



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

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### INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

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

### Cover Image:

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden meet in New Delhi, September 08, 2023. Source: PIB*

*Leaders at the G20 Summit meet at Bharat Mandappam in Pragati Maidan, New Delhi on September 09, 2023. Source: PIB*

*INS Sahyadri, HMAS Toowoomba and KRI Gusti Ngurah Rai exercise together in the Timor Sea, September 21, 2023. Source: Indian Navy.*

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# INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

September 2023

## Abstract

Multilateral summits high on promise commanded global and Indo-Pacific attention during the month. Southeast Asian leaders and those of partner nations met at the 43rd ASEAN Summit and the associated 18th East Asia Summit at Jakarta from September 05-07. Indonesia unveiled the first ASEAN Maritime Outlook and an action plan for constabulary cooperation on the AOIP with four partners, but did not make meaningful progress on issues generated by China's assertions and great power competition. The New Delhi G20 summit on September 9-10 brought together a galaxy of global leaders and witnessed the induction of the African Union as a member. The comprehensive Leaders' Declaration contained 73 outcomes and 39 annexed documents, including numerous commitments to far-reaching change from the leaders. It attested to the efficacy of India's diplomacy, leaving a large agenda to be carried forward by subsequent G20 presidencies. The 78th Session of the UN General Assembly opened in New York on September 5, with the High-Level Week from September 18-22. That leaders of four of the five permanent members of the UNSC chose to absent themselves speaks for itself.

In other promising plurilateral interactions, India, the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE, the EU, France, Germany and Italy signed on for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor on September 09. This ambitious connectivity initiative seeks to provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative and create the infrastructure that could transform global trade in the coming century. Ten days later, a Memorandum of Understanding established a business council partnership to engage the governments of India, the US, UAE and Israel and promote private sector participation in the I2U2 initiative. Quad Foreign Ministers met in New York on September 22 and continued to advance their vision of multilateral cooperation for the benefit of the Indo-Pacific people.

At the bilateral level, Prime Minister Modi met US President Joe Biden on September 08, French President Emmanuel Macron on September 10, and Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed bin Salman on September 11. Joint Statements following these meetings indicate that India's cooperation with these countries continues to thrive.

A US presidential visit to Hanoi on September 10 resulted in the bilateral relationship being upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, Vietnam's fifth after China, Russia, India and South Korea. Australia and the Philippines upgraded their relations from a comprehensive to a strategic partnership on September 09. The US continued to woo Pacific Island States through the second US-Pacific Islands Forum Summit on September 25. Meanwhile, China continued attempts to strengthen its control within the first island chain by publishing a new map with a ten-dash line encompassing Taiwan and installing a floating barrier to prevent Filipino fishermen from entering the Scarborough Shoal (the barrier was cut by the Philippines Coastguard). Taiwan unveiled its first indigenously manufactured submarine. Residents of Indonesia's Rempang Island, in the Natuna Sea, protested strongly as Indonesia sought to evict them from their land to enable the establishment of a China-owned glass factory.

The seventh and last of India's Project 17A frigates was launched at Mumbai on September 01. India continued its maritime outreach through 16 international interactions, including exercises with international partners and visits to Indo-Pacific ports during the month. The Australian Government received the independent analysis of its Surface Combatant Fleet and began considering the recommendations.

## **AOIP and the 18th East Asia Summit**

Located on the eastern flanks of India's core areas of interest, ASEAN comprises the world's fifth largest economy and is expected to move into the fourth position by 2030. Five of its member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) are among the world's top 30 exporting nations. Its sea lanes provide vital connectivity for the world's supply chains and energy security.

The strategic geography of ASEAN, coupled with China's rise and assertion, have converted the ASEAN space into a key arena of global geopolitical competition. This competition is predominantly in the maritime domain, where China's attempts to change established international law (including UNCLOS) and expand its blue water territory are coming up against pushback, not just from the world's pre-eminent maritime powers, but also from regional nations. Thus, the 33 statements and declarations of the 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit and associated summits, held at Jakarta from September 4-7, 2023, are of

considerable interest<sup>1</sup>. It is Indo-Pacific cooperation that this commentary focuses on.

The Trump administration's announcement of its Indo-Pacific policy<sup>2</sup> in 2017 heralded recognition of the onset of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia, already seeing itself as the Global Maritime Fulcrum, recognised the portents and set about formulating an Indo-Pacific Outlook as an ASEAN concept. At the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in 2019, Indonesia was able to get ASEAN to back<sup>3</sup> adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific<sup>4</sup> (AOIP). This outlook was and is intended to guide ASEAN's engagement and cooperation in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

The AOIP views the Indo-Pacific as a closely integrated and interconnected region with ASEAN at its centre, marked by dialogue and cooperation and not rivalry, and as a region of development and prosperity for all. It recognises the importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture and identified four areas of cooperation: maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development goals and economic cooperation.

The AOIP was endorsed when Thailand led ASEAN. Continental Southeast Asia, however, has little interest in the maritime domain. It is maritime ASEAN, primarily Indonesia and the Philippines, that has the most interest. Indonesia's turn to lead ASEAN after the acceptance of the AOIP came for the first time in 2023. It has effectively used this opportunity to advance AOIP cooperation with all its partners.

In August 2023, ASEAN published its first Maritime Outlook<sup>5</sup>. This recognises the geopolitical challenge, but notes that maritime challenges include the sustainability of the region's fishery resources, transnational crime, drug trafficking, people smuggling, degradation of the maritime environment, marine debris, sea robbery and piracy, and others. At the same time, the seas provide opportunity such as the blue and green economies, which can become engines of growth for ASEAN.

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<sup>1</sup> 43<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Summit and related summits, <https://asean.org/43rd-asean-summit-and-related-summits/>

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, November 10, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>

<sup>3</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, Bangkok, 23 June 2019, 'Advancing Partnership for Sustainability', Para 56

<sup>4</sup> ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, [https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ASEAN Maritime Outlook, First Edition, August 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AMO-1.pdf>

Four bilateral joint statements on AOIP cooperation, with China, India, the US and ROK are among the outcomes of Indonesia's leadership of ASEAN. These supplement earlier bilateral joint statements on AOIP Cooperation with Japan<sup>6</sup> and Australia<sup>7</sup>.

The statement with China records recognition that the AOIP is ASEAN's independent initiative, is open and inclusive, intended to enhance ASEAN's community-building process, and is not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones<sup>8</sup>. In effect, China has accepted the term 'Indo-Pacific'. The statement is silent on China's claims in the South China Sea, its continuing grey zone coercion, and on the Code of Conduct, but that is to be expected in a joint statement.

In the maritime domain, China and ASEAN will encourage partnerships on the blue economy; promote cooperation on marine environment protection, biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources; and explore projects to cooperation marine science, technology and connectivity. There is broad agreement to expand cooperation in specified connectivity, sustainable development goals and economic areas, even a statement regarding looking forward to exploring cooperation between the AOIP and BRI and development cooperation with China's GDI. ASEAN's attempts to involve China in combating transnational crime, and addressing other non-traditional security concerns continue. The areas of difference come out in the paragraphs on the South China Sea dispute and resolving them in accordance with UNCLOS, the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability and freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea as well as a Code of Conduct that is in consonance with international law, including UNCLOS; all of which are included only in the Chairman's Statement<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Joint Statement of the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-Japan Summit on Cooperation in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, November 12, 2020, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/17-Joint-Statement-of-the-23rd-ASEAN-Japan-Summit-on-Cooperation-on-ASEAN-O...pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Joint Statement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual ASEAN-Australia Summit on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, November 12, 2022, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Joint-Statement-on-2nd-ASEAN-Australia-Annual-Summit-on-Cooperation-on-the-AOIP\\_Final-1.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Joint-Statement-on-2nd-ASEAN-Australia-Annual-Summit-on-Cooperation-on-the-AOIP_Final-1.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Mutually Beneficial Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, September 06, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Final-ASEAN-China-Joint-Statement-on-Mutually-Beneficial-Cooperation-on-the-ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-China Summit, September 06, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Chairmans-Statement-of-the-26th-ASEAN-China-Summit.pdf>

The joint statement with India<sup>10</sup> includes decisions to act on deepening the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; strengthening ASEAN-India cooperation on maritime safety and security including HADR and SAR; countering trans-national crime and non-traditional challenges; enhancing information sharing and capacity building in the maritime domain; promoting cooperation and coordination between maritime authorities and law enforcement agencies; enhancing India-ASEAN connectivity; promoting cooperation in the blue economy including promoting green transport; strengthening cooperation to reduce marine debris; fostering greater engagement in the private sector, tourism industry, MSMEs, coastal communities and academia, among others; enhancing sustainable and responsible fisheries; enhancing ASEAN-India Space Cooperation including for maritime domain awareness; and enhancing cooperation for development and research of marine technology. The Chair's statement of the bilateral summit appreciatively records the attendance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the President of Timor-Leste as an observer<sup>11</sup>. It welcomes India's support and active cooperation on the AOIP and the complementarity between it and the IPOI. It welcomes successful conduct of the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise from May 2-8 2023, "which started from Singapore and culminated in international waters along the transit route to the Philippines". It similarly appreciates the enhanced ASEAN-India collaboration in countering transnational crime, welcomes progress of review of the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) and seeks completion of the revision by 2025. ASEAN leaders reiterate that the doors remain open for India to join RCEP whenever it is ready and recognise India's role as an important player in the global and regional value chains.

Similarly, the Joint Statement on Cooperation with the US on AOIP identifies policy areas where the two will work together<sup>12</sup>. These cover all four of the AOIP's priority areas. Of note are joint commitments to expand cooperation on sustainable management of marine resources and strengthening capacity to combat IUU fishing including through improved maritime domain awareness as well as cooperation on upholding freedom of navigation and overflight. The Chair's statement on the ASEAN-US Summit contains a

<sup>10</sup> ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Maritime Cooperation, September 7, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ASEAN-India-Joint-Statement-on-Maritime-Cooperation-FIN-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 20<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-India Summit, September 7, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-20th-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> ASEAN-US Leaders' Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, September 06, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ASEAN-US-Leaders-Statement-on-AOIP-FINAL-formatting.pdf>



paragraph on the war against Ukraine, another expressing concern on North Korea's continued missile launches, and three paragraphs on the situation in Myanmar<sup>13</sup>. The US State Department published a Fact Sheet on deepening ASEAN-US cooperation<sup>14</sup>.

The statement on ASEAN-ROK cooperation is notable in that it identifies a number of areas of potential cooperation, but does not indicate progress in any specific area<sup>15</sup>. This indicates that ASEAN-ROK Cooperation on the AOIP remains at a nascent stage.

Taken together, the statements indicate Indonesia's notable success in furthering AOIP cooperation with partner countries and a clear vision of the scope and extent of cooperation with each. This is notwithstanding the concerns of South China Sea (SCS) claimant states: in fact Indonesia can legitimately claim credit for convincing claimant states to go with a collective position and not publish independent statements on the SCS. ASEAN's challenge, however, lies in continuing to 'socialise' China, manage its claims in SCS, finding a bridge between claimant states and China's interests while remaining within the parameters of UNCLOS, and tempering geopolitical competition that China has created. The key to the last will lie in direct talks between China and the US.

The Summit also marked the culmination of Indonesia's Chairmanship. President Joko Widodo handed over to Lao PDR Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone<sup>16</sup>, spelling the transfer of ASEAN leadership from a strong and independent maritime nation to a continental one, susceptible to China's influence. The chair will then pass to Malaysia in 2025. Leaders decided that Myanmar will not lead ASEAN in 2026; that turn will pass to the Philippines. It is then that AOIP cooperation will again become a high priority and receive a thrust – but the Philippines is a claimant state and has turned towards the US.

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<sup>13</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 11<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-United States Summit, September 06, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-11th-ASEAN-US-Summit.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Fact Sheet: Deepening the United States-ASEAN People-to-People Relationship, Investing in education, cultural exchange and next generation of leaders <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/05/fact-sheet-deepening-the-united-states-asean-people-to-people-relationship-investing-in-education-cultural-exchange-and-the-next-generation-of-leaders/>

<sup>15</sup> Joint Statement of the 24<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Republic of Korea Summit on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), September 06, 2023, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-24th-ASEAN-ROK-Summit.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Lao PDR to Assume ASEAN Chairmanship 2024 in Succession to Indonesia, September 8, 2023, <https://www.asean2023.id/en/news/lao-pdr-to-assume-asean-chairmanship-2024-in-succession-to-indonesia>

Unless Indonesia can convince it to remain wedded to ASEAN or China's behaviour can be moderated, AOIP cooperation may fall by the wayside.

## The New Delhi G20 Summit

Following the November 2022 Bali Summit<sup>17</sup>, India assumed Presidency of the G20 from December 1, 2022 till November 30, 2023. This was the first time since the G20 began meeting annually (in 2008) that India had opportunity to steer the group's agenda and host its leaders. It made the summit the biggest event in the year's diplomatic calendar. The theme of India's presidency was "Vasudhaiva Kuttumbakam" or "One Earth, One Family, One Future"<sup>18</sup>. The focus was enabling the voice of the Global South to be heard in addressing major issues related to the world economy.

Preparation began with the Voice of the Global South Summit India hosted virtually on January 12-13, 2023. This comprised 10 sessions, bringing together representatives from 125 countries and focusing on financing people-centric development; balancing growth with environment friendly lifestyles; determining priorities of the Global South; energy security and development; building resilient healthcare systems; human resource development and capacity building; developing synergies in the Global South on trade, technology, tourism and resources; and hearing suggestions for India's Presidency<sup>19</sup>. Over the course of the year, India hosted more than 200 meetings in over 50 cities across 32 different workstreams<sup>20</sup>. The busy schedule culminated in the New Delhi G20 Summit at Bharat Mandappam in Pragati Maidan, attended by 16 G20 Heads of Government, 10 heads of invited states and the heads of 10 international organisations. Notable absentees were China's President Xi Jinping (the first time he has missed a G20 summit), Russia's President Vladimir Putin, and Mexico's President Andres Loblador

India set six priorities for its Presidency: green development, climate finance and LiFE (Lifestyle for the Environment); accelerated, inclusive and resilient growth; refocusing G20 efforts to accelerate progress on SDGs at the mid-point of the 2030 agenda; technological transformation and digital public infrastructure; reforming multilateral institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and

<sup>17</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The Bali G20 Summit", The Indo-Pacific Monitor, November 2022, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4610.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4610.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> G20, <https://www.india.gov.in/spotlight/group-twenty-g20>

<sup>19</sup> Voice of the global South Summit: Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose, <https://www.mea.gov.in/voice-of-global-summit.htm>

<sup>20</sup> G-20 and India's Presidency, December 10, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1882356>

women-led development. A seventh was inclusion of the African Union as a member of the G20, and the 2023 summit began with AU's induction. A comprehensive Leaders' Declaration<sup>21</sup> reflected fulfilment of an ambitious agenda and agreement on 73 lines of effort and 39 documents, more than twice the number agreed upon in Bali. Its content covered the six priority objectives and four other areas: international taxation; financial sector issues, countering terrorism and money laundering; and creating a more inclusive world.

Though the G20 is an economic forum and not a geopolitical one, geopolitical developments held up achievement of consensus till the day before the summit. India did not invite Ukraine to participate despite pressure to do so. The words used in the Bali Declaration were no longer acceptable. In the event, the Leaders' Statement underscored that all states must act in a manner consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter in its entirety and must refrain from the threat or use of force to seek territorial acquisition against the territorial integrity and sovereignty or political independence of any state. It recorded that the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible, highlighted the human suffering and negative added impacts of the war in Ukraine with regard to global food and energy security, supply chains, macro-financial stability, inflation and growth, which had complicated the policy environment for the developing and least developed countries and derailed progress towards the SDGs.

The Leaders made 12 commitments: accelerating strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth; accelerating the full and effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; pursuing climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable development pathways by championing an integrated and inclusive approach; improving access to medical countermeasures and facilitating more supplies and production capacities in developing countries; urgently and effectively addressing debt vulnerabilities in developing countries; scaling up financing for accelerating progress on SDGs; accelerating efforts and enhancing resources towards achieving the Paris Agreement; pursuing reform of multilateral development banks to make them more effective; improving access to digital services and digital public infrastructure; promoting sustainable, quality, healthy, safe and gainful employment; closing the gender gap and promoting the participation of women in the economy as decision-makers; and better integrating the perspectives of developing countries into future G20 agendas and strengthening their voice in global decision making.

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<sup>21</sup> G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2023/sep/doc202399250001.pdf>

The summit also provided a platform for other announcements that could shape the future. First of these was the India-Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor, for which a MoU was signed between Saudi Arabia, UAE, India, the EU, France, Germany, Italy and the US<sup>22</sup>. A Global Biofuels Alliance was launched by India, the US, Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Mauritius and the UAE<sup>23</sup>. An initiative to fundamentally reshape and scale up the World Bank to more effectively deliver inclusive economic growth was unveiled<sup>24</sup>. This could unlock an additional \$ 200 billion in new lending capacity over the next decade.

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, identified eight key outcomes of the New Delhi G20 Summit<sup>25</sup>: the action plan for sustainable development goals; the reform of international financial institutions; a green development pact; the high principles for LiFE, the lifestyle for environment initiative; an understanding on debt management; a consensus on woman-led development; an acceptance of digital public infrastructure; and an agreement to undertake global skills mapping. These and other outcomes will hopefully provide the international community the direction to overcome the numerous common challenges the world faces and provide the requisite resources for them. The reality is that the G20 Declaration is at best a statement of policy. Implementation, however, is governed by the resources provided by leaders, particularly of the developed nations. These have often fallen far short of promise.

Nevertheless, the successful hosting of the G20 Summit represents a success for India and its diplomacy. Coming after the success of Chandrayaan-3 last month, it signals an India that is more confident of itself and its capabilities. This confidence and capability is the harbinger of a better future for India, and along with it, a more representative world.

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<sup>22</sup> Memorandum of Understanding on the Principles of an India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor, [https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2023/sep/doc20239925010\\_1.pdf](https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2023/sep/doc20239925010_1.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Readout of Launch of Global Biofuels Alliance, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/readout-of-launch-of-global-biofuels-alliance/>

<sup>24</sup> Fact Sheet: Delivering a Better, Bigger, More Effective World Bank, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-delivering-a-better-bigger-more-effective-world-bank/>

<sup>25</sup> EAM Remarks at the ORF India – UN for Global South Event, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5CndIYsJMM>

## Unveiling the IMEC

In a public speech in May 2023, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had said, "If you remember nothing else from my speech, remember I2U2, because you will be hearing more about it as we go forward". He went on to describe the fundamental notion of the I2U2 as "connecting South Asia to the Middle East to the United States in ways that advance our economic technology and diplomacy"<sup>26</sup>. Three days later, National Security Advisors of India, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE met in Saudi Arabia to "advance their shared vision of a more secure and prosperous Middle East region interconnected with India and the world"<sup>27</sup>. Continued negotiation culminated in a special event co-chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Joe Biden<sup>28</sup>, at which India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Principles of an India – Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) on the sidelines of the G20 Summit<sup>29</sup>. Other participants at the event included Mauritius and the World Bank<sup>30</sup>.

The MoU is a commitment by the founding partners to work with other international partners and the private sector to connect India to Europe. The expectation is that this will fulfil multiple objectives: generating economic growth while incentivising new investments and the creation of jobs; connecting Asia and Europe to commercial hubs and facilitating the development and export of clean energy; supporting existing trade and manufacturing synergies and strengthening food security and supply chains; linking energy grids and telecommunication lines through undersea cables to expand reliable access to electricity; enabling innovation of advanced clean

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<sup>26</sup> Keynote Address by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, May 04, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/keynote-address-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan>

<sup>27</sup> Readout of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Meeting on Regional Integration, May 07, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/07/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-on-regional-integration/>

<sup>28</sup> Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) & India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), September 09, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1955921>

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum of Understanding on the Principles of an India-Middle East – Europe Economic Corridor, 09 September 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-principles-of-an-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/>

<sup>30</sup> FACT Sheet: President Biden and Prime Minister Modi Host Leaders on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, September 09, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-prime-minister-modi-host-leaders-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>

energy technology; and connecting communities to a secure and stable internet<sup>31</sup>.

The corridor effectively comprises three parts: an eastern maritime corridor connecting India to the UAE, a northern maritime corridor connecting Israel to Europe, and an overland railway corridor connecting the UAE to Israel via Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The participants intend laying cable for electricity and digital connectivity along the railway route, as well as a pipeline to carry clean hydrogen. They will establish coordinating entities to address the full range of technical, design, financing, legal and relevant regulatory standards. The partners have committed to meet within the next two months to develop and commit to an action plan with relevant timetables to execute their political vision.

In 2012-13, China's Xi Jinping had announced the Silk Route Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, China-centric connectivity initiatives eventually subsumed into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), envisaging an investment of over \$ 1 Trillion to improve connectivity between China and Europe. This investment was in sharp contrast to the failure of the West to fulfil infrastructure development aspirations of Asian and African nations, thus bridging the development gap. The BRI today involves participation of over 150 countries and has contributed substantially to enhancement of China's influence in Asia, Africa and indeed Europe. Among the changes is China's commitment to invest over \$ 400 billion in Iran, the March 2021 Iran-China strategic partnership agreement and Xi Jinping's December 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia<sup>32</sup>. Opposition to the BRI has, however, been gathering momentum on account of its opaque nature, concerns about unsustainable debt and the growing estrangement of the West from China. President Biden had described it as the "debt and noose agreement"<sup>33</sup>, while the EU's Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borell had been equally vocal<sup>34</sup>. China's economic downturn and

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<sup>31</sup> FACT Sheet: President Biden and Prime Minister Modi Host Leaders on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, September 09, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/09/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-prime-minister-modi-host-leaders-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>

<sup>32</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The Xi Jinping Visit to Saudi Arabia", DPG Indo-Pacific Monitor, December 2022, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4824.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4824.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Remarks by President Biden at a Campaign Reception, Salt Lake City, August 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/08/10/remarks-by-president-biden-at-a-campaign-reception-salt-lake-city-ut/>

<sup>34</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The China-EU Engagement", Indo-Pacific Monitor, Volume IV Issue 4, April 2023,

overbearing approach adds to the discomfort of participants and Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni has reportedly advised China of her intention to pull out of the agreement.

IMEC harnesses the strengths of traditional Gulf partners, including the US, France, the EU and India, to provide an alternative. By interlinking economies, IMEC provides the region with a vested interest in the stability necessary for the East-West SLOCs to function effectively. This could herald an era of peace between Israel and the Arab world – Saudi Arabia's acceptance of Israel's inclusion in the MoU is noteworthy. There are, however, reports regarding Saudi Arabia seeking a military pact with the US in return for a peace deal with Israel<sup>35</sup>. The outcome of bilateral negotiations between them, and its endorsement by the US Congress, will impact the corridor.

The IMEC also creates an alternate to the Suez Canal route, which could be blocked by accident or design. It provides India with an alternate to the International North South Transport Corridor, long stymied by sanctions against Iran and instability in Central Asia. The IMEC will no doubt compete with the BRI and the existing Suez Canal link, but the expectation, as enunciated by the President of the European Commission, is that it will make trade between India and Europe 40% faster, will foster clean energy trade between Asia, the Middle East and Europe, and will have a high speed data cable to link some of the most innovative digital ecosystems in the world and create business opportunities along the way – makes the corridor more than just a railway or a cable, it is a green and digital bridge across continents and civilisations<sup>36</sup>.

Corridors of this type entail substantial investment and technical knowhow. IMEC will not, however, have to depend on a single country for finance. G7 leaders had, at their Tokyo summit in May, aimed to mobilise up to \$ 600 billion under their Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment by 2027 to narrow the infrastructure investment gap in partner countries<sup>37</sup>. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are flush with investable funds. The EU, France and Germany have all committed to the project. India too can invest, and has the expertise

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[https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4889.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4889.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Exclusive: US-Saudi defence pact tied to Israel deal, Palestinian demands put aside, September 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-saudi-defence-pact-tied-israel-deal-palestinian-demands-put-aside-2023-09-29/>

<sup>36</sup> Statement by President von der Leyen at the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment event in the G20 Summit, September 09, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_4420](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_4420)

<sup>37</sup> Factsheet on the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100506918.pdf>

required to set up the overland railway network across a distance of more than 2500 Km, depending on the route chosen.

If the Indo-Pacific was about an increased role for India in the Western Pacific, the IMEC portends acceptance of India's increased role in the Arabian Gulf. It is moreover expected to be bankable, with multilateral institutions ready to fund it and private sector participation. In effect, the corridor is envisaged as providing the basis for private sector led world trade for the coming century and more. Partners are not, however, leaving private sector participation to chance. The I2U2 Private Enterprise Partnership, launched on the margins of the UNGA, is part of a well-conceived plan to bring the vision to fulfilment<sup>38</sup>. To derive benefit, however, port infrastructure in India will have to be upgraded, particularly at Kandla and JNPT, the traditional ports for Gulf traffic. Private sector ports could also be brought in. More important, although a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the UAE is operational, FTAs with Saudi Arabia and the EU will have to be prioritised. A fresh attempt may be needed to restructure India's farm laws to enable utilisation of India's agrarian potential.

On September 09, Saudi Arabia and the US issued a joint communique announcing the signing of a bilateral MoU<sup>39</sup>, providing the framework for developing a protocol for establishing intercontinental green transit corridors through the Kingdom to connect Asia with Europe. The communique reflects their political conviction in the IMEC and its future prospects.

However, while the IMEC is still an idea, the BRI is work in progress. There is a long way to go in the IMECs financing and completion. For one, it involves a partnership between a number of countries and political impediments or China's influence may cause one or more of them to pull out. China may have welcomed the initiative with the proviso that it should not become a geopolitical tool<sup>40</sup>, but has a long history of prizing deception. Nevertheless, as

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<sup>38</sup> Launch of I2U2 Private Enterprise Partnership, September 21, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-i2u2-private-enterprise-partnership/>

<sup>39</sup> Joint Communique between the Governments of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, September 09, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-communique-between-the-governments-of-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia-and-the-united-states-of-america/>

<sup>40</sup> China welcomes India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, September 11, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-welcomes-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-2434407-2023-09-11>



observed by Israel's Prime Minister, the IMEC has the potential to become a breakthrough that could transform the region<sup>41</sup>.

## The Modi-Biden Summit of September 2023

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's State Visit to the US in June this year held out the promise of a far-reaching transformation in the bilateral relationship through an ambitious joint statement<sup>42</sup>. The visit of President Joe Biden to New Delhi in September 2023<sup>43</sup>, for a bilateral summit as well as the G20 Summit, provided opportunity to take stock of developments in this transformation.

Briefing the press en route New Delhi, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had spoken of meaningful progress on a number of issues<sup>44</sup>. The joint statement following the bilateral interaction lived up to expectations<sup>45</sup>. Reiteration of principles that bound the two countries together included "The leaders re-emphasised that the shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, inclusion, pluralism and equal opportunities for all citizens are critical to the success our countries enjoy and that these values strengthen our relationship". This implicitly acknowledged that India abides by these values and countered the 'democratic backsliding' narrative propagated by sections of the US media.

In his press conference in Vietnam, President Biden said that he and Prime Minister Modi "had a substantial discussion about how we're going to continue to strengthen the partnership between India and the United States, building on

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<sup>41</sup> G20 plans to build trade, rail corridor linking India, Middle East and Europe, September 10, 2023, <https://www.breakingnews.ie/world/g20-plans-to-build-trade-rail-corridor-linking-india-middle-east-and-europe-1524839.html>

<sup>42</sup> India-USA Joint Statement During the Official State Visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to USA, June 23, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36711/IndiaUSA\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_the\\_Official\\_State\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_Shri\\_Narendra\\_Modi\\_to\\_USA](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36711/IndiaUSA_Joint_Statement_during_the_Official_State_visit_of_Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_to_USA)

<sup>43</sup> Statement from White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on President Biden's Travel to New Delhi, India, and Vice President Harris' Travel to Jakarta, Indonesia, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/22/statement-from-white-house-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-president-bidens-travel-to-new-delhi-india-and-vice-president-harris-travel-to-jakarta-indonesia/>

<sup>44</sup> Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan En Route Ramstein Air Base, Germany, September 7, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/09/08/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-en-route-ramstein-air-base-germany/>

<sup>45</sup> Joint Statement from India and the United States, September 08, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37078/Joint\\_Statement\\_from\\_India\\_and\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37078/Joint_Statement_from_India_and_the_United_States)

the Prime Minister's visit to the White House last June"<sup>46</sup>. However, apart from the announcement that ISRO and NASA were working on modalities for mounting a joint effort to the International Space Station in 2024, trying to finalise a framework for human space flight cooperation and intended to increase their coordination on protecting the planet from the impact of asteroids and near-Earth objects, this discussion was not reflected in the joint statement.

There was, however, evidence of progress in the agreed areas of June 2023. The Congressional Notification process for the GE engines has been completed and the negotiation of a commercial agreement between GE and HAL for joint manufacture of GE-F414 engines in India has commenced. India has formally requested that General Atomics supply 16 Sky Guardian and 15 Sea Guardian MQ-9B drones. A Master Ship Repair Agreement between the USN and MDL was signed in August, to follow a similar agreement between the USN and L&T in April; these will serve the commercial interests of Indian shipyards. In semiconductor supply chains, the implementation of announcements by Micron, LAM Research and Applied Materials to invest in India is proceeding satisfactorily. Two more companies, Microchip Technology Inc. and Advanced Micro Devices have announced their intent to invest \$ 700 million to expand their R&D and engineering operations in India. An MoU had been signed between the Bharat 6G Alliance and the US Next G Alliance to deepen the public-private partnership between vendors and operators, and the leaders looked forward to participation of Indian companies in the US Rip and Replace program (to replace the equipment made by Huawei and ZTE already installed in the US telecom network). A mid-term review of iCET is scheduled for September 2023, an annual review at NSA level will follow in early 2024. There is intensified consultation between India and the US to facilitate India-US cooperation on nuclear energy, including the development of next generation small modular reactor technologies in the collaborative mode. The final dispute between India and the US in the WTO has been settled. A number of Indian educational institutions have signed MoUs for cooperation with US counterparts. Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to the Quad and Prime Minister Modi looked forward to welcoming President Biden to the Quad Leaders' Summit to be hosted by India in 2024. The US announced its decision to co-lead the Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport Pillar of the Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative, along with India and Japan. The US reiterated its commitment to work with India in the quantum domain. The leaders welcomed joint support for a payment security mechanism financed through

<sup>46</sup> Remarks by President Biden in a Press Conference, September 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/10/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-press-conference-2/>

public and private funds which will accelerate the procurement of 10,000 made in India electric buses and associated charging infrastructure. Indian and US institutions exchanged letters of intent to provide \$ 500 million each to anchor a renewable infrastructure investment fund.

There were significant outcomes on the multilateral front also, these are covered separately in the section on the G20 Summit. What is clear is that the growth of the bilateral relationship remains on track. Progress will inevitably be slow as both countries step well outside their comfort zone and engage meaningfully. Continuity will always be a challenge, given that both countries are democratic and will go through elections in 2024. So long as the congruence in their visions remains, their partnership will impact the region, and indeed the world, substantially.

## The Saudi Arabian State Visit

India's relations with Saudi Arabia have improved substantially in the last 15 years. The two countries became strategic partners in 2010, with cooperation covering the security, economic, defence and political areas<sup>47</sup>. Visits of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Riyadh in April 2016 and October 2019, and by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) to India in February 2019 moved the relationship forward. The State Visit by MBS to New Delhi on September 11 is a continuation of this process.

Saudi Arabia occupies two thirds of the Arabian Peninsula, linking Europe and South Asia. It has the world's second largest proven crude oil reserves (after Venezuela) and by far the world's largest exportable surplus, making it the world's leading source for energy. Exports have given Saudi Arabia considerable wealth, including a large investable surplus. Two of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, are located within the country, giving it disproportionate heft in Islamic affairs. Saudi Arabia is ruled by an absolute monarchy; MBS is the designated heir. Two-thirds of its work force and nearly 40% of its population comprises expatriates, including over 2.6 million Indians<sup>48</sup>. Security has long been assured by the US, in exchange for Saudi oil sales being denominated exclusively in USD. The bilateral relationship frayed during the Biden administration when the US imposed the 'Khashoggi Ban' and

<sup>47</sup> Riyadh Declaration: A New Era of Strategic Partnership, March 01, 2010, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/3700/Riyadh+Declaration+A+New+Era+of+Strategic+Partnership>

<sup>48</sup> Population of Overseas Indians, <https://mea.gov.in/population-of-overseas-indians.htm>

insisted that the US-Saudi partnership reflect US values<sup>49</sup>. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and efforts to rebalance towards the Indo-Pacific generated doubt about US reliability. The consequential opening was exploited by China, resulting a consequential visit by Xi Jinping and his midwifing the resumption of the Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations<sup>50</sup>. These developments have resulted in the US rethinking its position, as reflected by the positioning of the USS Bataan ARG to the Gulf<sup>51</sup>.

Saudi Arabia is also important for India. It was the second largest supplier of crude oil to India in 2022, providing 815,000 barrels per day, 14.5% of India's total oil imports amounting to over 5.6 million barrels per day<sup>52</sup>. Security of India's diaspora and the money they remit are important interests. So is the annual Haj pilgrimage for India's substantial Muslim population, and the influence Saudi Arabia commands in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia too looks at India as a reliable buyer for its crude, an investment destination, a source of digital transformation and high-quality, disciplined professionals and labour to support its services and industry. This congruence spurs the growth of the India-Saudi Arabia relationship.

Prince Mohammed's visit had two parts: attending the G20 Summit on September 9-10, and the State Visit on September 11<sup>53</sup>. The bilateral joint statement indicated continued institutionalisation and forward movement of the relatively new strategic relationship<sup>54</sup>. The two leaders co-chaired the first meeting of the India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council set up in October 2019 and reviewed the work done by the two Ministerial Committees under this Council. Eight MoUs were signed / exchanged. Both sides discussed cooperation in a number of areas, including energy, electricity and grid interconnection, petrochemical complexes, promoting the use of advanced

<sup>49</sup> Accountability for the Murder of Jamal Khashoggi, February 26, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/accountability-for-the-murder-of-jamal-khashoggi/>

<sup>50</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The Xi Jinping visit to Saudi Arabia", DPG Indo-Pacific Monitor, December 2022, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4824.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4824.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> USS Bataan hosts distinguished visitors from Saudi Arabia at sea, September 17, 2023, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3528226/uss-bataan-hosts-distinguished-visitors-from-saudi-arabia-at-sea/>

<sup>52</sup> OPE Data, [https://asb.opec.org/data/ASB\\_Data.php](https://asb.opec.org/data/ASB_Data.php).

<sup>53</sup> State visit of the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to India, September 09, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37081/State\\_visit\\_of\\_the\\_Crown\\_Prince\\_and\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_the\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_to\\_India](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37081/State_visit_of_the_Crown_Prince_and_Prime_Minister_of_the_Kingdom_of_Saudi_Arabia_to_India)

<sup>54</sup> Joint Statement during the State Visit of HRH the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to India, September 11, 2023, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37110/Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_HRH\\_the\\_Crown\\_Prince\\_and\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_the\\_Kingdom\\_of\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_to\\_India](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37110/Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_HRH_the_Crown_Prince_and_Prime_Minister_of_the_Kingdom_of_Saudi_Arabia_to_India)

hydrocarbon materials and energy efficiency. Both sides emphasised the role of the private sector in their economic partnership and discussed further facilitation of investment from Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund in India. Both agreed to enhance cooperation in the trade sector, industry and mining, food security, ICT and the digital economy, tourism, health, defence, cyber security, maritime security, combating transnational crime, and countering terrorism.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) announced at the G20 Summit will transform the Indian Ocean maritime, bringing along with it substantial regional development, as well as strategic competition with China. As the I2U2 partnership develops and India enhances its footprint to the west, the India-Saudi Arabia partnership will play an important role in regional affairs. The partnership, however, is still at an exploratory stage. Actual outcomes will depend on the resources put into achieving desired results.

## India's Quadrilaterals

India's quadrilateral groupings both moved forward on the margins of the 78<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly at New York. The Quad Foreign Ministers issued a joint statement, while the I2U2 group launched a Private Enterprise Partnership and announced a joint space venture<sup>55</sup>.

The Quad Ministerial Statement<sup>56</sup> is essentially a reiteration, with different words, of the joint statement following the March 2023 New Delhi Ministerial<sup>57</sup>. There is recommitment to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient. The commitment to the UN Charter, the full achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UN reform and ASEAN centrality, as well as working through the PIF and IORA are reiterated. So is commitment to the Quad Hiroshima initiatives, with the addition of a statement of support for private sector-led Quad Investors to facilitate investment in critical and emerging technologies. There is progress on the activities of the Quad Maritime Security Working Group and the Quad Counterterrorism Working Group, both have held initial meetings and are moving ahead with tabletop exercises. There is reiteration of the conviction that international law, respect

<sup>55</sup> The I2U2 Group Announces Joint Space Venture, September 22, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/the-i2u2-group-announces-joint-space-venture/>

<sup>56</sup> Joint Readout of the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, September 22, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/joint-readout-of-the-quad-foreign-ministers-meeting-in-new-york/>

<sup>57</sup> Joint Statement: Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting, March 03, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36323/Joint\\_Statement\\_Quad\\_Foreign\\_Ministers\\_Meeting](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36323/Joint_Statement_Quad_Foreign_Ministers_Meeting)

for sovereignty and territorial integrity, peaceful resolution of disputes and the maintenance of peace and security in the maritime domain underpin Indo-Pacific development and prosperity. There is continued concern about the militarisation of disputed features, the dangerous use of maritime militia vessels and efforts to disrupt other countries' offshore exploitation activities. There is concern about the ongoing war in Ukraine and the unacceptability of the use of nuclear weapons in that war, condemnation of North Korea's destabilising launches of ballistic missiles and concern about the crisis in Myanmar. Finally, there is the statement of intent to meet in person for the next Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Japan in 2024.

The I2U2 witnessed representatives of the four countries signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the UAE-India Business Council, the UAE-US Business Council and the UAE-Israel Business Council to create the I2U2 Private Enterprise Partnership<sup>58</sup>. This partnership will increase awareness of the I2U2 initiative in business communities and support projects and other efforts that further the goals of the initiative. An I2U2 web page has been launched<sup>59</sup>, re-identifying focal areas for projects as water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security and technology. I2U2 partners also announced a new joint space venture to create a space-based tool for policymakers, institutions and entrepreneurs, enabling their work on environmental and climate change challenges<sup>60</sup>.

The ideation phase of the Quad and I2U2 partnerships is behind; both appear to be moving into the implementation phase of the relationship. This phase will see greater involvement of the private sector; additional ideas, if any, will have to wait till the next Quad Summit. India and its capacities will remain central to both partnerships.

## The US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The US-Vietnam relationship has undergone transformational change, from conflict in the 1960s and early 1970s, to normalisation of ties followed by the establishment of a comprehensive partnership in 2013. On September 10, a new chapter was added to the relationship when the two countries upgraded their ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership "for the purposes of peace,

<sup>58</sup> Launch of I2U2 Private Enterprise Partnership, September 21, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-i2u2-private-enterprise-partnership/>

<sup>59</sup> I2U2, <https://www.state.gov/i2u2/>

<sup>60</sup> The I2U2 Group Announces Joint Space Venture, September 22, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/the-i2u2-group-announces-joint-space-venture/>

cooperation and sustainable development”<sup>61</sup>. This is the highest tier of Vietnam’s external relationships, one it has with only four other countries: China, Russia, India and South Korea.

The new partnership stands on 10 pillars. In the first, Political and Diplomatic Relations, the leaders intend to enhance dialogue at all levels, establish an annual dialogue at Foreign Minister Level, promote relations between political parties and legislative bodies, and complete construction and staffing of their diplomatic and consular facilities. In the second, Economic, Trade and Investment Cooperation, both will further open their markets to each other and address market access barriers through a Trade and Investment Facilitation Agreement<sup>62</sup>. The US intends to expand bilateral market access for agricultural products and provide capital to Vietnamese borrowers. Vietnam will purchase 50 Boeing 373 Max aircraft. Three US firms are investing in facilities in Vietnam to strengthen semiconductor supply chains. Others are investing in Vietnam to develop AI-based solutions tailored for Vietnam. A Vietnamese company is building an electric vehicle manufacturing facility in North Carolina, while a US based company is opening hotels, residences and restaurants in Vietnam. Other US companies are investing in enhancing Vietnam’s port infrastructure, expanding aquaculture operations and securing Vietnam’s next generation of bank notes. The third pillar is Science, Technology, Innovation and Digital Cooperation, wherein the US convened an investment and innovation summit to discuss priorities for expanding technology and economic cooperation, formalised a bilateral partnership to expand the capacity of the semiconductor ecosystem in Vietnam to support US industry, established workforce development initiatives, and announced the intent to launch an electronics and leading technology advancement partnership and a science and technology agreement for research. In the fourth, Education and Training Cooperation, the US announced it would encourage American educational institutions to welcome additional Vietnamese students (they already admit 30,000) and encourage partnerships between educational institutions, including opening campuses in Vietnam. The fifth pillar is advancing climate, energy, environment and health cooperation. The two will launch a bilateral climate working group to coordinate climate related projects, expand

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<sup>61</sup> Joint Leaders’ Statement: Elevating United States-Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, September 11, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/11/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>62</sup> Details from Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, September 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/10/fact-sheet-president-joseph-r-biden-and-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-announce-the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>

Vietnam's energy storage capacity, support Vietnam's efforts to quantify its rare earth resources and enhance cooperation on a range of health related activities.

Pillar 6 is addressing war legacies, under which the US will help Vietnam to identify and locate the remains of its war casualties, advance complete Dioxin remediation at Bien Hoa and raise funding for it to \$ 300 million till 2028, support persons with disabilities and provide an additional \$ 25 million to clear unexploded ordnance. Pillar 7, people to people ties contains a range of programmes to advance ties between communities, cultural exchanges and sports relations. Pillar 8, Defense and Security Cooperation, focuses primarily on expanding law enforcement and criminal justice cooperation, while also seeking that US-produced equipment replace that provided by Russia and China. The US has taken cognisance of reports regarding a secret Vietnam-Russia arms deal being negotiated<sup>63</sup>. There is, however, the understanding that becoming Vietnam's preferred source of military equipment will not be easy, given Vietnam's price consciousness and long history of dependence on Russia<sup>64</sup>. Pillar 9 relates to promotion and protection of human rights and pillar 10 to coordination on regional and global issues, particularly under the aegis of ASEAN centrality.

The economic rationale for greater US investment in Vietnam is strong, particularly as it seeks to reduce its dependence on China and diversify supply chains. Moreover, China's relationship with Vietnam is a difficult one notwithstanding Communist Party links: the two fought a war in 1979 and China's claims in the South China Sea, including in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, cover what should be Vietnam's territory. The ground is, therefore, fertile for US-Vietnam cooperation. Translating this into stronger security cooperation, notwithstanding Vietnam's need to balance China, will be a long process, with limited possibilities at present.

Nevertheless, the US is investing in the process, making the difficult transition from enmity to a comprehensive partnership. Upgrading of the Vietnam-US partnership is one step in the process. It also sends yet another signal to China that its actions are generating anxiety and a pushback from the Southeast Asian region, even though this signal is unlikely to lead to any change in Chinese behaviour.

<sup>63</sup> Vietnam Chases Secret Russian Arms Deal, Even as it Deepens US Ties, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/09/world/asia/vietnam-russia-arms-deal.html>

<sup>64</sup> Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and Deputy National Security Adviser Jon finer, September 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/09/10/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-deputy-national-security-advisor-jon-finer/>



## Australia and Philippines Upgrade Relations

Australia's foreign policy has long been based on three strands: regional engagement in Asia, a close alliance with powerful friends, and commitment to a rules-based order. Pursuit of the first strand was evident when Australia and the Philippines elevated their comprehensive partnership of 2015<sup>65</sup> into a strategic partnership<sup>66</sup>, founded on shared democratic values, a common vision for the region and a rules-based order. Leaders also directed their Foreign Ministers to formulate and coordinate a whole-of-government joint plan of action.

The partnership stands on seven pillars: political and strategic cooperation, defence and security cooperation, economic relations, development cooperation, environment and climate change, and people-to-people links. In the first, the announced addition to existing dialogues is an annual defence minister's meeting. This will oversee the defence and security cooperation pillar, which includes an enhanced defence cooperation program; working with regional partners; high-level consultations in HADR, education and training, law enforcement cooperation, counter-terrorism, and countering a range of transnational crimes including violent extremism, money laundering and human trafficking. The two sides underscored that disputes should be resolved peacefully, without the use of force and in accordance with UNCLOS, and the South China Sea award of July 12, 2016 is final and legally binding. The two will plan joint patrols in the South China Sea and other areas of mutual interest. Both also recognise the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Their statement looks "forward to the positive contribution of the AUKUS security partnership" for the collective security and stability of the region. Australia announced a new \$64.5 million contribution to peace building in Mindanao, to reduce violent conflict, reintegrate former combatants and support community development<sup>67</sup>.

In the economic pillar, the two will explore opportunities to broaden mutual economic cooperation, including developing resilient supply chains, supporting the climate and clean energy transition, and expanding trade and

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<sup>65</sup> Joint Declaration on Australia-The Philippines Comprehensive Partnership, November 18, 2015, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/joint-declaration-on-australia-the-philippines-comprehensive-partnership>

<sup>66</sup> Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership Between the Republic of the Philippines and the Commonwealth of Australia, September 09, 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-declaration-strategic-partnership-between-republic-philippines-and-commonwealth>

<sup>67</sup> A Stronger Partnership Between Australia and the Philippines: Media Release, September 08, 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/stronger-partnership-between-australia-and-philippines>

investment in a wide range of areas, while seeking to strengthen and reform the rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core. The stated objective is balanced trade, elimination of barriers, and provision of a level playing field. Australia had earlier announced its Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040<sup>68</sup>. The two will also work closely to enhance existing free trade agreements, including the AANZFTA, RCEP, while pursuing commitments through the IPEF.

The development cooperation pillar seeks to intensify cooperation informed by the Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028, Australia's new International Development Policy, and as set out in the Philippines – Australia Development Partnership Plan. The environment and climate change pillar states the intent to explore opportunities in climate change mitigation and adaptation, renewable energy, electric vehicles, regional connectivity etc. On the people-to-people front, Australia will award of 50 scholarships to Philippines' students in Australian Masters and PhD programs, re-establish a Philippines Institute at the Australian National University, and introduce a reciprocal Work and Holiday visa. Prime Minister Albanese has invited President Marcos to Australia to attend the Special Summit to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Australia-ASEAN Dialogue Relations in March 2024.

Australia's investment in relations with the Philippines has grown incrementally over the years. This was the first Prime Ministerial visit from Australia to Manila in two decades, an indication that the Philippines has not been a high Australian priority. There are about 400,000 Philippines' nationals in Australia, including about 18,000 students<sup>69</sup>. Bilateral trade in 2021-22 was just \$8.2 billion. Over 250 Australian companies are invested in the Philippines to the tune of \$7.7 billion, employing 41,000 Filipinos. A bilateral defence cooperation agreement was signed in 1995 and a bilateral status of visiting forces agreement came into force in 2012<sup>70</sup>. At the multilateral level, the first Joint Australia-Japan-Philippines-US Exercise took place in August 2023<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/invested-southeast-asia-economic-strategy-2040.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Philippines Country Brief, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/philippines/philippines-country-brief>

<sup>70</sup> Agreement Between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines Concerning the Status of Visiting Forces of Each State in the Territory of the Other State, Entry into force September 28, 2012, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/ATS/2012/31.html>

<sup>71</sup> Japan-US-Australia-Philippines Quadrilateral Exercise, August 25, 2023, [https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202308/20230825\\_02en.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202308/20230825_02en.pdf)

The key question will be Australia's ability to build trust in its relations with the Philippines. Historical experience, including of racism and neglect will not easily be set aside, nor will distrust of a white-dominated Australia. The imperative of addressing hard security concerns due to China's coercive activity forces the Philippines to accept assistance from every quarter. How this will impact its commitment to ASEAN, as also relations with its Indonesian partner, remains to be seen.

## India's Maritime Outreach

Dates	Location	Participating Units	Event	Remarks
31 Aug – 14 Sep	Alexandria, Egypt <sup>72</sup>	Tri-service contingent, INS Sumedha	Ex Bright Star	Multinational exercise, 34 countries, India for first time
01-03 Sep	Colombo <sup>73</sup>	INS Delhi	Goodwill Visit	
03-06 Sep	Port Victoria, Seychelles <sup>74</sup>	INS Sunayna	Goodwill visit, EEZ surveillance	
05 Sep	New Delhi <sup>75</sup>	Brazilian Navy Delegation	Discussion on submarine maintenance	-
08 Sep	Arabian Sea <sup>76</sup>	INS Teg, Talwar, Deepak, P-8I, one submarine, FNS Suffren, FNS Languedoc (SSN), Atlantic	Bilateral India France Exercise Varuna Phase II	Phase I was off West Coast in January 2023.
11 Sep – 14 Oct	Southeast Asian Countries <sup>77</sup>	ICGS Samudra Prahari	Showcasing ICG Pollution Response capability	To visit Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta
12-16 Sep	New Delhi, Mumbai <sup>78</sup>	Indian and Bangladesh Navies	Visit of Bangladesh CNS to India	To enhance navy-to-navy cooperation

<sup>72</sup> INS Sumedha at Alexandria, Egypt for Ex Bright Star-23,

<https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-sumedha-alexandria-egypt-ex-bright-star-23>

<sup>73</sup> Visit of INS Delhi to Colombo, Sri Lanka

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1954138>

<sup>74</sup> Visit to Port Victoria, INS Sunayna, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1955728>

<sup>75</sup> Visit of Brazilian Navy Delegation, 05 Sept 23,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1954935>

<sup>76</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Edition of India France Bilateral Naval Exercise VARUNA – 2023,

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1891610>

<sup>77</sup> Indian Coast Guard Ship Samudra Prahari on an overseas deployment to ASEAN Countries as part of India's initiative for Marine Pollution Response in the Region,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1958029>

<sup>78</sup> Admiral Mohd Nazmul Hassan, Chief of the Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy, Visit to India,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1957016>

Dates	Location	Participating Units	Event	Remarks
13-15 Sep	Mauritius <sup>79</sup>	INS Sharda	Joint EEZ surveillance and goodwill visit	
14-16 Sep	Gurugram <sup>80</sup>	IFC-IOR Gurugram, 26 countries	Maritime Information Sharing Workshop	
14-21 Sep	Trincomalee <sup>81</sup>	INS Nireekshak	Joint Dive Training with Sri Lanka Navy	
15-17 Sep	Mumbai <sup>82</sup>	HQ WNC, IN ships, MDL	Visit of Sri Lanka NDC Delegation	
17 Sep	Hawaii <sup>83</sup>	Quad Navy Chiefs	Malabar Navy Chiefs Meeting	Ahead of Annual International Seapower Symposium
19-22 Sep	Rhode Island <sup>84</sup>	Navy Chiefs	International Seapower Symposium	CNS India attended
20 – 24 Sep	Singapore <sup>85</sup>	IN ships Ranvijay, Kavaratti, Sindhukesari, P-8I,	30 <sup>th</sup> Exercise SIMBEX	
20-21 Sep	Timor Sea <sup>86</sup>	INS Sahyadri, HMAS Toowoomba, KRI Gusti Ngurah Rai	First trilateral India Australia Indonesia Exercise	Trilateral formed with Foreign Ministers meeting at UNGA 2022
25 -28 Sep	Phuket, Thailand <sup>87</sup>	INS Tir, Sujata, STS Sudarshini, CGS Sarathi	Training visit to Thailand, Malaysia,	Trainees from Bangladesh, Maldives,

<sup>79</sup> INS Sharda Visits Mauritius, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-sharda-visits-mauritius-0>

<sup>80</sup> Marine Information Sharing Workshop 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1958025>

<sup>81</sup> INS Nireekshak Arrives Trincomalee for Joint Dive Training, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1958028>

<sup>82</sup> 21 member delegation from National Defence College, Sri Lanka, visited Mumbai, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/21-member-delegation-national-defence-college-sri-lanka-visited-mumbai>

<sup>83</sup> Readout: Malabar Navies' Leadership Meet in Pearl Harbour, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3531377/readout-malabar-navies-leadership-meet-in-pearl-harbor/>

<sup>84</sup> Visit of Adm R Hari Kumar, Chief of the Naval Staff, to USA, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1960082>

<sup>85</sup> Indian Nava Ships, Submarine and LRMP Aircraft reach Singapore to participate in SIMBEX 23, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-naval-ships-submarine-and-lrmp-aircraft-reach-singapore-participate-simbex-23>

<sup>86</sup> Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri Participates in the Maiden India-Indonesia-Australia Trilateral Maritime Exercise, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1959717>

<sup>87</sup> First Training Squadron Visit to Phuket, Thailand, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1961883>

Dates	Location	Participating Units	Event	Remarks
			Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam	Mauritius and Vietnam embarked, also NCC cadets

## A New Chapter in India's Warship Construction

The launch on September 01, 2023, of Yard 12654 (Mahendragiri) by Mazagon Docks Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) marks a new chapter in India's warship construction<sup>88</sup>. Mahendragiri will be the seventh of the Indian Navy's Project 17A Nilgiri-class frigates. India's construction of major warships began with the old Nilgiri-class, which served the nation from 1972-2012.

Indian shipyards were renowned for the quality of the wooden-hulled men-of-war they built. Among the first warships built in Mumbai was HMS Minden, commissioned in 1808 and known for having been the ship on which Francis Scott Key composed the US national anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, in 1814. The advent of steam propulsion and steel hulls, however, resulted in wooden sailing vessels being phased out. The last wooden-hulled warship built in Mumbai was Madras (later renamed Meanee) in 1848.

In 1960, Government of India, acquired both MDL and Garden Reach Workshop Kolkata, later renamed Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE) with the intention of building ships up to frigate size in India in collaboration with an established shipbuilder. UK, Holland, Sweden and the USSR were investigated as possible collaborators (the US declined assistance in the naval field in view of British interest). The search homed in on Britain's Vickers Yarrow group and the Leander class frigate. Following an agreement signed in December 1964, personnel from the Indian Navy (IN) and MDL were sent to UK for training in British shipyards, while MDL facilities were upgraded. The keel of the first indigenous frigate, INS Nilgiri, was laid in 1966 and the ship entered service in 1972. Six ships of the class were built by MDL, with the design evolving. The three next ships of the class had different sensors and combat management systems. The design of the last two was changed to enable them to carry a larger helicopter. These six ships proudly served India for the next four decades, with the last being decommissioned in 2013. The author served on two of them.

<sup>88</sup> Launch of Y-12654 (Mahendragiri), September 01, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1954111>

**Table I: India's First Generation of Nilgiri-class Warships**

Ship	Date of				Builder
	Keel Laying	Launch	Commission	Paying off	
Nilgiri	15/10/66	23/10/68	3/6/72	31/5/96	MDL
Himgiri	4/1/68	6/5/70	23/11/74	6/5/05	MDL
Udaygiri	14/8/70	24/10/72	18/2/76	24/8/07	MDL
Dunagiri	25/1/73	9/3/74	5/5/77	20/10/10	MDL
Taragiri	5/11/76	12/11/77	8/7/81	27/6/13	MDL
Vindhyagiri	5/11/76	12/11/77	8/7/81	14/6/12	MDL

The new Nilgiri-class will comprise seven warships, expected to enter service commencing 2024. This time, four are being built by MDL, the remaining three by GRSE.

**Table II: The New Generation of Nilgiri-class Warships**

Ship	Date of			Builder
	Keel Laying	Launch	Entry into Service	
Nilgiri	28/12/17	28/9/19	2024	MDL
Himgiri	10/11/18	14/12/20	2025	GRSE
Udaygiri	7/5/19	17/5/22	2025	MDL
Dunagiri	24/1/20	15/7/22	2025	GRSE
Taragiri	10/9/20	11/5/22	2026	MDL
Vindhyagiri	5/3/21	17/8/23	2026	GRSE
Mahendragiri	28/6/22	1/9/23	2027	MDL

Each of the first Nilgiri-class ships served for around 30 years. Assuming a similar life-span for the new generation, these ships will remain in service till the mid to late 1950s. How do they compare with the older generation? They are far larger, displacing more than double the weight of their predecessors – in fact their displacement is greater than many classes of destroyers in service in the world today. They are also far more capable, as can be seen from the table below.

Table III: Comparing the old and new Nilgiri-class

Characteristic	First Nilgiri Class	Second Nilgiri Class
Length (m)	113	149
Beam (m)	13	17.8
Draught (m)	4.3	5.22
Displacement (Tons)	2962	6670
Propulsion	Steam Turbine	CODAG (two MAN diesels, two LM-2500)
Speed (knots)	28	32
Range (nm)	4000	5500
Complement	267	226
Surface Armament	1 Twin 4.5" gun	8 Brahmos SSM One Twin 76mm gun
Anti-aircraft Armament	Seacat SAM	32 Barak-8ER
CIWS	AK 630 CIWS Two 20 mm	AK 630 CIWS
ASW	Mortar Mk X Two triple torpedo tubes	Two Triple torpedo tubes Two RBU-6000
Helicopter	One Chetak / Seaking	Two Dhruv / Seaking

How will these ships compare with frigates built by other maritime powers, both adversaries and friends that will serve in a similar timeframe? A comparison is at Table IV below. The Nilgiri-class will be larger, faster and better equipped. However, many other nations would classify ships of this size as destroyers.

Table IV: Comparison with current generation frigates

Characteristic	India Nilgiri Class	China Type 054A	Russia Gorshkov class	UK Type 31	France (FDI)
Length (m)	149	134	135	138.7	122
Beam (m)	17.8	16	16		17.7
Draught (m)	5.22	5	4.5		
Displacement (Tons)	6670	3963	5400	5700	4460
Speed (knots)	32	27	29.5	28	27

Characteristic	India Nilgiri Class	China Type 054A	Russia Gorshkov class	UK Type 31	France (FDI)
Range (nm)	5500	3800	4850	9000	5000
Complement	226		210	80-100	110
SSM Range (Km)	500	230	> 1000		200
SAM Range (Km)	150	40			120-150
ASW Torpedo Range (Km)	40				23
Helicopter	1 Dhruv or Seaking	1 K-28	1 Ka-27	1 Merlin or Wildcat	1 NH-90

There are, nevertheless, some limitations. First, the new Nilgiri-class does not address the need for defences against hypersonic missiles that are entering service in China (and Russia). Second, the number of cells for anti-aircraft or anti-ship missiles is on the low side, especially given the ship size and the expectation that a great power threat will manifest itself in the Indian Ocean within this decade. Third, kinetic defences against UAVs are in short supply, though the soft-kill capability is good. Fourth, anti-submarine sensors and anti-missile hard-kill weapons require modernisation. These limitations are understandable – the warship design was frozen in a much more benign era. Nevertheless, these deficiencies will have to be addressed through retrofit as appropriate solutions become available.

The new Nilgiri-class epitomises the substantial progress that has been made by India in designing and building warships over the last five decades. The capability has advanced to building an aircraft carrier as well as a nuclear-propelled submarine. In large part, this is a tribute to the vision and sagacity of political, military, administrative and industrial leaders of yester-year. There is, however, a long way to go before India can consider itself a true maritime power, capable of fulfilling the aspirations of the nation and a region undergoing momentous change.

## Other Indo-Pacific Developments

The Malta Meeting. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and China's Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met at Malta on September 16-17 in an effort to keep open lines of



communication and manage the bilateral relationship<sup>89</sup>. Both sides had candid discussions on a range of global issues, including Ukraine, bilateral relations and cross-Strait issues. Notably, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proceeded from Malta to Moscow to meet his Russian counterpart on September 18<sup>90</sup>.

7<sup>th</sup> Australia China High Level Dialogue in Beijing. The Australia-China High Level Dialogue was resumed after a gap of three years, in Beijing, on September 7<sup>91</sup>. The dialogue does not include government ministers: former Trade Minister Australia Craig Emerson and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop represented Australia, while China was represented by former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing<sup>92</sup>. China appears to have abandoned its effort to isolate Australia and is now rebuilding trade ties. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is expected to visit Beijing towards the end of the year.

Japan Cabinet Reshuffle. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reshuffled his cabinet for the second time on September 13<sup>93</sup>. Ms Yoko Kamikawa assumed charge as the Minister for Foreign Affairs, while Minoru Kihara became the Defense Minister<sup>94</sup>.

Trilateral Harris Kishida Marcos Meeting in Jakarta<sup>95</sup>. US Vice-President Kamala Harris met Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Japan on September 7. The three discussed the maritime security environment and ideas for enhancing trilateral maritime security cooperation. The Philippines faces a growing challenge from China

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<sup>89</sup> Readout of National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan's Meeting with Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member, Director of the Office of Foreign Affairs Commission, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, September 17, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/17/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-meeting-with-chinese-communist-party-politburo-member-director-of-the-office-of-the-foreign-affairs-commission-and-foreign-minister-wang/>

<sup>90</sup> Wang Yi Meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, September 18, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb\\_663304/wjbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202309/t20230919\\_11145344.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202309/t20230919_11145344.html)

<sup>91</sup> Australia – China High Level Dialogue, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-china-high-level-dialogue>

<sup>92</sup> Chin, Australia hold first high-level dialogue in three years in Beijing, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-australia-hold-first-high-level-dialogue-three-years-beijing-2023-09-07/>

<sup>93</sup> Inauguration of the Second Kishida Cabinet (Second Reshuffle), September 13, 2023, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/actions/202309/13naikaku\\_kaizo.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/actions/202309/13naikaku_kaizo.html)

<sup>94</sup> List of Ministers, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/meibo/daijin/index\\_e.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/meibo/daijin/index_e.html)

<sup>95</sup> Harris's Trilateral Meeting with President Marcos of the Philippines and Prime Minister Kishida of Japan, September 7, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/07/readout-of-vice-president-harris-trilateral-meeting-with-president-marcos-of-the-philippines-and-prime-minister-kishida-of-japan/>

to offshore islands within its EEZ and has evidently given up hope of being able to find a mutually beneficial solution with China.

Japan-Iran Summit. Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met Ayatollah Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, the President of Iran, in New York on September 20<sup>96</sup>. He exchanged views on easing tensions in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear ambitions and the importance of ensuring maritime security with the Iranian leader. The Iranian President sought expansion of Japan-Iran cooperation in various fields

India and Timor-Leste. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced India's decision to establish an Embassy in Dili, Timor-Leste, during the ASEAN-India Summit on September 7<sup>97</sup>. It followed up with the visit of Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, the Minister of State for External Affairs, to Timor-Leste from September 30 – October 03<sup>98</sup>. This is the first high-level Indian visit to the new country since 2018.

Minerals Security Partnership. The Minerals Security Partnership was expanded with the US announcing that India, Norway and Italy had joined it on September 16<sup>99</sup>. The partnership now has 14 partners: Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Norway, Sweden, the UK, the US and the EU working together to bolster supply chains and ensure a sustainable future for all.

Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement. Japan and the UK exchanged diplomatic notes for entry into force of the Reciprocal Access Agreement they had signed in January 2023<sup>100</sup>. The agreement will enter into force on October 15, 2023.

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<sup>96</sup> Japan – Iran Summit Meeting, September 20, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/me\\_a/me2/ir/page4e\\_001476.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/me_a/me2/ir/page4e_001476.html)

<sup>97</sup> India announces decision to establish and India Embassy in Timor-Leste, September 7, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37071/India\\_announces\\_decision\\_to\\_establish\\_an\\_Indian\\_Embassy\\_in\\_Timor\\_Leste](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37071/India_announces_decision_to_establish_an_Indian_Embassy_in_Timor_Leste)

<sup>98</sup> Visit of Minister of State for External Affairs, Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh to Timor-Leste (September 30-October 03, 2023), [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37150/Visit\\_of\\_Minister\\_of\\_State\\_for\\_External\\_Affairs\\_Dr\\_Rajkumar\\_Ranjan\\_Singh\\_to\\_TimorLeste\\_September\\_30\\_October\\_03\\_2023](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37150/Visit_of_Minister_of_State_for_External_Affairs_Dr_Rajkumar_Ranjan_Singh_to_TimorLeste_September_30_October_03_2023)

<sup>99</sup> The Minerals Security Partnership Continues to Expand with Norway, Italy and India, September 16, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/the-minerals-security-partnership-continues-to-expand-with-norway-italy-and-india/>

<sup>100</sup> Exchange of Diplomatic Notes for Entry into Force of Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement, September 15, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003298.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003298.html)

Japan Germany Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement. Japan announced commencement of negotiations for the conclusion of a bilateral Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with Germany to realise a framework facilitating joint activities between the defence forces of both countries<sup>101</sup>.

Australia's Surface Fleet Review. The Independent analysis of the Australian Navy's Surface Fleet was submitted to the Australian Government on September 29<sup>102</sup>. The analysis was led by retired USN Vice Admiral William Hillarides, assisted by a former Secretary of the Australian Department of Finance, Rosemary Huxtable, and former Commander of the Australian Fleet, Vice Admiral Stuart Meyer. The Australian government will now consider the analysis and its recommendations.

Turnaround of China's Gulf of Aden Force. The 45<sup>th</sup> Escort Force of the PLA (Navy) set sail from Qingdao on September 12<sup>103</sup>, bound for the Gulf of Aden to relieve the 44<sup>th</sup> Naval Escort Force. The escort force comprises the destroyer Urumqi (Type 052D, commissioned 2018), the frigate Linyi (Type 954A, commissioned 2012), the replenishment ship Dongpinghu (Type 903, commissioned 2015), two helicopters and Special Forces personnel. The forces are drawn mainly from the Northern Theatre Command, an indication that China is familiarising personnel from all commands with operations in distant waters.

Exercise Bright Star 2023. Signalling increased linkages with the US Central Command, India participated for the first time in multinational exercise Bright Star 2023, at the Mohammed Naguib Military Base in Egypt<sup>104</sup>, from August 31-September 14. The Indian Army contingent comprised 137 personnel; that of the Indian Air Force comprised five Mig-29, two IL-78, two C-130 and two C-17, apart from Garuda Special Forces personnel<sup>105</sup>. INS Sumedha represented the Indian Navy<sup>106</sup>. Exercise Bright Star is a biennial multinational exercise

<sup>101</sup> Commencement of Negotiations on the Japan-Germany Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, September 29, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press7e\\_000042.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press7e_000042.html)

<sup>102</sup> Independent Analysis into Navy's Surface Combatant Fleet Received by Government, September 29, 2023,

<sup>103</sup> China's 45<sup>th</sup> naval fleet sets sail for escort mission in Gulf of Aden, September 13, 2023, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press7e\\_000042.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press7e_000042.html)  
[http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16251813.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16251813.html)

<sup>104</sup> Indian Army Contingent Leaves for Exercise Bright Star-23 Being Held in Egypt, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1953147>

<sup>105</sup> Participation of Indian Air Force in Exercise Bright Star-23 at Cairo Air Base, Egypt, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1952602>

<sup>106</sup> INS Sumedha at Alexandria, Egypt for Ex Bright Star-23, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1955399>

whose first edition was held in 1980; this year was the 18<sup>th</sup> edition. 34 countries participated<sup>107</sup>.

US and Philippines Navy Cooperation in the South China Sea. USS Ralph Johnson and BRP Jose Rizal sailed together in the South China Sea on September 4<sup>108</sup>. The event signals US commitment to both the Philippines and China.

Exercise Varuna 2023. The second phase of Exercise Varuna 2023 was conducted commencing September 02<sup>109</sup>. It involved IN ships Teg, Talwar and Deepak, a submarine and a P-8I from India, as well as FNS Suffren (an SSN), Languedoc (a frigate) and an Atlantic aircraft based in the UAE from the French side<sup>110</sup>. The first phase of the exercise had taken place in the Arabian Sea in January 2023<sup>111</sup>.

Taiwan Strait Transit. USS Ralph Johnson and HMCS Ottawa conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit while remaining outside the territorial waters of both countries on September 09<sup>112</sup>. The transit is in keeping with UNCLOS, which permits warships the unrestricted right of passage in waters beyond the territorial sea.

China Navy's Largest Ever Exercise. In a show of force two days after the transit by the US and Canadian warships, the PLA (Navy) carried out its largest ever exercise in the area between Taiwan, the Philippines and Guam<sup>113</sup>. The exercise involved the aircraft carrier Shandong and more than 20 warships, sailing out

<sup>107</sup> US participates in Exercise Bright Star in Egypt, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3513863/us-participates-in-exercise-bright-star-in-egypt/>

<sup>108</sup> US, Philippine Navies conduct bilateral sail to enhance interoperability, September 4, 2023, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3514609/us-philippine-navies-conduct-bilateral-sail-to-enhance-interoperability/>

<sup>109</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Edition of India-France Bilateral Naval Exercise Varuna-2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1955639>

<sup>110</sup> Update on Operations from Thursday August 31 to Wednesday September 6, 2023, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/point-situation-operations/point-situation-operations-du-jeudi-31-aout-au-mercredi-6-septembre-2023>

<sup>111</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Edition of India-France Bilateral Naval Exercise Varuna 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1891610>

<sup>112</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet Destroyer Transits Taiwan Strait, September 9, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3521041/7th-fleet-destroyer-transits-taiwan-strait/>

<sup>113</sup> China's navy starts largest ever exercises in the Pacific Ocean <https://www.ft.com/content/88e2eeab-e464-4ec3-a17f-5417150c5350>

of the first island chain through the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait on September 11<sup>114</sup>.

China's Action in Scarborough Shoal. China's attempts to seize the Scarborough Shoal despite the July 2016 arbitration award continued when it installed a floating barrier to bar the entry of Philippines' fishermen into the shoal on September 22. The Philippines Coast Guard cut the barrier on September 25, prompting a call from China's spokesperson to the Philippines "not to make provocation or stir up trouble"<sup>115</sup>.

Taiwan Launches First Indigenous Submarine. Taiwan launched its first indigenous submarine at Kaohsiung on September 28, bringing to fruition an effort spanning nearly four decades<sup>116</sup>. Named Hai Kun, the submarine has taken over seven years to construct and has included contributions from retired submarine officers and engineers from the US, UK, India, Australia, South Korea, Spain and Canada. Hai Kun is expected to commission in 2025 and will be the first of a class of eight boats. It will strengthen the Taiwan Navy's deterrent capability.

Rempang Island. An agreement between Indonesia and a Chinese company to build a glass factory on Indonesia's Rempang Island, in the Natuna Sea, sparked fierce protest from those being deprived of their land<sup>117</sup>. The factory was announced following the meeting between China's Xi Jinping and Indonesia's Joko Widodo in July 2023. Indonesian government officials have promised improved compensation packages for those being dispossessed.

IRGC Lazing Incident in the Arabian Gulf. Iranian units shone a laser multiple times at a USMC AH-1Z Viper Attack Helicopter engaged in routine operations in international air space in the Arabian Gulf on September 28<sup>118</sup>. Chinese and

<sup>114</sup> China's aircraft carrier Shandong sails past Taiwan Island for second far sea drill of the year, two days after US and Canadian warships' provocative Straits transit,

[http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16251587.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16251587.html)

<sup>115</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on September 26, 2023,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202309/t20230926\\_11150685.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202309/t20230926_11150685.html)

<sup>116</sup> Taiwan Unveils Homemade Submarine as it Seeks to Counter China Threat,

<https://www.wsj.com/world/china/taiwan-unveils-homemade-submarine-as-it-seeks-to-counter-china-threat-ad4c41e8>

<sup>117</sup> Indonesian indigenous islanders are rallying against plans to build a Chinese funded factory on their homes, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/19/asia/indonesia-rempang-island-protests-chinese-factory-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>118</sup> No US Injuries Following IRGC Navy Lazing Incident at Sea, September 28, 2023, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3540955/no-us-injuries-following-irgc-navy-lazing-incident-at-sea/>

Iranian forces have long used lasers in an attempt to blind pilots of surveillance aircraft operating in their area of interest.

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