He said, "The Taiwan question is purely an internal matter for China, one which brooks no

¹⁶ February 7, 1972, Joint Communiqué Between the United States and China,

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121325>

¹⁷ Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of China; December, 1954, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/chin001.asp

¹⁸ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1678/text>

¹⁹ Air activities in Southwestern ADIZ of ROC, 2021/10/04,

<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/Publish.aspx?title=News%20Channel&SelectStyle=Military%20News%20Update%20&p=79140>

²⁰ Air activities in Southwestern ADIZ of ROC, 2021/10/04,

<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/Publish.aspx?title=News%20Channel&SelectStyle=Military%20News%20Update%20&p=79142>

²¹ Air activities in Southwestern ADIZ of ROC, 2021/10/02,

<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/Publish.aspx?title=News%20Channel&SelectStyle=Military%20News%20Update%20&p=79133>

²² Air activities in Southwestern ADIZ of ROC, 2021/10/02,

<https://www.mnd.gov.tw/english/Publish.aspx?title=News%20Channel&SelectStyle=Military%20News%20Update%20&p=79136>

²³ China marks 1911 Revolution anniversary, pooling strength for national rejuvenation,

http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-10/09/content_10097236.htm

external interference”, and “The complete reunification of our country will be and can be realized”²⁴. The speech left no doubt about his complete commitment to Taiwan’s reunification with China. Events indicate that increased coercive pressure will be the strategy he employs for this purpose.

Why the push to absorb a small island that has a land area of just 2,260 Km², as compared to 9,326,410 Km² for China²⁵? Taiwan has a population of 23.5 million, vis-à-vis nearly 1.4 billion for China. Its GDP is \$611 billion, as against China’s GDP of over \$ 14.3 trillion. It has just 170,000 personnel in its Armed Forces, as against over 2 million for China.

When the Taiwan Relations Act was passed, the island was impoverished and China lacked significant economic or military capability. Taiwan began liberalising in the 1970s and is today a relatively advanced nation despite prolonged efforts by China to isolate it from the world. Three reasons stand out for China’s thrust to seize Taiwan. The first is political: Taiwan’s successful export-oriented free-market economy and democracy are affronts to China’s CCP directed and controlled model, providing a living example that falsifies Xi Jinping’s narrative that alternatives to the CCP-led model don’t work for the Chinese people²⁶. This becomes important as China faces difficult economic conditions at home, with the failure of Evergrande and other property developers. An energy crisis has resulted in widespread blackouts in China, while the Delta variant of COVID has resulted in multiple hard lockdowns²⁷. Action against Taiwan stokes nationalism, to distract from domestic dissatisfaction. The second is geo-strategic: Taiwan sits astride the gates to the first island chain, acting both as a potential base for adversaries to strike the mainland as well as a barrier to the egress of China’s forces into the Western Pacific. It is also a vulnerable flank for forces heading South towards the Indian Ocean. The third is industrial: Taiwan is the unmatched leader of the global semi-conductor industry; with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company alone accounting for more than half the global market and possessing technology China needs to attain global dominance.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Statistics from The CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/taiwan/#military-and-security> for Taiwan and <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/#military-and-security> for China.

²⁶ ‘Xi says multi-party system didn’t work for China’, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-xi-idUSBREA3107S20140402>

²⁷ China puts city of 6 million under lockdown amid spike, third this week, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/china-coronavirus-china-covid-china-delta-variant-china-puts-city-of-6-million-under-lockdown-amid-spike-third-this-week-2590908>

Decades of effort to attract Taiwan into the Chinese fold, including through offer of the 'one country two systems' model, have failed. China's absorption of Hong Kong despite commitments under its treaty with the UK doesn't help in building trust in its promises. So Xi Jinping has focused on the coercive approach, trying to isolate Taiwan from the rest of the world, punishing nations that deal with it, and seeking to stretch Taiwan's limited defences beyond breaking point.

Other countries are, however, increasingly standing up. Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott visited Taiwan recently and warned that China may lash out as its economy slowed and finances creaked²⁸. A visiting French senator and former defence minister has described Taiwan as a country²⁹. Lithuania recalled its Ambassador in Beijing following China's response to its decision to establish trading relations with Taiwan despite Chinese threats of punishment³⁰. Other East European countries, which don't have extensive trading relations with China and are conscious of having lived under the shadow of an authoritarian USSR, may follow suit. Japan's political leaders are linking Taiwan's security with that of Japan³¹. The Biden – Suga Summit of April had included a reference to 'peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits'³². Secretary of State Antony Blinken has called for "Taiwan's robust, meaningful participation throughout the UN system and in the international community"³³. In a departure from long held policy of strategic ambiguity, President Biden had said that the US had a commitment to defend Taiwan if attacked³⁴, though his Press Secretary later clarified "He has not made any decision to change our policy" and "there is no change in our policy"³⁵. She also

²⁸ China denounces 'insane' Australian ex-PM Abbott for Taiwan Remarks, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-denounces-insane-australian-ex-pm-abbott-taiwan-remarks-2021-10-09/>

²⁹ Call Taiwan a country, French senator says, angering China, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/call-taiwan-country-french-senator-says-angering-china-2021-10-08/>

³⁰ Lithuania withdraws Chinese envoy in row over Taiwan, <https://www.reuters.com/world/lithuania-withdraws-chinese-envoy-row-over-taiwan-2021-09-03/>

³¹ An important issue for Japan's upcoming Lower House election: Defending Taiwan, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/10/15/commentary/world-commentary/japan-election-taiwan-security/>

³² 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/>

³³ "Supporting Taiwan's Participation in the UN System", <https://www.state.gov/supporting-taiwans-participation-in-the-un-system/>

³⁴ "Biden says US will defend Taiwan if China attacks", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59005300>

³⁵ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, October, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/10/22/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-october-22-2021/>

said the US would continue to “assist Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capability” and would “regard any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific and of grave concern to the US”³⁶. Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen has said that she has faith that US forces will defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack, and that US troops are present on the island to train Taiwanese forces³⁷. Xi Jinping cannot afford to appear weak in the face of these growing calls.

Geostrategically, Taiwan’s seizure by China opens the gates to the Western Pacific. It brings China closer to Japan’s outlying islands, thus threatening Japan’s security. It enables the pushing of US power further outward, raising the probability of Taiwan’s territory being used to strengthen China’s anti-access / area denial strategy. It strengthens Beijing’s claim for the treatment of the Taiwan Straits as internal waters and will help in cementing its control over the East and South China Seas. All these actions will impact India’s Act East Policy and initiatives such as the Chennai Vladivostok Corridor, or the strategic partnership with Japan, enabling China to create a barrier to connectivity at will.

The consensus view is that China is not yet militarily capable of seizing Taiwan and Xi is indulging in sabre-rattling to shore up his domestic standing. But as the South China Sea experience has proved, rolling back China’s gains is impracticable. The key will be convincing China that the costs of aggression will be unaffordable. A Xi-Biden summit is in the offing³⁸. This will provide opportunity for some plain-speaking on Taiwan. Biden must make clear that the US will not abandon Taiwan in return for some abstract assurances from China on climate change.

As an aspiring Indo-Pacific power, India must be alive to these developments. The need is for measured steps to show to China that India will not unilaterally concede China’s self professed ‘core interests’ without reciprocation on its own core interests from China. In May last year, BJP MPs Meenakshi Lekhi and Rahul Kaswan had attended Tsai Ing-wen’s swearing in ceremony virtually³⁹. There is need for stronger signals, including stepping up economic engagement to expedite bringing Taiwan’s semi-conductor manufacturing

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ “Confirming US troops are in Taiwan, Tsai says she has ‘faith’ allies will defend island”, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/10/28/asia-pacific/taiwan-us-troops-tsai/>

³⁸ Biden and Xi Jinping of China Agree to Hold a Virtual Summit, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/06/us/politics/biden-xi-jinping-china-summit.html>

³⁹ BJP Mps ‘attend’ Taiwan event, irk China, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-mps-attend-taiwan-event-irk-china/articleshow/75986912.cms>

expertise to India, measured expressions of diplomatic support, pressing for inclusion of Taiwan in the World Health Organisation and expanding intelligence cooperation.

JIMEX and Japan India Maritime Cooperation

The fifth edition of the Japan India Maritime Bilateral Exercise, JIMEX 2021, was held in the Arabian Sea from October 06 – 08, 2021⁴⁰. IN Ships Kochi and Teg, under the command of R Adm Ajay Kochhar, Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet, exercised with JMSDF Ships Kaga and Murasame, under the command of R Adm Ikeuchilzuru, Commander of Escort Flotilla Three, along with their integral helicopters as well as P8I, Dornier and Mig-29K aircraft. The ships exercised a range of activities connected with war at sea, including over-the-horizon targeting, surface gun shoots, advanced coordinated anti-submarine exercises using an underwater target deployed by the JMSDF, simulated air strikes by Mig-29Ks shepherded by Dorniers, advanced anti-aircraft firing exercises on an expendable target, replenishment at sea including connecting up JS Kaga and INS Kochi for fuelling, and cross-deck helicopter operations. The JMSDF's stated objectives in conducting the exercise were "to improve the JMSDF's tactical capabilities" and "to strengthen cooperation with the Indian Navy"⁴¹. IN objectives, on the other hand, were "to develop common understanding of operational procedures and enhance interoperability through conduct of a multitude of advanced exercises, across the entire spectrum of maritime operations"⁴².

Japan and India are both middle powers over 3300 Km apart as the crow flies. The sea distance between them is nearly 7500 Km, across the Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea, Straits of Malacca, South China Sea and the East China Sea. Although US strategy had conceived of the Quad as a hedging strategy in 2001⁴³, Indian and Japanese maritime forces first came together during the December 2004 tsunami. Japan participated in Exercise Malabar 2007 along with Australia and Singapore. However, a sharp response from China led to cooperation, directed at that time towards HA/DR, being abandoned.

⁴⁰ Fifth Edition of Japan-India Bilateral Maritime Exercise 'Jimex', <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/fifth-edition-japan-india-bilateral-maritime-exercise-%E2%80%98jimex%E2%80%99-1>

⁴¹ Japan-India Maritime Exercise JIMEX, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202110/20211005.pdf>

⁴² Fifth Edition of Japan-India Bilateral Maritime Exercise 'Jimex', <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/fifth-edition-japan-india-bilateral-maritime-exercise-%E2%80%98jimex%E2%80%99>

⁴³ Quadrennial Defense Review Report, September 30, 2001, <http://www.comw.org/qdr/qdr2001.pdf>

The idea of India and Japan working together was expressed by Japan's Shinzo Abe during his 'Confluence of the Seas' speech to India's parliament⁴⁴. In Abe's words, "I spoke in India of the need for the Indian and Japanese governments to join together to shoulder more responsibility as guardians of navigational freedoms across the Pacific and Indian oceans"⁴⁵. He envisaged "a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the Western Pacific" and was "prepared to invest, to the greatest possible extent, Japan's capabilities in this security diamond"⁴⁶.



Mig-29K fighters fly past JS Kaga in the Arabian Sea during JIMEX 2021.
Source: Indian Navy

The 2008 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between India and Japan called for "service-to-service exchanges including bilateral and multilateral exercises"⁴⁷. The 2009 Action Plan to advance security cooperation between the two countries called for a maritime security dialogue, as well as "Annual bilateral naval exercises, alternately off India and Japan, to enhance

⁴⁴ "Confluence of the Two Seas" Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at the Parliament of the Republic of India, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

⁴⁵ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe>

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation Between Japan and India, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0810/joint_d.html

cooperation and core ability for maritime operation and disaster relief”, as well as “multilateral naval exercises, when possible”⁴⁸. Delivery on this call, however, remained in limbo. Then External Affairs Minister SM Krishna visited Tokyo on October 2011 and sought a joint exercise between the JMSDF and the IN⁴⁹. A commitment to hold the exercise annually was formalised during the visit of then Defence Minister AK Antony to Tokyo on November 02, 2011⁵⁰.

The first JIMEX was conducted off Japan on June 9, 2012, involving IN Ships Rana, Shivalik, Karmukh and Shakti⁵¹. The second JIMEX took place off Chennai in December 2013⁵². It involved IN ships Satpura, Ranvijay and Kuthar exercising with JS Ariake and JS Setogiri. Nascent cooperation then came to a halt, with no JIMEX for the next five years.

JIMEX failed to find mention in the 2015 Joint Statement on India and Japan Vision 2025⁵³. Japan’s participation in Exercise Malabar had by then become a regular feature, but bilateral exercises remained a difficult prospect. This continued till the Joint Statement during the visit of PM Abe to India in 2017, which spoke of enhancing “defence and security cooperation and dialogues, including the MALABAR and other joint exercises” and noted ongoing close cooperation between the IN and JMSDF in various specialized areas of mutual interest, including anti-submarine aspects⁵⁴. JIMEX was resurrected, with the third edition taking place off Visakhapatnam from October 7-15, 2018. This time, IN ships Satpura, Kadmatt, Shakti and one submarine participated, along with P8I aircraft⁵⁵. JIMEX-4 took place in the North Arabian Sea from

⁴⁸ Action Plan to advance Security Cooperation based on the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Japan and India, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/pmv0912/action.html>

⁴⁹ Fifth Japan-India Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue (Overview), https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/india/meeting1110_2.html

⁵⁰ KV Prasad, “India Japan to Step Up Defence Cooperation”, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-japan-to-step-up-defence-cooperation/article2593792.ece>

⁵¹ JIMEX 12: First Exercise Between India and Japan, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/first-bilateral-maritime-exercise-between-india-and-japan-jimex-12/>

⁵² First Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) in Indian Waters from 19-22 Dec, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=101825>

⁵³ Joint Statement on India and Japan Vision 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26176/Joint_Statement_on_India_and_Japan_Vision_2025_Special_Strategic_and_Global_Partnership_Working_Together_for_Peace_and_Prosperty_of_the_IndoPacific_R

⁵⁴ India Japan Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister of Japan to India (September 14, 2017), https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28946/IndiaJapan_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Japan_to_India_September_14_2017

⁵⁵ Bilateral Maritime Exercise Between Japan and India (JIMEX 18) to Commence at Vishakhapatnam, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1548837>

September 26-28, 2020, with IN ships Chennai, Tarkash and Deepak participating. The duration was curtailed as the harbour phase had to be cut out due to COVID-19.

JMSDF participation in the last three editions has included JS Kaga, the helicopter-carrier, and one destroyer. There is evident satisfaction about the content, with the full range of operations being exercised. The timing, just after Fumio Kishida took over as Japan's Prime Minister, indicates that bilateral cooperation will continue. The question, however, is whether this goes far enough in fulfilling the vision enunciated by Shinzo Abe, or indeed whether the vision continues to shape India-Japan relations.

Among its foundational precepts were the beliefs that India and Japan are natural partners with a mutual stake in each other's progress and prosperity; that a strong India is in the interests of Japan and vice versa; that both have a responsibility for and are capable of responding to regional and global challenges; and that they must play an active role in the promotion of peace and stability in Asia. However, the structures that enable cooperation are underpinned by the US. There is considerable room for growth in the mechanisms designed to ensure both have adequate situational awareness in the surface, underwater and air dimensions. While headway has been made in expanding the reach and interoperability of both navies, their resources are not sufficient to maintain the presence required to deter challengers throughout their area of operations. Bilateral coordination mechanisms are slow. Trilateral cooperation, involving Japan, India and other nations like Australia, Indonesia and even Vietnam is yet to take off. Structural issues continue to inhibit India-Japan defence trade. The Quad certainly holds out promise of enhancing regional influence, but much more is possible at the bilateral level.

These issues need addressing at apex leadership levels. However, the inability of the two countries to host a bilateral summit since the last minute cancellation of the Guwahati Summit in December 2019, or even a 2 + 2 Dialogue since November 2019, has stunted growth in bilateral defence relations. There is need of new impetus from the political leadership.

Encouragement may be derived from the telephonic conversation between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Fumio Kishida on October 08, 2021⁵⁶. Asia

⁵⁶ Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Speaks on Telephone with H.E. Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34359/Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_speaks_on_telephone_with_H_E_Fumio_Kishida_Prime_Minister_of_Japan

will carefully watch how quick the latter is to accept the invitation to visit India at his earliest convenience for a bilateral summit meeting.

Malabar Phase II and the CNO's Visit to India

The August issue of the Indo-Pacific Monitor (IPM) had projected the probability of a second phase of Exercise Malabar 2021 in the Bay of Bengal in October⁵⁷. It had also reported the statement of Tony Abbott, the former Australian Prime Minister, that Malabar 2021 would involve the HMS Queen Elizabeth Task Group⁵⁸. The latter did not happen, but the IPM's projection regarding a second phase was proved true as ships from the Quad countries came together again for Exercise Malabar 2021 in the Bay of Bengal from October 12-15, 2021⁵⁹. The exercise coincided with the visit of Admiral Michael Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) of the US Navy, to India from October 11 – 15, 2021⁶⁰.



Indian, Australian, Japanese and US Warship Participate in Exercise Malabar in the Bay of Bengal, October 4, 2021. Source: Indian Navy

⁵⁷ <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/indo-pacific-monitor/volii-issue8-2808.html>

⁵⁸ 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>

⁵⁹ Multilateral Exercise Malabar 2021 – Phase II in Bay of Bengal 12-15 October 21, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/multilateral-maritime-exercise-malabar-2021-%E2%80%93-phase-ii-bay-bengal-12-%E2%80%93-15-october-21>

⁶⁰ Admiral Michael Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations United States Navy Visit to India, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1763116>

Units involved in the exercise included IN ships Ranvijay, Satpura, an Indian submarine and a P-8I aircraft, HMAS Ballarat and Sirius, JS Kaga and Murasame, and USS Carl Vinson, Lake Champlain and Stockdale and a P-8A. The two Japanese ships had also participated in Phase I, as well as in the Japan India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) from October 06-08, 2021.

The first phase of Malabar had encompassed maritime operations, anti-submarine warfare, air warfare, live-fire gunnery events, replenishment at sea, cross-deck flight operations and maritime interdiction operations in the Philippine Sea⁶¹. The second phase included "surface and air expendable mobile anti-submarine warfare training target exercises (EMATTEX), cross-deck helicopter operations, surface gunnery exercises and replenishments at sea⁶². This allowed the navies involved to familiarise themselves, operate and train in two vastly different regions of the Indo-Pacific.

The CNO's visit to India was announced on October 8, 2021⁶³. Admiral Gilday's programme encompassed courtesy calls on Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of the Naval Staff, Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Foreign Secretary and General Bipin Rawat, Chief of Defence Staff in New Delhi on October 12, 2021⁶⁴. He visited India's Eastern Naval Command, receiving a tour of naval facilities in Visakhapatnam⁶⁵ on October 13. On October 14, he hosted a group of Indian senior officers including Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of the Naval Staff and Vice Admiral AB Singh, the Commander-in-Chief of Eastern Naval Command, on board the USS Carl Vinson⁶⁶. The last leg comprised a visit to Western Naval Command, Mumbai on October 15, during which he visited Mazagon Docks Limited and addressed officers of the Indian Naval Academy, all training establishments and others through video conference⁶⁷.

⁶¹ Australia, India, Japan, and US Kick-off Phase II: Malabar 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2809399/australia-india-japan-and-us-kick-off-phase-ii-malabar-2021/>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ CNO to Visit India, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/2805785/cno-to-visit-india/>

⁶⁴ CNO Delivers an Address to Indian Western Naval Command, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Speeches/display-speeches/Article/2811396/cno-delivers-an-address-to-the-indian-western-naval-command/>

⁶⁵ Admiral Michael Gilday, Chief of Naval Operations, US Navy visits ENC, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/admiral-michael-gilday-chief-naval-operations-us-navy-visits-enc>

⁶⁶ CNO hosts Senior Indian Navy Officers aboard USS Carl Vinson during Malabar, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/2809911/cno-hosts-senior-indian-navy-officers-aboard-uss-carl-vinson-during-malabar/>

⁶⁷ CNO Visits Western Naval Command Headquarters; Delivers Keynote Address to Indian Navy, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display->

The focus of his address was how to prepare for the future of naval warfare while preventing conflict from breaking out in the first place. He identified three elements⁶⁸. The first, readiness, was necessary to ensure safe and secure seas, which carried the commerce and generated prosperity for an increasingly globalised world. This in turn necessitated a strong maritime force, which had to deliver every day, both to protect the ships that use the seas, as also the digital infrastructure that interconnects the world. The second was building trust and interoperability. This necessitates fusing of operation from various sources to generate maritime domain awareness, building competence and interoperability, and enabling combined operations. The third was conducting the operations across multiple domains, including on, under and above the seas, in the information environment, in the cyber domain, across the electromagnetic spectrum and in space. He concluded with a call for unity and cooperation to provide a safer, more secure and brighter world for our descendants to prosper in.

Exercise Malabar has come a long way since its inception as a bilateral exercise in 1992. Starting from a basic level, it now encompasses the complete range of maritime operations and involves four countries. It is also indicative of the vast change in India-US relations. It brings together the navies of the four most capable democratic maritime nations in the Indo-Pacific and does deter high end operations by adversarial nations who don't share the same vision of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. It does little, however, to deter grey zone coercion, the equivalent of guerrilla warfare, or the salami-slicing strategy adopted by China. Deterring and preventing this is the more pressing need, but remains an unlikely prospect.

The objective in the Indian Ocean must remain securing this crucial global maritime highway, which remains the key to the economic growth of both China and India. The IN, USN and partner navies will have to leverage each other's national capabilities and technologies, identifying gaps and filling them.

The special and continued effort by the US to engage India is in sharp contrast to China's effort to coerce India. The CNO combined his visit with Exercise Malabar. His itinerary was structured to enable engagement with the naval leadership of a partner nation and its people, as well as with USN personnel. Opportunities for this have been somewhat restricted following the onset of the

[pressreleases/Article/2811405/cno-visits-western-naval-command-headquarters-delivers-keynote-address-to-india/](https://www.dpg.org/pressreleases/Article/2811405/cno-visits-western-naval-command-headquarters-delivers-keynote-address-to-india/)

⁶⁸ CNO Delivers an Address to the Indian Western Naval Command, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Speeches/display-speeches/Article/2811396/cno-delivers-an-address-to-the-indian-western-naval-command/>

pandemic. The wide-ranging expanse of the visit, exposing him to both of India's operational maritime commands, demonstrates that India too seeks expanded engagement with the US. It is the maritime front that will remain the centrepiece of the engagement and of strengthening India's military capability. The visit enabled the two Chiefs to assess together the level of interoperability, identify gaps and conceptualise what needs to be done to fill them in the years ahead.

The absence of participation by HMS Queen Elizabeth and CSG-21 remains noteworthy. CSG-21 entered the Bay of Bengal on October 15, 2021⁶⁹, the last day of Exercise Malabar. It was exercising with USS Carl Vinson in the Pacific earlier this month, and could have reached the Bay of Bengal in time. The inference is that the countries concerned are not yet ready to expand Malabar.

The Hypersonic Frontier

A story⁷⁰ about China having tested a hypersonic missile, thus displaying a capability that surprised the US⁷¹, provided the ability to attack from an unexpected direction, resulted in potential loss of strategic stability and spawned a new arms race occupied media headlines through the month. The missile was reported to have circled the globe before proceeding to its target, which it missed by about 24 miles⁷². The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff described it as very close to a "Sputnik Moment"⁷³. China's wolf warrior spokesman said "this was a routine test of spacecraft to verify technology of spacecraft's reusability"⁷⁴. He added, "China will work with other countries in the world for the peaceful use of space for the benefit of mankind"⁷⁵.

⁶⁹ UK Carrier Strike Group led by HMS Queen Elizabeth enter the Bay of Bengal, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-led-by-hms-queen-elizabeth-enters-bay-of-bengal>

⁷⁰ Broken by the Financial Times on October 17, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ba0a3cde-719b-4040-93cb-a486e1f843fb>

⁷¹ Natasha Bernard, China's latest missile test raises the stakes for Biden's nuclear weapons review, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/22/politics/china-hypersonic-missile-joe-biden-nuclear-policy/index.html?mkt_tok=MDk1LVBQVi04MTMAAAGAXUYaMhSbrRr2Uilu1huCvxOrjXAVIfXbcU8TqVU7S7Nkp5R3bcsEb_0fVnoX8-Y1ySzooydiaOW4-Z9Z_zo4PKFk90Zkyvo6NNvqVCc3XHg

⁷² "China's Hypersonic Missile: Could it spark a new arms race", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59001850>

⁷³ China's Weapons Tests Close to a 'sputnik Moment', US General Says, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/us/politics/china-hypersonic-missile.html?smid=em-share>

⁷⁴ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on October 18, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1915130.shtml

⁷⁵ Ibid.



China's DF- Hypersonic Missiles on Display at the National Day Parade in Beijing, October 1, 2019. Source: Global Times

What is the state of hypersonic weapon development globally? Has China taken the lead in hypersonic weapons, and is the response of its spokesman describing the test as that of a reusable space vehicle credible? And what does this imply for India?

Hypersonic speed is defined as that speed at which heat generated by friction causes molecules of air surrounding the object attaining it to change by breaking apart (dissociation) and / or picking up an electrical charge (ionization), impacting the principles of flight. This is generally considered to be Mach 5, or a speed of 3,836.5 mph at sea level and at a temperature of 20°C⁷⁶. Two basic categories of weapons attain hypersonic speeds. The first are hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV), which are launched by a rocket and then glide to their target through the atmosphere. These could potentially reach anywhere on earth. The second is hypersonic cruise missiles, powered by a supersonic combustion ramjet (Scramjet), which will have a smaller range. Both can manoeuvre to their target and do not follow a predictable ballistic trajectory.

The benefits hypersonic weapons confer are a function of their speed, manoeuvrability, low flight altitude and high kinetic energy. Speed puts them beyond the engagement envelope of almost all current defensive systems.

⁷⁶ Eric Limer, "How Fast is Hypersonic Speed", <https://www.popularmechanics.com/flight/a28426/hypersonic-speed-math-examples/>

Manoeuvrability creates unpredictability in determining the future position of the missile, a pre-requisite for interception. The lower flight altitude results in radar detection ranges being limited by the curvature of the earth. This could technically be overcome by using space-based detection, but the plasma pulse surrounding the missile results in a much dimmer radar echo (though the heat signature would be much higher). Kinetic energy provides the means to penetrate even the most hardened targets. Most important, hypersonic weapons provide the ability to engage time-critical targets, such as road-mobile missile launchers, possibly before they can launch their missiles. This could destabilise deterrence.

Hypersonic programmes are being run by the US, Russia, China, Australia, India, France, Germany and Japan, among others. US programmes include the US Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS), the US Army's Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW), the USAF Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) and Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile (HACM), and DARPA's Tactical Boost Glide (TBG), Operational Fires (OpFires) and Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapon Concept (HAWC)⁷⁷. The test of a glide vehicle failed on October 21, 2021⁷⁸, while that of the ARRW had failed in April 2021⁷⁹. The HAWC, however, is reported to have undergone a successful test in September 2021⁸⁰. These programmes are intended to produce prototypes; there are no known programmes to produce weapons. Defensive capability is not expected to be available before the mid-2020s.

Russia is reported to have two active programmes: the Avanguard hypersonic glide vehicle launched from the SS-19 Stiletto ICBM, which is reported to have entered combat duty in December 2019, and the ship-launched Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile with a range of 250-600 miles⁸¹. The Tsirkon missile was reportedly tested successfully from the submarine Severodvinsk on

⁷⁷ Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress, October 19, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45811>

⁷⁸ Oren Liebermann, "Latest US military hypersonic test fails", https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/21/politics/us-hypersonic-test-fails/index.html?mkt_tok=MDk1LVBQVi04MTMAAAGAXUYaMspkDr4vvjEKARASqUPck6YQC6QmN4TAtFvW5slN4uq65kIv9Zxp1sSo1c4nSk174jZmKWCEPJLjh9Cf1B3ce-5DSdB8Wa6Ih-aGjG

⁷⁹ Barbara Starr and Oren Liebermann, "US air Force test to launch ultra-fast hypersonic missile fails", <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/06/politics/air-force-hypersonic-missile-test/index.html>

⁸⁰ DARPA's HAWC Achieves Successful Flight, <https://www.darpa.mil/news-events/2021-09-27>

⁸¹ Unless otherwise stated, data from CRS report R45811 "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress", <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45811>

October 4, 2021⁸², and from a surface ship in July 2021⁸³. Russia is also reported to have operationalised the Kinzhal, a manoeuvring air-launched ballistic missile to be deployed from Mig-31 and Su-34 strike aircraft. China has reportedly deployed the DF-17, designed to launch HGVs, with a range of 1000 – 1500 miles and the DF-ZF HGV with a range of about 1200 miles. It has tested the DF-41 to carry an HGV. It is also reported to have tested the Starry Sky-2 hypersonic vehicle prototype, which is expected to become operational by 2025⁸⁴.

Among other nations, the US and Australia have been collaborating since 2007 to develop hypersonic technologies through the Hypersonic International Flight Research Experimentation (HIFiRE) programme. The successor programme, Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFiRE) has been launched to develop hypersonic air-breathing technologies, with the first flight expected in the mid-2020s. Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update calls for an investment of \$ 7.1 billion in hypersonic weapons and directed energy systems⁸⁵. India has collaborated with Russia to develop BrahMos II, a Mach 7 cruise missile. Initial Operational Capability is expected between 2025 and 2028. India is also developing an indigenous hypersonic cruise missile. The first successful test of a fully indigenous hypersonic technology demonstrator powered by an air-breathing scramjet was reported in September 2020⁸⁶. France has collaborated with Russia on the development of hypersonic technology and plans to modify its air-to-surface ASN4G supersonic cruise missile for hypersonic flight by 2022. It is also working with the UK to develop the Mach 5 Perseus anti-ship missile, expected to enter service in 2028⁸⁷. Germany tested an experimental hypersonic glide vehicle (SHEFEX II) in 2012, but may have stopped development. Japan is developing the Hypersonic Cruise Missile (HCM) and Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectile (HVGP), to enter service in 2026⁸⁸. Iran, Israel and South Korea are also reported

⁸² Russia test fires submarine-launched hypersonic Tsirkon missile for the first time, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/04/europe/russia-tsirkon-missile-test-intl/index.html>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ CRS Report R 45811, Op cit.

⁸⁵ 2020 Defence Strategic Update, <https://www1.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2020-defence-strategic-update>

⁸⁶ Vivek Raghuvanshi, "Watch India test its new homemade hypersonic vehicle," <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/09/09/india-tests-homemade-hypersonic-vehicle/>

⁸⁷ Martin Manaranche, "Royal Navy to field new FC/ASW missile from 2028", <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/07/royal-navy-to-field-new-fc-asw-missile-from-2028/>

⁸⁸ Hypersonic and directed-energy weapons: Who has them and who's winning the race in the Asia-Pacific, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/03/15/hypersonic-and-directed-energy-weapons-who-has-them-and-whos-winning-the-race-in-the-asia-pacific/>

to have done foundational research, but may not have an active programme. North Korea has a research centre for hypersonic missiles under its Academy of National Defence Science. It claims to have tested the Hwasong-8 hypersonic missile on September 27, 2021⁸⁹, though preliminary assessment indicates it did not reach hypersonic speeds⁹⁰. Pakistan's outgoing Navy Chief Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi had revealed plans to equip future warships with directed energy weapons and the P282 hypersonic missile⁹¹. The number of nations with hypersonic capability in India's neighbourhood will only grow.

Zhao Lijian's description of the reported launch as a reusable space vehicle is misleading. The technology used is identical: both use a rocket to boost and then glide unpowered to their target / landing area. China's record of obfuscation doesn't inspire confidence in its statements. Moreover, the five reusable space vehicles (space shuttles) seen by the world so far could lift a payload of 27,500 Kg into Low Earth Orbit (LEO). The Long March 2C rocket used by China, however, can only lift 3,850 Kg. Given the weight of the vehicle itself, what remains for use in space will be quite small, calling into question the utility of the launch vehicle.

Offensive hypersonic weapons appear to be developing faster than the capability to defend against them. Conventional hard kill measures will not work. The need is for advanced defensive weapons such as directed energy systems or rail-guns, but progress in their development has lagged. What cannot be hidden, however, is that both Russia and China appear to be well ahead of the US and other democratic countries in the development of offensive hypersonic capability. This will foster the perception that the West is falling technologically behind. The global range and the ability to strike time-critical targets, such as road or rail-mobile missiles, could result in destabilisation of the nuclear deterrent.

A hypersonic weapons race is clearly on. The similarities between this race and the one that led to India eventually adopting the nuclear option are striking. It must be expected that China will eventually provide hypersonic technology to Pakistan, just as it did in the case of nuclear technology. Unless India can find a way to get leading nations to abandon it, it has no choice but to participate, or risk strategic vulnerability. It can depend on external sources for defensive

⁸⁹ North Korea says it fired a new hypersonic missile, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58729701>

⁹⁰ N Korea's 'hypersonic missile' appears to be at early stage of development: JCS, <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210929005552325?section=nk/nk>

⁹¹ Usman Ansari, "Outgoing Pakistan Navy Chief Reveals Details of Modernization Programs", <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/10/14/outgoing-pakistan-navy-chief-reveals-details-of-modernization-programs/>

technology, or accelerating its own offensive and defensive programmes to ensure deterrence is maintained. There is thus urgent need for speeding up indigenous research into development of hypersonic weapons as well as defences against them.

CSG 21, Global Britain and India

Shortly after Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Boris Johnson had agreed to a transformational expansion of the India-UK relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership⁹² at their virtual summit on May 04, 2021, the HMS Queen Elizabeth led Carrier Strike Group (CSG-21) set out on what was described as "the UK's most ambitious global deployment for over two decades"⁹³. CSG-21 entered the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea on July 06, 2021⁹⁴. It then exercised with CSG-5 (Ronald Reagan) in the Gulf of Aden, visited Duqm and then carried out its "first major workout after entering the Indian Ocean" with the Indian Navy, on July 21-22, 2021⁹⁵. It then went on through the Malacca Straits through the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea to Apra Harbour, Guam.

CSG-21 is now on its way back to the UK, after having exercised vigorously with the USN, JMSDF and RAN as well as other navies and shown its presence in the Western Pacific through August and September. Its last major activity in the Western Pacific was to carry out multiple carrier strike exercises in the Philippine Sea during the first week of October⁹⁶, signalling the British intent to form part of multinational operations, especially in the event of a Taiwan contingency. It re-entered the Bay of Bengal on October 15⁹⁷ and took part in

⁹² Joint Statement on Indi-UK virtual Summit (Roadmap 2030 for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33837/Joint_Statement_on_IndiaUK_Virtual_Summit_Roadmap_2030_for_a_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership

⁹³ Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, presented to parliament March 16, 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf

⁹⁴ Sam LaGrone, "HMS Queen Elizabeth Enters Middle East After Suez Canal Transit; Carrier Eisenhower Now in Atlantic", USNI News, <https://news.usni.org/2021/07/07/hms-queen-elizabeth-enters-middle-east-after-suez-canal-transit-carrier-eisenhower-now-in-atlantic>

⁹⁵ "The UK's Carrier Strike Group has completed its first major workout since entering the Indian Ocean", <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/july/28/210728-csg-trains-with-indian-navy>

⁹⁶ <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2806048/multiple-allied-carrier-strike-groups-operate-together-in-7th-fleet/>

⁹⁷ UK Carrier Strike Group led by HMS Queen Elizabeth Enters Bay of Bengal, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-led-by-hms-queen-elizabeth-enters-bay-of-bengal>

a four nation (Australia, Japan, UK and the US) Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX), described as “high-end, multi-domain maritime training at its finest”⁹⁸. MPX commenced just after Phase II of Exercise Malabar 2021 ended on October 15, in the same area (Bay of Bengal) and continued till October 18. It involved the same ships from Australian, Japanese and US Navies. The difference was substitution of IN ships by UK’s CSG 21. Ships of the four nations dispersed thereafter, with the Japanese ships calling at Port Blair from October 20-23⁹⁹, HMS Kent going to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and HMS Queen Elizabeth heading for Mumbai.



Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff of the Royal Navy, inspects a Guard of Honour at New Delhi on October 22, 2021. Source: Indian Navy

In Mumbai, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Defender provided a platform to showcase Britain’s industrial capability to India. The event was marked by the UK Foreign Secretary, Elizabeth Tuss, the British Chief of Defence Staff General Sir Nicholas Carter and the First Sea Lord, Admiral Tony Radakin embarking the ships and playing host to senior elements of the Indian Navy, defence industry and media¹⁰⁰. In parallel, ships of CSG-21 participated in the harbour phase of the maiden India-UK Joint Tri-Service Exercise Konkan Shakti from

⁹⁸ Warships from Australia, Japan, UK and US Joint Forces in Maritime Partnership Exercise 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2815845/warships-from-australia-japan-uk-and-us-join-forces-in-maritime-partnership-exe/>

⁹⁹ Japan-US-Australia-UK multilateral exercise ‘Maritime Partnership Exercise’, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202110/20211015-3.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ UK Forges Closer Defence and Security Partnership with India, October 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-forges-closer-defence-and-security-partnership-with-india-october-2021>

October 21-24¹⁰¹. The sea phase of this exercise was conducted from October 24 – 27¹⁰², making UK only the third country (after Russia and the US) with which India has conducted a tri-service exercise.

When he was the Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson had gone on record at the Manama Dialogue in 2016 to state that “the policy of disengagement East of Suez was a mistake and insofar as we are now capable we want to reverse that policy”¹⁰³. The speech also explained his zeal for Brexit. As the Prime Minister, his March 2021 vision for UK in 2030 called for the country to be “deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values” and remaining “a nuclear-armed power with global reach and integrated military capabilities across all five operational domains”¹⁰⁴. The underlying belief is that the UK’s economic future lies in the Indo-Pacific.

To provide the security foundations of his vision of Britain playing a global role, his initiatives include “the biggest programme of investment in defence since the end of the Cold War”¹⁰⁵. Britain has reopened its Naval Support Facility at HMS Juffair in Bahrain and upgraded berthing facilities to enable destroyers to come alongside¹⁰⁶. It has secured long-term usage of facilities including dry docks at Duqm and established a Joint Logistics Support Base at the Port, providing it a base outside the Straits of Hormuz, in the Indian Ocean¹⁰⁷. Facilities in Oman, Kenya, Singapore, Australia, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) and Brunei are being strengthened, providing Britain support throughout the Indian Ocean and in South East Asia. RN OPVs Tamar and Spey

¹⁰¹ Maiden India-UK Joint Tri-Service Exercise Konkan Shakti 21 Oct – 27 Oct 2021, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/maiden-india-%E2%80%93-uk-joint-tri-service-exercise-konkan-shakti-21-oct-27-oct-21>

¹⁰² Sea Phase of India-UK maiden Tri-Service exercise ‘Konkan Shakti 2021’ in full swing, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1766666>

¹⁰³ Foreign Secretary Speech: “Britain is Back East of Suez”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-speech-britain-is-back-east-of-suez>

¹⁰⁴ Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Quay development as big-ship jetty opens for Royal Navy ships in Bahrain, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2020/june/23/200623-new-jetty-in-bahrain>

¹⁰⁷ Defence Secretary strengthens ties between UK and Oman, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-strengthens-ties-between-uk-and-oman>

began a five-year deployment to the Indo-Pacific on September 05¹⁰⁸, to add to the continuing British presence in the Gulf for Operation Kipion. They will act as the UK's eyes and ears in the region, while running patrols to deal with drug-running, smuggling, terrorism and other transnational crime.

Johnson's strategy also includes engaging India, as envisioned in his virtual summit with Prime Minister Modi¹⁰⁹. The defence and security component of this partnership encompasses logistic and training MOUs, grey and dark shipping information-sharing agreements, joint exercises and professional military exchanges, deepened defence research, innovation, technology and industry cooperation, and cooperation for counter-terrorism, cyber-security and maritime security. The British focus is greater in the western half of the Indian Ocean, thus complementing the role of the US Indo-Pacific Command in the eastern half, though there will be overlap. This also explains the underlying rationale for AUKUS, the recent agreement between Australia, the US and UK to upgrade Australia's capabilities and enable it to take on greater security responsibility. The three countries see the return of Cold War confrontation and have made an arrangement that enables the US to focus more on the Indo-Pacific Command's Area of Responsibility (AOR) and builds up Australia to take on a role similar to what UK did in the trans-Atlantic scenario, while the UK increasingly takes on responsibility for constabulary tasks in the Western Indian Ocean.

Though Trump's NSS 2017 had assigned the lead role for Indian Ocean security to India, the current administration is hedging its bets and placing greater faith in the trans-Atlantic ally. This will probably result in the lessening of need (and interest) on the part of US CENTCOM to engage with India. Furthermore, as the Quad is intimately involved in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, it should be expected that there will be a push for the UK to join the Quad in the near future.

These developments will impact France and the EU. As a stakeholder with the largest part of its EEZ in the Indo-Pacific, France will find it necessary to strengthen its engagement in the region or risk being marginalised. Similar considerations will drive EU nations like the Netherlands and Germany to step up their engagement. All these nations, as well as the EU, have announced their Indo-Pacific visions. The security element in these visions is presently

¹⁰⁸ Patrol ships bid farewell to Portsmouth as they begin their Indo-Pacific deployment, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/september/07/210907-spey-and-tamar-deploy>

¹⁰⁹ Roadmap 2030 for India-UK future relations launched during India-UK Virtual Summit (4 May, 2021), https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33838/Roadmap_2030_for_IndiaUK_future_relations_launched_during_IndiaUK_Virtual_Summit_4_May_2021

restricted to constabulary duties and humanitarian assistance / disaster relief missions, which remains a common interest. But as financial engagement grows, a security element will come in.

To sum up, the Indian Ocean is transitioning from being a strategic backwater to the foremost region for maritime contestation. Prime Minister Modi had said, "Today, the world speaks of 21st century driven by the dynamism the energy of Asia and the Pacific. But its course will be determined by the tides of the Indian Ocean. This is why the Indian Ocean is at the centre of global attention more than ever before"¹¹⁰. The words are being proved prescient. This should provide ample opportunity for the multi-alignment espoused by External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar¹¹¹. Shri Rajnath Singh, India's Defence Minister, said on October 27, 2021, "We are fully determined to protect the legitimate rights and interests of our country in relation to our territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone, while supporting the maintenance of rule-based maritime systems, as mandated under UNCLOS, 1982"¹¹². It is to be hoped that these words translate into strengthening India's maritime sword arm and equipping it to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

The ASEAN Summit

The 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits took place virtually on October 26, 2021¹¹³. ASEAN leaders adopted ASEAN SHIELD, an initiative to ensure ASEAN's collective and rapid response in mitigating the impact of different types of emergencies or disasters¹¹⁴. They reaffirmed their belief in regionalism and multilateralism, adopting a declaration on upholding multilateralism¹¹⁵. The ASEAN Leaders' declaration on the Blue Economy sought to take the lead on the subject and set out principles as well as potential areas for action and

¹¹⁰ 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>

¹¹¹ External Affairs Minister's Speech at the 4th Ram Nath Goenka Lecture, 2019, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32038/External+Affairs+Ministers+speech+at+the+4th+Ramnath+Goenka+Lecture+2019>

¹¹² Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Delivers Keynote Address at the Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1766855>

¹¹³ Chairman's Statement of the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-38th-and-39th-ASEAN-Summits-26-Oct....pdf>

¹¹⁴ Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the Strategic and Holistic Initiative to Link ASEAN Responses to Emergencies and Disasters (ASEAN SHIELD), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2.-BSB-Declaration-on-ASEAN-SHIELD.pdf>

¹¹⁵ ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Upholding Multilateralism, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/3.-FINAL-ASEAN-Leaders-Declaration-on-Upholding-Multilateralism.pdf>

cooperation¹¹⁶. Recognising the pace of digital transformation, the leaders adopted an ASEAN Digital Transformation Agenda¹¹⁷. Other declarations included a strategic policy framework on promoting an adaptive ASEAN community of greater understanding, tolerance and a sense of regional agendas¹¹⁸; a joint statement to COP-26 on climate change¹¹⁹; a declaration on promoting competitiveness, resilience and agility of workers¹²⁰; a declaration on the reformulation and production of healthier food and beverage options¹²¹, and a comprehensive framework on the 'Care Economy'¹²².



Leaders attend the 16th East Asia Summit, October 27, 2021. Source: ASEAN

- ¹¹⁶ ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/4.-ASEAN-Leaders-Declaration-on-the-Blue-Economy-Final.pdf>
- ¹¹⁷ ASEAN Leaders' Statement on Advancing Digital Transformation in ASEAN, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/7.-ASEAN-Leaders-Statement-on-Digital-Transformation.pdf>
- ¹¹⁸ ASEAN Strategic Policy Framework on Promoting an Adaptive ASEAN Community of Greater Understanding, Tolerance and a Sense of Regional Agendas Among the Peoples of ASEAN, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/9.-Strategic-Policy-Framework-on-Promoting-an-Adaptive-ASEAN-Community.pdf>
- ¹¹⁹ ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to the 6th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC COP 26), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/10.-ASEAN-Joint-Statement-to-COP26.pdf>
- ¹²⁰ ASEAN Declaration on Promoting Competitiveness, Resilience and Agility of Workers for the Future of Work, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/12.-ASEAN-Declaration-on-Promoting-Competitiveness-Resilience.pdf>
- ¹²¹ ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Reformulation and Production of healthier Food and Beverage Options, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/13.-ASEAN-Leaders-Declaration-on-the-Reformulation-and-Production-of-Healthier-Food-and-Beverage-Options.pdf>
- ¹²² ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/8.-Final-ASEAN-Comprehensive-Framework-on-Care-Economy.-20-Oct-2021.pdf>

On regional issues, ASEAN leaders reiterated their commitment to preserve Southeast Asia as a nuclear weapons-free zone, especially significant on account of AUKUS. They reaffirmed the objectives and principles of the AOIP. On South China Sea, they reiterated their position that disputes in the region should be settled peacefully, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law including UNCLOS. They welcomed continuation of the second reading of the Single Draft Negotiating Text, noting that provisional agreement had been reached on the Preamble, while the 'objectives' section of General Provisions was currently being negotiated. On Myanmar, leaders' endorsed the October 5 decision of ASEAN Foreign Ministers that Myanmar be represented by a non-political representative¹²³ due to the unsatisfactory and highly limited progress in implementation of the ASEAN Leaders' five-point consensus, while making it clear that Myanmar remained a member of ASEAN. In the event, the junta boycotted the event and Myanmar was not represented.

The 18th ASEAN – India Summit¹²⁴, on October 28, endorsed designation of 2022 as the ASEAN-India Friendship Year to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-India relations. It appreciated India's decision to resume vaccine exports and COVID-19 cooperation. There was also appreciation for enhanced ASEAN-India collaboration on countering terrorism, violent extremism, transnational crime and cybersecurity cooperation. There was agreement to strengthen ASEAN-India economic relations including through enhanced utilisation and effective implementation of ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement. ASEAN looked forward to a review of ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement to make it more user-friendly, simple, trade facilitative for businesses and supportive of sustainable and inclusive growth. It welcomed full ratification of ASEAN-India Investment Agreement by all parties and implementation of ASEAN-India Trade in Services Agreement by all parties. It acknowledged the important role of India in regional value chains and looked forward to India's participation in RCEP whenever it is ready to do so.

A Joint Statement on India-ASEAN Cooperation on the AOIP was issued¹²⁵. This commits to strengthening the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership across

¹²³ Statement of the Chair of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, <http://www.mfa.gov.bn/Lists/Press%20Room/news.aspx?id=947>

¹²⁴ Chairman's Statement of the 18th ASEAN-India Summit, 28 October 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/70.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-18th-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf>

¹²⁵ ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/71.-ASEAN-India-Joint-Statement-on-Cooperation-on-the->

the spectrum of political-security, economic, socio-cultural and developmental cooperation. It focuses on exploring potential cooperation between the AOIP and IPOI, identifying 21 areas where existing cooperation can be enhanced or possible cooperation explored. India's commitment to the centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture has been further strengthened. Cooperation between the AOIP and IPOI will necessarily rest on the maritime domain, necessitating strengthening of both economic and security foundations.

ASEAN's summit with Australia has been changed from a biennial to an annual event¹²⁶. The two sides agreed to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership. Australia pledged over AUD 1.06 billion towards ASEAN-Australia cooperation, spread over 13 different programmes. There is commitment to enhance defence and security cooperation to address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges through ASEAN-led mechanisms. There is progress in upgrading the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, which is targeted for conclusion by 2022. ASEAN leaders have accepted Australia's reassurance of steadfast commitment to meet all its obligations as a non-nuclear weapons state under the NPT, while noting its continued support and reaffirmation of ASEAN centrality and towards promoting regional peace, stability and security in accordance with the TAC.

President Biden participated virtually in the US-ASEAN Summit on October 26¹²⁷, as well as in the East Asia Summit on October 27. He pledged to deepen cooperation in the region "to take on the challenges of our time, which includes working with allies and partners to defend against threats to the international rules-based order and to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific"¹²⁸. He described China's actions towards Taiwan as 'coercive' and a threat to peace and stability¹²⁹. He committed \$ 102 million in new initiatives to expand the US-ASEAN strategic partnership, focusing on the health, climate, economic

[ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific-for-Peace-Stability-and-Prosperity-in-the-Region-Final.pdf](#)

¹²⁶ Chairman's Statement of the 1st ASEAN-Australia Summit, 27 October 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/62.-FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-1st-ASEAN-Australia-Summit.pdf>

¹²⁷ Readout of President Biden's Participation in the US-ASEAN Summit, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/26/readout-of-president-bidens-participation-in-the-u-s-asean-summit/>

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Biden stresses 'rock solid' US commitment to Taiwan at East Asia Summit, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20211028-biden-stresses-rock-solid-us-commitment-to-taiwan-at-east-asia-summit>

and people sectors¹³⁰. He said that ASEAN could expect the US to show up including at the leader level and reiterated the US commitment to ASEAN centrality¹³¹. An ASEAN-US Leaders' Statement on Digital Development committed to US support for ASEAN digital initiatives¹³². Speaking at the East Asia Summit, he announced that the US would explore with partners the development of an Indo-Pacific economic framework that "will define our shared objectives around trade facilitation, standards for the digital economy and technology, supply chain resiliency, decarbonisation and clean energy, infrastructure, worker standards and other areas of shared interest"¹³³. The US pivot to Asia is clearly gathering momentum.

ASEAN and China decided to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership¹³⁴. The Chairman's statement records the standard ASEAN formulation on maintaining the South China Sea as a region of peace, stability and prosperity, full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, progress towards formulation of the Code of Conduct and the need to uphold international law, including UNCLOS. It also reaffirms the need to pursue peaceful resolution of disputes, the importance of non-militarisation and self-restraint. Such statements have not hindered China's coercive actions in the past, nor are they likely to do so in the years ahead.

A comprehensive action plan for the period 2021-25 to implement the ASEAN-Russia strategic partnership was promulgated¹³⁵. The 15-page plan focuses on cooperation in the political-security, economic, socio-cultural and cross-pillar areas and sets out priorities for both sides to realise the full potential of the ASEAN-Russia strategic partnership.

¹³⁰ Fact Sheet: New Initiatives to Expand the US-ASEAN Strategic Partnership, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/26/fact-sheet-new-initiatives-to-expand-the-u-s-asean-strategic-partnership/>

¹³¹ Remarks by President Biden at the Annual US-ASEAN Summit, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/10/26/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-annual-u-s-asean-summit/>

¹³² ASEAN-US Leaders' Statement on Digital Development, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/27/asean-u-s-leaders-statement-on-digital-development/>

¹³³ Readout of President Biden's Participation in the East Asia Summit, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/27/readout-of-president-bidens-participation-in-the-east-asia-summit/>

¹³⁴ Chairman's Statement of the 24th ASEAN-China Summit, 26 October 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/63.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-24th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>

¹³⁵ Comprehensive Plan of Action CPA to Implement the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Russian Federation Strategic Partnership, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/83.-ASEAN-RU-CPA-2021-2025-Final.pdf>

The 16th East Asia Summit took place on October 27, 2021¹³⁶. It focused on identifying areas of cooperation for the period 2023–27, ranging from environment and energy, education, finance, health issues, disaster management, economic cooperation and trade, food security and maritime cooperation; and regional and international issues, including developments in Myanmar, the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, countering violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism and the need for an enduring regional architecture. There was no mention of Taiwan or Hong Kong. The Chairman's statement "noted views expressed by some EAS participating countries on the AUKUS"¹³⁷. EAS leaders adopted statements on sustainable recovery¹³⁸, economic growth through tourism recovery¹³⁹, and on mental health cooperation¹⁴⁰.

Despite its visible limitations, ASEAN's influence continues to grow. ASEAN will maximise the benefit it derives from its engagement with powers that have a stake in the region. How effectively these powers engage with ASEAN will influence their ability to shape the vital Southeast Asian regional environment.

¹³⁶ Chairman's Statement of the 16th East Asia Summit, 27 October 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/96.-FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-16th-East-Asia-Summit-on-27-October-2021.pdf>

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ East Asia Summit Leaders' Statement on Sustainable Recovery, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/98.-EAS-Leaders-Statement-on-Sustainable-Recovery-FINAL.pdf>

¹³⁹ East Asia Summit Leaders' Statement on Economic Growth Through Tourism Recovery, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/99.-EAS-Leaders-Statement-on-Economic-Growth-through-Tourism-Recovery-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴⁰ East Asia Summit Leaders' Statement on Mental Health Cooperation, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/97.-EAS-Leaders-Statement-on-Mental-Health-Cooperation-FINAL.pdf>



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