



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

APRIL 2024

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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, assisted by Ms. Divya Rai, 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:

*President Bong Bong Marcos, President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio meet at the White House, April 11, 2024. Source: Kantei.org.jp*

*Chinese President Xi Jinping Meets US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the Great Hall of People, in Beijing, China, April 26, 2024. Source: The State Council for the People's Republic of China*

*INS Trishul and HNLMS Tromp exercise together in the Arabian Sea on April 29, 2024. Source: Indian Navy*

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## INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

April 2024

### Abstract

Two Indo-Pacific summits drew attention during the month. The first, between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Kishida on April 10, marked Japan's decisive alignment with the US-led West. The second, the US-Japan-Philippines summit on April 11, marked the emergence of the second Western Pacific trilateral.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited China from April 24-26 to take forward the process of engagement begun at the November 2023 Biden-Xi Summit. Though the visit did include a meeting with President Xi Jinping, major contentious issues remain.

Reports of a secretive gentleman's agreement between former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte and China's President Xi Jinping regarding the Philippines' outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal created a media furore in the Philippines. China continued its assertive action in the region, while a joint Australia-Japan-US-Philippines maritime cooperation activity in the South China Sea on April 07 sought to bolster deterrence.

The US Congress passed the National Security Supplemental Budget which President Biden signed into law on April 24, providing funding for security assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Election outcomes in two Indo-Pacific Island nations aroused considerable interest. In the Maldives, President Mohammed Muizzu's People's National Congress won 71 of the 93 seats in parliament, giving it an absolute majority. The outcome is expected to strengthen the Maldives relationship with China. In the Solomon Islands, incumbent Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's Ownership, Unity and Responsibility Party was able to get only 15 of the 50 parliamentary seats. Independents and micro-parties won 15 seats, while mainstream opposition parties won 20.

A Joint Statement by AUKUS Defence Ministers on April 08 took stock of progress in AUKUS cooperation. Australia announced selection of its build and maintenance partners for submarines to be built in Australia, as well as the



qualification of an Australian steel-maker for the supply of steel for Australian as well as US and UK submarines.

Australia published its National Defence Strategy 2024 on April 18.

Houthi attacks on traffic in the Red Sea continued for the seventh month, undermining Freedom of Navigation in a choke point that normally carries 12% of world trade and 20% of world container traffic. A new normal appears to have set in, with countries accepting the increased costs of routing via Africa.

India began delivery of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines on April 19. Meanwhile, an Indian warship carried out the first successful drug interdiction as part of the Coalition Maritime Force on April 13. Indian and Japanese ASW aircraft exercised together off Japan on April 04-05.

## The Japan US Philippines Trilateral Summit

In August 2023, the US began converting its hub-and-spokes alliance system in the Pacific into a mutually supporting lattice of alliances by hosting Japan and South Korea at Camp David for a trilateral summit<sup>1</sup>. A second trilateral came into being when US President Joe Biden hosted President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. of the Philippines and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan at the White House on April 11 for the first trilateral US-Japan-Philippines leaders' summit<sup>2</sup>. The summit lasted about 50 minutes and resulted in a Joint Vision Statement<sup>3</sup>.

The groundwork for this trilateral was laid by three sets of meetings at the official level. In the first, the three National Security Advisors met in Tokyo in June last year, with another virtual meeting between them in December. In the second, the three Foreign Ministers met in Jakarta on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in July 2023, and in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA session in September 2023. The third was the meeting in September 2023 between Prime Minister Kishida, President Marcos and Vice President Kamala Harris on the sidelines of the UNGA session.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Lalit Kapur, "The Camp David Trilateral Summit" in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, August 2023, [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4965.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-4965.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Japan-US-Philippines Summit Meeting (Summary), April 11, 2024, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/diplomatic/202404/11usaphilippines.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/diplomatic/202404/11usaphilippines.html)

<sup>3</sup> Joint Vision Statement from the Leaders of Japan, the Philippines and the United States, April 11, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/joint-vision-statement-from-the-leaders-of-japan-the-philippines-and-the-united-states/>



The three leaders affirmed their unwavering support for ASEAN centrality and unity and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. They supported Pacific Island Countries and committed to working with the Pacific Islands Forum on the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. They also welcomed the efforts of the Quad, AUKUS and the US-Japan-Republic of Korea trilateral.

Four pillars undergird the joint statement of the inaugural US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit. First is promoting inclusive economic growth and economic resilience. This encompasses support for the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, appreciation for the more than \$1 billion in US private sector investments to promote the Philippines' innovation economy, and Japan's Official Development Assistance and private sector investment that has exceeded the pledge of JPY 600 billion made in the 2023 Japan-Philippines Joint Statement. It includes the announcement of the Luzon Economic Corridor, the first Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment corridor in the Indo-Pacific. This corridor supports connectivity between Subic Bay, Clark, Manila and Batangas, with a commitment to accelerating coordinated investments in high-impact infrastructure projects, including rail, port modernisation, clean energy and semiconductor supply chains and deployment, agribusiness, and civilian port upgrades at Subic Bay. A trilateral event promoting investment in the Luzon Corridor is to be held on the margins of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Manila next month.

The second pillar is developing Critical and Emerging Technologies. The US and Japan will provide at least \$ 8 million for Open Radio Access Network (ORAN) field trials and the Asia ORAN Academy at Manila, building on prior investment of over \$ 9 million. A new semiconductor workforce development initiative will provide training to Philippines' students at American and Japanese universities to help secure semiconductor supply chains.

The third pillar is advancing the climate partnership and clean energy supply chains. The three countries sought expansion of cooperation to deploy renewable energy projects in the Philippines (including wind and solar). They also sought expansion of the partnership on safe and secure civil-nuclear capacity building, and to deepen cooperation on civil nuclear force development through a trilateral dialogue this year.

The final pillar is "partnering for Peace and Security". President Biden reaffirmed the ironclad US alliance commitments to both the Philippines and Japan. The three countries expressed serious concerns about the PRC's dangerous and aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, the PRC's repeated obstruction of Philippine vessels exercising the high seas freedom of



navigation and disruption of supply lines to the Second Thomas Shoal, “which constitute dangerous and destabilising conduct”, and regarding the situation in the East China Sea and their strong opposition to any attempts by the PRC to unilaterally change the status quo by force or coercion. They were also concerned by militarisation of reclaimed features and unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea. They affirmed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. There was the expected condemnation of Russia’s action in Ukraine, and North Korea’s destabilising missile launches.

The leaders welcomed Japan’s capacity building for the Philippines Coast Guard by the provision of twelve vessels and plans to provide five additional vessels. Following their first joint exercise between the Coast Guards in 2023, the US looked forward to welcoming Japanese and Philippines personnel on a US Coast Guard vessel on patrol in the Indo-Pacific in 2024. The three Coast Guards also plan to conduct an at-sea trilateral exercise and other maritime activities within the next year. The leaders announced the establishment of a trilateral dialogue to enhance coordination and collective responses to promote maritime cooperation. They pledged to continue advancing maritime domain awareness, and to launching a Japan-Philippines-US HADR response exercise to be integrated into trilateral or multilateral activities next year. They also resolved to advance trilateral defence cooperation, including through combined naval training and exercises between the three countries and other partners, and by coordinating US and Japanese support for Philippines defence modernisation priorities.

The trilateral summit marks a beginning, with the US and Japan providing the base on which greater Philippines and trilateral security can be built. The initiative is still in its early stages, with a long way to go before a stronger security edifice comes up. Many questions remain unanswered at this stage: will the trilateral be able to stop China from interfering with Philippines resupply missions to BRP Sierra Madre on the Second Thomas Shoal? Will they be able to return the Scarborough Shoal to the Philippines? Will the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Manila next month be able to drum up private sector investment in the Luzon Economic Corridor? What will China’s counter to the trilateral be? These, and others, will be answered in due course. For the present, the only certainties are that the Philippines has burnt its bridges with China and thrown its lot unambiguously with the US and Japan, and that China will not easily throw in the towel.





## The IMF World Economic Outlook

The IMF World Economic Outlook (WEO), published on April 16, 2024, speaks of global economic activity growing steadily even as global inflation descended from its mid-2022 peak, defying warnings of global recession and stagflation. Growth in employment and incomes held steady reflecting supporting demand developments, including greater than expected government spending and household consumption, as well as a supply side expansion amid a boost to labour force participation.

Global growth, estimated at 3.2% in 2023, is projected to continue at the same pace in 2024 and 2025. Global headline inflation is expected to fall from an annual average of 6.8% in 2023 to 5.9% in 2024 and 4.5% in 2025, with advanced economies returning to their inflation targets sooner than emerging markets and developing economies.

World GDP is pegged at \$ 109.53 trillion, up from \$ 104.476 trillion in the WEO of October 2023. Asia's share of this amounts to \$ 38.46 trillion, 35.12% of world GDP, as compared to \$ 37.035 trillion (35.4% of the world) in October 2023. North America's output has risen from \$ 30.996 trillion (29.7% of the world in October 2023) to 33.16 trillion, 30.27% of the world) in April 2024. European GDP has risen from \$ 25.44 trillion (24.4% of the world in October 2023) to \$ 26.47 trillion (24.17% of the world in April 2024). 26.28% of the world GDP comes from the US, 16.9% from China and 3.6% from India.

India grew @ 7.8% in 2023. Growth projections for 2024 and 2025 are 6.8% and 6.5% respectively. India's economy, currently the world's fifth largest, is expected to overtake Japan and move into fourth place in 2025, and to overtake Germany to move into third place in 2027. The projection is that India's economy will be at \$ 6.4 trillion in 2029. Notably, India's is expected to add \$ 364.93 billion dollars to its economy in 2024. The addition is more than Pakistan's GDP, which stood at \$ 338.24 billion in 2023 and is shrinking.

## Duterte's South China Sea Deal

In October 2016, former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte made his first state visit to China. The visit reflected his warmth towards Beijing, at the cost of the Philippines relationship with the US. Its Joint Statement comprised 47 paragraphs reflecting the newfound bonhomie, with 13 agreements annexed to it<sup>4</sup>. Among them were four paragraphs dedicated to South China Sea issues:

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<sup>4</sup> Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines, October 21, 2016,





paragraph 18 on enhancing cooperation between the two Coast Guards, including for environmental and humanitarian concerns in the South China Sea; and paragraphs 40-42 on maintaining peace and stability and managing Philippines-China disputes in accordance with UNCLOS, the DOC and confidence-building measures in the region.

A political storm flared up in the Philippines following a press briefing on April 11, during which Duterte was reported to have recalled a gentleman's agreement beyond the contents of the joint statement made during his visit and not recorded in any document. According to Duterte, he discussed with Xi his country's plan to drill for oil in the West Philippine Sea (the part of South China Sea within the Philippines' EEZ). Xi told him not to do it. Duterte understood that even if the Philippines confined the drilling to its own EEZ, China would go to war<sup>5</sup>. So Duterte backed down, decided to maintain status quo and not drill. In his telling, the gentleman's agreement was limited to maintenance of the status quo and no drilling by the Philippines.

China's version of the agreement is somewhat different. According to the spokesperson in China's embassy at Manila<sup>6</sup>, the Philippines deliberately grounded BRP Sierra Madre at the Second Thomas Shoal in May 1999. China immediately protested the violation of its sovereignty and asked the Philippines to tow the warship away at once. Duterte's gentleman's agreement was that he would do so. The spokesperson said that over the last 25 years, China had been making special provisional arrangements to enable the Philippines to supply necessities like food and water to the illegally grounded warship, while opposing the sending of construction materials and repair/reinforcement of the vessel so as to build a permanent structure and enable the permanent occupation of Ren'ai Jiao (Second Thomas Shoal) illegally. Now that the Philippines had ceased to abide by the agreement, categorically denied its existence and was stirring up trouble to provoke incidents, China was upping the ante, while still trying to find ways to peacefully manage the situation.

A former associate justice of the Philippines Supreme Court, Antonio T. Carpio, an acknowledged South China Sea expert in the Philippines, has analysed the

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[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/201610/t20161021\\_679488.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201610/t20161021_679488.html)

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Maitem, "Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte claims China threatened war of South China Sea if status quo not kept", April 12, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3258816/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-claims-china-threatened-war-over-south-china-sea-if-status-quo-not-kept?module=inline&pgtype=article>

<sup>6</sup> Remarks of the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in the Philippines on Ren'ai Jiao Issue, April 12, 2024, [http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202404/t20240412\\_11280977.htm](http://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgdt/202404/t20240412_11280977.htm)



so-called gentleman's agreement<sup>7</sup>. If it was to maintain status quo, that must what prevailed at the time of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct between ASEAN and China. Since BRP Sierra Madre was grounded in 1999, the status quo gives the Philippines the right to keep BRP Sierra Madre on the Ayungin Shoal (the Filipino name for the Second Thomas Shoal) and includes the right of maintenance and repair.

However, in his understanding (and as claimed by China), Duterte agreed to bar the Philippines from maintaining and repairing the Sierra Madre, thus leaving China free to seize the shoal (in the same way it seized Scarborough Shoal in 2012) when the Sierra Madre could no longer be sustained. Moreover, when Duterte made his agreement, the Permanent Court of Arbitration had already issued its arbitral award, which unequivocally ruled that the Ayungin Shoal was within the Philippines EEZ, thus giving it the right to erect a structure there. Duterte thus agreed to convert what was unambiguously Philippine territory into a disputed zone. Carpio observes that the Ayungin Shoal is also an important outpost to monitor Mischief Reef, where China's largest air and naval base in the Spratlys is located, and it is the gateway to monitor and protect the gas-rich Reed Bank, which is the only replacement for the Philippines depleted Malampaya gas field. It is thus of great geo-strategic importance for the Philippines.

The enforceability of any 'gentleman's agreement' in international relations is always going to be questionable. In the absence of an agreed text, different versions and interpretations will always create doubt. Furthermore, an unwritten agreement between an authoritarian nation and a democratic one has the additional difficulty of experiencing change of government and administration. More so when opposition parties are involved.

What the actual agreement was about will be revealed only by an impartial investigation, momentum towards which is building up. The incident is, however, reflective of a penchant towards hidden agreements, not revealed to the public, that enable China to suborn elites of the countries it deals with.

Meanwhile, for the present, tensions between the Philippines and China over the Second Thomas Shoal appear destined to build up. A Philippines reinforced by the US and other regional partners and standing its ground is no longer a pushover. There is need for both sides to display a level of maturity and give-and-take that has not so far been in evidence. Unless they can find a way to do

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<sup>7</sup> Statement on Former President Duterte's "Gentleman's Agreement" with China, April 14, 2024, <https://twitter.com/TristanNodal/status/1779345596840869995>



so, a hot conflict resulting in casualties and unforeseen consequences could happen at any time.

## Australia's National Defence Strategy

"Defence should move away from white papers to produce a National Defence Strategy on a biennial basis. The first National Defence Strategy should be delivered no later than Q2 2024"<sup>8</sup>. In compliance with this recommendation of its 2023 Defence Strategic Review, Australia published its first National Defence Strategy (NDS) during the month. The publication comprises two documents to be read in conjunction: the 2024 National Defence Strategy<sup>9</sup> and 2024 Integrated Investment Program<sup>10</sup>. Together, the two spell out the Australian Government's approach towards addressing the country's most significant strategic risks.

The strategy re-iterates that Australia faces its most complex and challenging strategic environment since the Second World War. The ten-year strategic warning time for conflict previous Australian White Papers had assumed no longer exists. An unfavourable balance increases the risk of being coerced and losing the ability to pursue sovereign interests peacefully. Thus, maintaining a favourable regional strategic balance is as vital for Australia's economy as it is for security.

The NDS is based on the threat from China. It expects China to seek to play a more prominent role in the region, including leveraging all elements of its power in pursuit of strategic objectives and changing the current balance in its favour. It notes that China has employed coercive tactics in the region and some of its initiatives lack transparency around their purpose and scope. The risk of conflict is thus increasing, in the Taiwan Strait, East and South China Seas, as well as along the border with India. Meanwhile technology has already overturned Australia's advantage of geography, which cannot protect against long-range missiles, cyberattack, space attack, disinformation, supply chain disruptions and the erosion of global rules and norms.

The NDS spells out a new concept of national defence: harnessing all arms of Australia's national power to establish a holistic, integrated and focused

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<sup>8</sup> Recommendation 14.3 in the Australian Defence Strategic Review, April 2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review>

<sup>9</sup> National Defence Strategy, [https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24553016/australian\\_national\\_defense\\_strategy\\_2024.pdf](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24553016/australian_national_defense_strategy_2024.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Integrated Investment Program, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2024-national-defence-strategy-2024-integrated-investment-program>



approach to protect security and advance interests. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) will shift from a balanced force designed to respond to a range of contingencies to an integrated force designed to address the nation's most significant strategic risks. Apart from investing in the ADF, other initiatives will include integrated statecraft; national, industry and supply chain resilience; innovation in science and technology; a workforce and skills base, and a robust national intelligence community.

The strategy adopted is one of denial, that seeks to deter conflict before it begins, prevent any adversary from succeeding in coercing Australia through the use of force and upholding a favourable strategic balance. Denial is to be achieved through increasing the range and lethality of the ADF, strengthening national resilience and enhancing interoperability with partners as well as collective deterrence. Denial spans the maritime, land, air, space and cyber domains and focuses on safeguarding the Northeast Indian Ocean through maritime Southeast Asia into the Pacific. It focuses on deterring action against Australia's strategic interests, as compared to shaping the environment or responding with credible military force when needed. Notwithstanding the denial strategy, the five tasks given to the ADF are defending Australia and its immediate region; deterring any potential adversary's attempt to project power against Australia through the northern approaches, protecting Australia's economic connection to the world; contributing with partners to the collective security of the Indo-Pacific, and contributing to the maintenance of the global rules-based order. The planned force structure is intended to generate six capability effects: project force; hold a potential adversary's forces at risk, protect ADF forces and support critical infrastructure in Australia; sustain protracted combat operations; maintain persistent situational awareness in the primary areas of interest; and achieve decision advantage.

The NDS identifies six immediate priorities to be implemented: acquisition of SSNs through the AUKUS route; precision long range strike and manufacture of munitions in Australia; improving ADF ability to operate from Northern bases; improving growth and retention of highly-skilled workforce; lifting capacity to rapidly translate disruptive new technologies into ADF capability; and deepening Australia's diplomatic and defence partnerships with key partners in Indo-Pacific. The integrated force is to deliver a Navy with enhanced maritime, air and land strike capability; an Army optimised for littoral manoeuvre with a long range land and maritime strike capability; an Air Force that can deliver long-range intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance and enhanced maritime, land and air strike capability; space capabilities that enhance ISR, provide resilient communications and counter emerging space threats; and cyber capabilities that enable enhanced ISR,



deliver resilient communications and provide computer network defence and disrupt operations.

India is explicitly identified as a top-tier security partner for Australia. Australia will continue to support India's key role in the region by increasing the depth and complexity of defence cooperation. Australia will also continue to seek opportunities with India to drive practical bilateral and multilateral cooperation, defence industry cooperation and information sharing. The NDS describes the Northeast Indian Ocean as central to Australia's security and SLOCs. Accordingly, Australia will focus on regularising ADF presence including through increased deployments, training and exercises, with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives. It will also strengthen cooperation with Indian Ocean states through maritime domain awareness, defence industry engagement and increasing education and training opportunities.

To deliver these effects, Australia intends to invest A\$ 330 billion in the next decade on capability priorities through the Integrated Investment Program. A summary of priority areas for these investments is contained in the table below.

Sl.	Capability	Areas of Investment	Amount (A\$ Billion)
1	Undersea Warfare	SSNs; subsea warfare and uncrewed maritime systems; Ghost Shark autonomous vehicle, underwater range systems	63-76
2	Maritime capabilities for sea denial and localised sea control ops	Hunter class frigates; general purpose frigates; Hobart class air warfare destroyers; large optionally crewed vessels	51-69
3	Targeting and long range strike	Sea-based strike; land-based strike; air-launched vehicles; hypersonic weapons; targeting enterprise	28-35
4	Space and Cyber	Enhanced cyber capabilities; satellite communications; space sensors; space control; electronic warfare	27-36
5	Amphibious capable	Landing craft; Infantry fighting vehicles; combat reconnaissance	36-44



	combined-arms land system	vehicles; Apache helicopters; Black Hawk helicopters; M1A2 Abrams main battle tank	
6	Expeditionary air operations	C-130J Hercules; F-35A Joint Strike Fighter; EA-18G Growler; uncrewed air systems; air intelligence; surveillance and reconnaissance; air-to-air weapon systems	28-33
7	Missile Defence	AEW & C replacement aircraft; joint air battle management system; active missile defence; Jindalee Operational Radar Network; E-7A Wedgetail	14-18
8	Theatre Logistics	Theatre logistics upgrade; improved fuel resilience; deployable logistics; improved health capabilities	15-21
9	Theatre command and control	Land, maritime and air command systems; warfighting networks and strategic communications; air traffic management and control capability; decision advantage and intelligence systems	11-15
10	Guided weapons and explosive ordnance	Development of sovereign ability to produce, maintain, repair and overhaul select systems; domestic manufacture of Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems from 2025	16-21
11	Enhanced and resilient northern bases	Northern base infrastructure; northern logistics network; northern training area enhancements.	14-18

China's reaction to being named in the Australian NDS was remarkably muted. It's spokesperson reiterated the old narrative that China was committed to regional peace and security and posed no threat to anyone. Security risks, according to him, came from countries outside the region which had been forming exclusive groups, stoking bloc confrontation and muddying the





waters in the South China Sea. China hoped Australia would “correctly view China’s development and strategic intentions, abandon the Cold-War mentality, do more to keep the region peaceful and stable, and stop buzzing about China”<sup>11</sup>.

China’s averments of its peaceful intentions beggar belief and must be treated with a large dose of salt. Its continued military buildup and proclivity to use coercion have been on display for well over a decade now. However, despite recognising the threat from China, very little in the NDS content will protect against long-range missile attack (China’s missiles outrange by far those Australia is planning to acquire), or cyber or space attack, disinformation or supply chain disruptions. The stated focus is on deterring such attack, through strike capability, enabling the holding of the adversary’s forces at risk. Evidently, the risk of such attack during the coming decade at least is considered low.

Strike, however, is a capability usable only in a hot conflict scenario. It cannot be employed in grey zone coercive scenarios, against vessels with white hulls, or against fishing craft manned by maritime militia without a severe international and domestic backlash. China has so far relied on grey zone activity to attain its strategic objectives, including laser-dazzlers and the use of sonar when divers are in the water. It has shown no inclination to use military coercion at sea, which is what the strike capability is intended to deter.

As and when China does resort to military force, the weight of strike Australia will be able to bring to bear remains limited. The only truly long-range vector available to carry out strike beyond the Indonesian archipelago will be the SSN. Land-based vectors don’t have the reach, while those on surface ships operating in say the South China Sea will be exposed and vulnerable. SSNs, however, are unlikely to be available by 2033-34, the period the NDS caters for. Once they do become available, their numbers will be too small to make a difference, unless they act as part of a larger, US-led force.

Among the tasks given to the ADF is preserving Australia’s economic connection to the world. This translates into a SLOC protection mission for Australia’s main trade routes: to Japan through the Pacific, and to India, the Middle East and Europe through the Indian Ocean. The number of assets available for such a

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<sup>11</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference on April 17, 2024, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202404/t20240417\\_11283249.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202404/t20240417_11283249.html)





mission, particularly when outside the reach of land-based air cover or dealing with a submarine threat, remain far too low to make a difference.

Nevertheless, the NDS does chart out a clear path to a prioritised set of capabilities. Its limitations will no doubt be addressed in subsequent iterations, to follow at two-year intervals. The fact that a beginning has been made is commendable.

## Operations, Exercises and Capability Enhancement – India

Admiral Adoong Pan-Iam, Commander-in-Chief, Royal Thai Navy, made an official visit to India from April 1-3<sup>12</sup>. Apart from ceremonials, his programme encompassed courtesy calls on senior military and defence ministry officials, the National Maritime Security Coordinator, and discussions with Indian defence industry personnel to explore current trends in shipbuilding and identify scope for ship maintenance and repair in India.

V Adm Mark Hammond, Chief of the Royal Australian Navy, made an official visit to India from April 2-6<sup>13</sup>. His programme encompassed courtesy calls and meetings with senior Indian Armed Forces and Department of Defence officials, visits to the Southern and Western Naval Command including to INS Vikrant, and visits to the Naval Dockyard at Mumbai as well as Mazagon Docks Limited. The visit further consolidated relations between the Indian and Australian Navies.

General Anil Chauhan, Chief of Defence Staff, proceeded on an official visit to France from April 21-28<sup>14</sup>. Apart from high level meetings, his agenda encompassed deliberations at France's Directorate General of Armament for enhancing the exchange of high-end dual use technologies and interactions with to leadership of the French defence industry including Dassault, Safran, Naval Group and Thales Alenia Space. He also interacted with leadership of the French Land Forces Command and the French Space Command, apart from Ecole Militaire.

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<sup>12</sup> PIB, "Visit by Admiral Adoong Pan-Iam, Commander-in-Chief, Royal Thai Navy", April 1, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2016824>

<sup>13</sup> PIB, "VAdm Mark Hammond, Chief of the Royal Australian Navy, April 2", 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2017049>

<sup>14</sup> Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan Concludes his official visit to France, April 28, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2019044>



The Indian Coast Guard's Pollution Control Vessel (PCV), Samudra Paheredar made port calls at Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam)<sup>15</sup> and Muara (Brunei) on April 2 and April 9 respectively<sup>16</sup>. The visits are in pursuance of the India-ASEAN Initiative for Marine Pollution, as announced by Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh in 2022 in Cambodia during the ASEAN Defence Minister Plus Meeting.

The United States Navy and Cochin Shipyard (CSL) inked a Master Shipyard Repair Agreement (MRSA)<sup>17</sup>, effective from April 5, 2024. This agreement facilitates the repair of US Military Sealift Command vessels at CSL, making it the third Indian shipyard to sign such agreement after Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) and Larsen & Toubro (L&T) Shipyard at Kattupalli.

Agni-Prime, a new-generation ballistic missile fired from a canisterised road-mobile launcher, was successfully tested off from Dr APJ Abdul Kalam Island on April 3<sup>18</sup>. The test was conducted by the Strategic Forces Command (SFC), along with Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). The missile has a range of 1000-2000 Km.

Units of the Indian Navy, Indian Coast Guard, Marine Police, Fisheries, Customs, and other security agencies conducted Sagar Kavach from April 1-2 in the Lakshadweep Islands<sup>19</sup>. The exercise projected enhanced preparedness, response mechanisms and surveillance capability coordination among the coastal security stakeholders.

ASW aircraft from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy conducted a bilateral exercise in the south of Kanto on April 3 and 5, focusing on anti-submarine warfare<sup>20</sup>. The objectives of this exercise were to improve the tactical capabilities of both units and enhance interoperability between them.

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<sup>15</sup> ICG's Pollution Control Vessel Samudra Paheredar makes a port call in Vietnam as part of its overseas deployment to ASEAN countries,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2016905>

<sup>16</sup> Indian Coast Guard Vessel Samudra Paheredar makes a port call at Muara, Brunei,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2017549>

<sup>17</sup> Press Statement by Cochin shipyard Limited, "CSL signs Master Ship Repair Agreement with US Navy", April 6, 2024, <https://www.bseindia.com/xml-data/corpfiling/AttachLive/27902f27-05fb-4e35-bf57-cf4c09ea7eed.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> PIB, "New Generation Ballistic Missile Agni-Prime successfully flight-tested by Strategic Forces Command & DRDO off the Odisha coast", April 4, 2024,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2017114>

<sup>19</sup> <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/sagar-kavach-0124-conducted-lakshadweep-islands>

<sup>20</sup> Indian Navy, "Sagar Kavach 0124 conducted off Lakshadweep Islands", April 1, 2024

<https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202404/20240408en.pdf>



Defence Secretary Shri Giridhar Aramane presided over the inaugural steel cutting ceremony for the first of five Fleet Support Ships being built for the Indian Navy at Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL) in Visakhapatnam on April 10<sup>21</sup>, and for the third Cadet Training Ship at M/s L&T Kattupalli on April 20. The fleet support ships, with a displacement of 44,000 tonnes, will enable replenishment of the Navy's fleet at sea with essential supplies like fuel, water, ammunition, and stores. The Cadet Training Ships are expected to be delivered in early September 2026<sup>22</sup>.

INS Talwar carried out its first interdiction of illicit narcotics as a member of Combined Maritime Forces, seizing 940 kg of drugs in the Arabian Sea on April 13, while operating in support of Combined Task Force (CTF) 150<sup>23</sup>.

INSV Tarini, the Indian Navy's sail training ship with an all-woman crew, commenced her return voyage from Port Louis on March 30 and reached Goa on April 21<sup>24</sup>. Lt Cdr Dilna K and Lt Cdr Roopa A became the first women officers from India to complete this transoceanic expedition. The two officers will now prepare for their upcoming circumnavigation of the globe (Sagar Parikrama – IV) planned to commence in September this year.

On April 26, INS Sahyadri participated in Maritime Partnership Exercise with Royal Navy's RFA Argus and RFA Lyme Bay, part of the UK Littoral Response Group South at Sea. The exercise provided an opportunity for both navies to exchange best practices.<sup>25</sup>

On April 20, the Indian Navy (IN) conducted Exercise Poorvi Lehar (XPOL 2024) on the East Coast under the operational control of the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command. The exercise aimed at readiness to tackle security challenges head-on in the region witnessed the

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<sup>21</sup> PIB, "Defence Secretary presides over first steel cutting of Fleet Support Ships for Indian Navy at Hindustan Shipyard Ltd in Visakhapatnam", April 10, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2017619>

<sup>22</sup> PIB Press Release, "Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan concludes his official visit to France", April; 28, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2018331>

<sup>23</sup> Combined Maritime forces, "Indian Navy Carries Out First Drug Interdiction as CMF Member", April 16, 2024, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2024/04/16/indian-navy-carries-out-first-drug-interdiction-as-cmf-member/>

<sup>24</sup> INSV Tarini returns triumphant after historic transoceanic expedition by Indian Navy's women officers, April 22, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2018460>

<sup>25</sup> Indian Navy Official Twitter Handle, April 25, 2024. <https://twitter.com/indiannavy/status/1783506820289724645>



participation of ships, submarines, aircraft, and special forces. In addition, the IAF, Andaman and Nicobar Command, and Coast Guard also participated.<sup>26</sup>

On April 26, a Mission deployed Indian naval destroyer INS Kochi responded to a maritime security incident involving attack on Panama flagged crude oil tanker MV Andromeda Star. An aerial reconnaissance by helicopter was conducted to evaluate the situation after an Indian Navy cruiser intercepted the MV. All 30 crew members—22 of whom are Indian citizens—are safe, and the ship is proceeding with its planned passage to the next port.<sup>27</sup>

On April 23, the Strategic Forces Command successfully launched of the new variant of a Medium-Range Ballistic Missile.<sup>28</sup>

## Other Indo-Pacific Developments

Xi Jinping Joe Biden Telecon. Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping spoke to each other telephonically on April 02 for the first time since their November 2023 Summit. According to the US readout, they reviewed progress on key issues discussed at the Woodside Summit, including counternarcotics cooperation, ongoing military-to-military communication, addressing AI-related risks, climate change and people-to-people exchanges. The two paragraph long US readout said President Biden emphasised issues connected with Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and China's unfair trade policies and non-market economic practices<sup>29</sup>. China's over two-page long readout underlined three overarching principles to guide US-China relations<sup>30</sup>: Peace must be valued, stability must be prioritised, and credibility must be upheld. It stressed the Taiwan question as the first red line that must not be crossed in China-US relations. It described US sanctions as measures to suppress China's trade and technology development and said these were not derisking, but creating risks. It noted that President Xi stated China's position on Hong Kong related issues, human rights, the South China Sea and other issues, implying that these were discussed.

<sup>26</sup> PIB Press Release, Indian Navy Conducts Exercise Poorvi Lehar on the East Coast, April 20, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2018336>

<sup>27</sup> Indian Navy Official Twitter handle, April 28, 2024. <https://twitter.com/indiannavy/status/1784554009275372015>

<sup>28</sup> PIB Press Release, Successful test of new version of Medium-Range Ballistic Missile, April 23, 2024. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2018638>

<sup>29</sup> Readout of President Joe Biden's Call with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, April 02, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/02/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

<sup>30</sup> President Xi Jinping Speaks with US President Joe Biden on the Phone, 2024-04-02, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202404/t20240403\\_11275451.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202404/t20240403_11275451.html)



Blinken Visit to China. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited China from April 24-26 to take forward the process of engagement begun during the Woodside Summit. Areas of engagement at that time included re-instating military-to-military communications, artificial intelligence, counternarcotics cooperation, people-to-people exchanges and increased passenger flights between the two countries. There was no agreement then on difficult issues, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, North Korea's proliferation and missile tests, China's support to Russia, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, the situation in the Middle East, wrongful detainment of citizens of other countries, human rights issues etc. The outcomes of the visit did not reflect any movement forward on these aspects. China's readout speaks of a five-point consensus: to continue trying to stabilise relations, to maintain high level exchanges and contacts at all levels, to hold the first meeting of the China-US intergovernmental dialogue on artificial intelligence, hold a senior officials' meeting of the anti-drug working group and to hold other meetings, to expand cultural and people-to-people ties, and to maintain consultations on international and regional hot spot issues<sup>31</sup>. The US readout identifies a number of issues raised by Secretary Blinken, but does not record any outcome<sup>32</sup>. Meanwhile, China's readout of President Xi's meeting with Secretary Blinken reiterates the five pillars proposed at the Woodside Summit: jointly developing a right perception, jointly managing disagreements effectively, jointly advancing mutually beneficial cooperation, jointly shouldering responsibilities as major countries, and jointly promoting people-to-people exchanges<sup>33</sup>; in effect a G-2.

Solomon Islands Elections. Parliamentary elections in the Solomon Islands threw up a hung parliament, with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's Ownership, Unity and Responsibility Party obtaining only 15 of the 50 seats, down from 37 it had before. Independents and micro-parties won 15 seats, while the balance 20 were won by opposition parties. Sogavare announced his withdrawal from the race to become the country's next prime minister on April 29<sup>34</sup>. He is known for having led his country into a pivot towards China, culminating in a secretive security agreement. Who will be the country's next Prime Minister will be known after the parliament meets on May 02.

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<sup>31</sup> China-US reach five-point consensus at Beijing meeting, April 26, 2024, [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202404/26/content\\_WS662dae75c6d0868f4e8e684c.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202404/26/content_WS662dae75c6d0868f4e8e684c.html)

<sup>32</sup> Secretary Blinken's Visit to the People's Republic of China, April 26, 2024,

<https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-visit-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

<sup>33</sup> President Xi Jinping Meets with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, April 26, 2024,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/202404/t20240426\\_11289925.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202404/t20240426_11289925.html)

<sup>34</sup> Solomon Islands' pro-China leader Manasseh Sogavare withdraws from race to be next prime minister, April 29, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-29/solomon-islands-manasseh-sogavare-to-step-down-as-pm-candidate/103781462>



Maldives Elections<sup>35</sup>. President Mohammed Muizzu's People's National Congress won 71 of the 93 seats in Maldives' Parliamentary Election on April 21. Former President Ibrahim Mohammed Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party was able to win only 12 seats. The result was widely seen as a setback for India and a gain for China.

UK Defence Spending. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that the UK will increase defence spending to 2.5% by 2030 – reaching £87 billion a year in 2030. He set out three areas of focus for the bolstered defence budget: (a) increasing UK defence industrial base with an investment of at least £10 billion over the next decade to enhance rapid production capacity and stockpiles of next-generation munitions, (b) reforming Armed Forces and creating a new Defence Innovation Agency with at least 5% of the defence budget to be committed to R&D, and (c) backing Ukraine's defence with a commitment to provide an additional £500 million this year for ammunition, air defence and drones.<sup>36,37</sup>

UK Visit to China and Hong Kong. The UK Minister for the Indo-Pacific, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, made a six-day visit to mainland China and Hong Kong. She met senior representatives of the Chinese government and Hong Kong authorities<sup>38</sup> and discussed opportunities for greater cooperation including in AI safety, trade, development, and climate change.

IMF World Economic Outlook<sup>39</sup>. The April 2024 edition of the IMF World Economic Outlook was released on April 16. The outlook predicts the world economy will grow at 3.2% in 2024 and 2025, the same pace as it did in 2023. Advanced economies are predicted to grow at 1.7% in 2024, while those of emerging and developing Asia will grow by 4.2%. China's growth is predicted to decelerate from 5.2% in 2023 to 4.6% in 2024. India remains the fastest growing major economy: it grew at 7.8% in 2023, as against the predicted 6.7%.

<sup>35</sup> Pro-China party wins Maldives election in landslide – reports, April 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pro-china-party-wins-maldives-election-landslide-media-say-2024-04-22/>

<sup>36</sup> Prime Minister's Office 10 Downing Street. "PM Announces 'Turning Point' in European Security as UK Set to Increase Defence Spending to 2.5% by 2030." GOV.UK, April 24, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-turning-point-in-european-security-as-uk-set-to-increase-defence-spending-to-25-by-2030>.

<sup>37</sup> Cabinet Office, UK. "Defending Britain." GOV.UK, April 22, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defending-britain>.

<sup>38</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. "UK Minister for Indo-Pacific's Meetings in China and Hong Kong, April 2024." GOV.UK, April 23, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-minister-for-indo-pacifics-key-meetings-in-mainland-china-and-hong-kong-sar-april-2024>.

<sup>39</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook April 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2024/04/16/world-economic-outlook-april-2024>





It is predicted to grow by 6.8% in 2024 and 6.5% in 2025, rising to the level of \$ 6.44 trillion by 2029. India's economy is predicted to overtake Japan to become the world's fourth-largest in 2025, and to overtake Germany to become the world's third-largest in 2027.

AUKUS Defence Ministers Joint Statement<sup>40</sup>. A joint statement from AUKUS Defence Ministers on April 08 took stock of progress in delivering on the two pillars of AUKUS. In Pillar I (the SSN), ASC Pty Ltd and BAE Systems have been chosen as industry partners to build the SSN-AUKUS and ASC Pty Ltd to sustain it. All three countries have made significant investments in their respective submarine industrial bases. USS Annapolis visited HMAS Stirling in March 2024 as the precursor to building Australia's capacity to support a rotational presence of UK and US SSNs from 2027. The first maintenance activity on an SSN will occur in Australia in the second half of 2024, for which Australian personnel are undergoing necessary training in Guam. The US has awarded the first contracts for submarine training simulators and Australian personnel have completed a placement at the Pearl Harbour Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility. Enabling nuclear safety legislation has been passed in the US and introduced in Australia. Australia and the US and Australia and UK have signed bilateral Memoranda of Understanding for personnel exchanges to help accelerate the growth of Australia's nuclear submarine workforce. The ministers announced that in recognition of Japan's strengths and its close bilateral defense partnerships with all three countries, they are considering cooperation with Japan on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects.

President of Iran Visits Sri Lanka. President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Dr. Ebrahim Raisi made an official bilateral visit to Sri Lanka on April 24. The visit was at the invitation of President Ranil Wickremesinghe to jointly declare open the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project.<sup>41</sup>

Djibouti Code of Conduct. The EU announced that it will become an observer in the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment. The aim of the regional cooperation framework is to combat illicit marine operations such as piracy,

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<sup>40</sup> AUKUS Defense Ministers' Joint Statement, April 08, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3733790/aucus-defense-ministers-joint-statement/>

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Sri Lanka, "Visit of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Sri Lanka," 24 April 2024. <https://mfa.gov.lk/visit-of-the-president-iran-to-sl/>.





armed robbery, and human trafficking in the North-Western Indian Ocean, which includes the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>42</sup>

Indonesia to Build Scorpene Submarines. Indonesia has chosen France's Naval Group and Indonesia's PT PAL to build two Scorpene Evolved Full Lithium Battery submarines for the Indonesian Navy<sup>43</sup>. The two companies had entered into a strategic partnership agreement for this purpose in February 2022. The submarines will be built at the PT PAL shipyard in Surabaya and will be maintained locally. The Scorpene family presently includes Malaysia (two submarines), Brazil (four submarines) and India (six submarines); Indonesia will be the latest addition.

Delivery of Brahmos Missiles to Philippines<sup>44</sup>. The first batch of BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles under a \$ 375 million deal concluded between India and the Philippines was delivered by special IAF aircraft on April 19. This was the first export of the BrahMos missile by India. Philippine Navy personnel had earlier this year been trained in operation and maintenance of the missile system in India. The missiles when operationalised will considerably strengthen the Philippine ability to safeguard their territorial zones.

Philippines US Bilateral Strategic Dialogue<sup>45</sup>. The 11<sup>th</sup> Philippines-US Bilateral Strategic Dialogue took place at Washington DC on April 22 & 23. The two countries decided to expand the breadth of the partnership, modernise alliance cooperation, promote an international law-based maritime order, advance common prosperity and protect the shared planet, and strengthen multilateral cooperation.

Australia-Japan-Philippines-US Activity in the South China Sea. Warships and aircraft from Australia, Japan, the Philippines and the US came together to exercise in the South China Sea on April 06-07<sup>46</sup>. The JMSDF fielded JS Akebono, The USN had USS Mobile and a P-8A, Australia had HMAS

<sup>42</sup> EU Press Release, Maritime Security: EU to Become an Observer of the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment," April 22, 2024.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/04/22/maritime-security-eu-to-become-an-observer-of-the-djibouti-code-of-conductjeddah-amendment/>.

<sup>43</sup> Naval Group and PT PAL have signed a contract with Indonesia for two locally built Scorpene Evolved Full LiB Submarines, <https://www.naval-group.com/en/naval-group-and-pt-pal-have-signed-contract-indonesia-2-locally-built-scorpener-evolved-full-lib>

<sup>44</sup> India delivers first batch of BrahMos to Philippines, April 19, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-delivers-first-batch-of-brahmos-to-philippines/article68084161.ece>

<sup>45</sup> Joint Statement on the Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, April 24, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-philippines-united-states-bilateral-strategic-dialogue/>

<sup>46</sup> Japan-US-Australia-Philippines Quadrilateral Exercise, April 06, 2024, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202404/20240406en.pdf>



Warramunga and a P-8A, and the Philippines fielded BRP Antonio Luna and BRP Valentin Diaz. Exercises included Anti-Submarine Warfare and tactical manoeuvres. A joint statement described the exercise as a demonstration of the collective commitment to strengthen regional and international cooperation in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and the demonstration of their upholding the right to freedom of navigation and overflight, as well as respect for maritime rights under international law, as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>47</sup>.

Exercises in the South China Sea<sup>48</sup>. USS Mobile and HMAS Warramunga conducted bilateral operations in the South China Sea on April 08. A day later, they teamed up with FS Vendemiaire to conduct trilateral operations in the South China Sea<sup>49</sup>.

Ream Naval Base<sup>50</sup>. Two Chinese naval corvettes appear to have settled in more or less permanently at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, giving credence to reports of a secret deal to establish a permanent Chinese presence at Ream. The two ships were first seen at the pier on December 03. No other ships (including Cambodian) have been permitted to dock on the China-built pier. Two Japanese destroyers that had made a port call in Cambodia were sent to Sihanoukville, while Cambodian boats continue to cluster at the smaller old pier. Extensive construction indicates that permanent housing for Chinese personnel is coming up.

Taiwan Strait Transit<sup>51</sup>. A US Navy P-8A Poseidon transited the Taiwan Strait on April 17 (local time). The aircraft remained within international air space.

Japan's Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) will conduct the Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024 (IPD24) from May 3 to December 15, 2024. This deployment marks the 8th time the JMSDF has deployed in the Indo-Pacific since 2017. It will involve port calls in several

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<sup>47</sup> Joint Statement: Australia – Japan – Philippines – United States Maritime Cooperative Activity, April 05, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-04-06/australia-japan-philippines-united-states-maritime-cooperative-activity>

<sup>48</sup> US and Australia Conduct Bilateral Operations, April 9, 2024, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3734709/us-and-australia-conduct-bilateral-operations/>

<sup>49</sup> US, Australian and French Naval Forces Conduct Trilateral Operations, April 10, 2024, <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/3737803/us-australian-and-french-naval-forces-conduct-trilateral-operations/>

<sup>50</sup> First Among Piers: Chinese Ships Settle in at Cambodia's Ream, April 18, 2024, <https://amti.csis.org/first-among-piers-chinese-ships-settle-in-at-cambodias-ream/>

<sup>51</sup> US Navy Aircraft Transits the Taiwan Strait, April 16, 2024, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3743947/us-navy-aircraft-transits-the-taiwan-strait/>



countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, France, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Marshall Islands, Fiji, India, Kiribati, Palau, the Philippines, Vanuatu, and the United States. The JMSDF will also participate in several major exercises during the deployment, including MARARA 24, RIMPAC 2024, Tonga Royal Navy's 50th Anniversary Fleet Review, Pacific Dragon 2024, Pacific Vanguard 2024, KAKADU 2024, Pacific Partnership 2024, and MALABAR 2024.<sup>52</sup>

UK, US and Japan to Exercise in Indo-Pacific. The UK announced that the UK, US, and Japan will hold regular trilateral military exercises in the Indo-Pacific from 2025 to boost security in the region and further develop the ability of each country's armed forces to operate together. The trilateral exercises aim to build upon the previous operations between the three countries, underlining the UK's commitment to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>53</sup>

CARAT Exercises. The USN conducted week long Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises with Bangladesh<sup>54</sup> and Sri Lanka<sup>55</sup> on April 24.

Red Sea Attacks Continue. Houthi attacks on traffic in the Red Sea continued for the seventh month, undermining Freedom of Navigation in a choke point that normally carries 12% of world trade and 20% of world container traffic. The continued inability of maritime powers to stop such attacks, despite almost daily strikes by US-led forces against Houthi missile launcher and drone sites, speaks of the limitations of what can be achieved by maritime power without political action. Disappearance of coverage regarding the Houthi attacks from the media indicates a new normal has set in, with countries accepting the increased costs of routing via Africa.

MSC Aries Seized. Iran's Revolutionary Guard seized the container vessel MSC Aries with 25 crew members (including 17 Indian citizens) in the Strait of Hormuz on April 13. The vessel is a container ship owned by Gortal Shipping Inc., flagged in Portugal and chartered by MSC. It was en-route from Port

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<sup>52</sup> JMSDF-Press Release, "Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024", April 16, 2024.

<https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/en/release/202404/20240416en.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> UK Press Release. "UK to Hold Joint Military Exercises with US and Japan to Boost Security and Strengthen Defence Ties," April 11, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-hold-joint-military-exercises-with-us-and-japan-to-boost-security-and-strengthen-defence-ties>.

<sup>54</sup> Bangladesh, US Navies Commence CARAT Bangladesh 2024, April 24, 2024, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3754977/bangladesh-us-navies-commence-carat-bangladesh-2024/>

<sup>55</sup> CARAT Sri Lanka 2024 Kicks Off, April 24, 2024, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3754996/carat-sri-lanka-2024-kicks-off/>



Khalifa in the UAE to Nhava Sheva, India.<sup>56</sup> A female crew member from India was released by Iranian authorities and landed safely at the Cochin International Airport on April 16<sup>57</sup>.

Hambantota Commences Container Transshipment. Hambantota International Port (HIP) commences its inaugural container transshipment service operated by the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC). On April 9, MV 'MSC Ingrid' made her maiden call at HIP, discharging a total of 500 plus TEUs of transshipment containers to be connected to a second carrier.<sup>58</sup>

Appointments of Senior Officers. Admiral Stephen Koehler assumed command of the US Pacific Fleet, relieving Admiral Samuel Paparo on April 04<sup>59</sup>. The latter is to take over as the Commander Indo-Pacific Command in May. Vice Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi was appointed to take over as India's next Chief of the Naval Staff on April 19<sup>60</sup>. The Admiral will take over on April 30. Australia announced a series of high level appointments on April 9, including Vice Admiral David Johnston as the next Chief of Defence Force, Air Marshal Robert Chipman to the Vice Chief of Defence Force, AVM Stephen Chappel to be the Chief of the Air Force, R Adm Justin Jones to become the Chief of Joint Operations and Maj Gen Susan Coyle to become the Chief of Joint Capabilities<sup>61</sup>. All appointments will become effective in July. Lt Gen Gavan Reynolds is to complete his term as the inaugural Chief of Defence Intelligence; the position will rotate to a civilian who is yet to be identified.

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<sup>56</sup> "MSC Aries Incident Update." MSC, April 17, 2024.

<https://www.msc.com/en/newsroom/customer-advisories/2024/april/msc-aries-incident-update>.

<sup>57</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. "Indian Woman Cadet on Vessel MSC Aries Returns Home," April 18, 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37783/Indian+woman+cadet+on+vessel+MSC+Aries+returns+home>.

<sup>58</sup> "Hambantota International Port Commences Container Operations | Hambantota International Port Group," April 9, 2024. <http://www.hipg.lk/2024/hambantota-international-port-commences-container-operations>.

<sup>59</sup> COMPACFLT Holds Change of Command Ceremony in Pearl Harbour, April 04, 2024, <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/3732013/compacflt-holds-change-of-command-ceremony-in-pearl-harbor/>

<sup>60</sup> Vice Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi appointed as the next Chief of the Naval Staff, April 19, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2018213>

<sup>61</sup> Appointment of Australian Defence Force senior leadership, April 09, 2024, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2024-04-09/appointment-australian-defence-force-senior-leadership>



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