



**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# DPG POLICY BRIEF

## The Indo-Pacific Maritime in 2022

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### Cover Photographs:

*INS Vikrant, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, commissioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Kochi on September 2, 2022. Source: Indian Navy*

*Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles, British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and US Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III with senior military leaders at the Pentagon at the First AUKUS Defence Ministers' Meeting, December 7, 2022. Source: The Pentagon*

*Chiefs of the Australian, Indian, Japanese and US Navies at the four-chiefs of Navies Talks at Yokosuka on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Exercise Malabar, November 05, 2022. Source: PIB*

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# The Indo-Pacific Maritime in 2022

by  
Lalit Kapur

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## The Indo-Pacific Maritime in 2022

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### China's Destabilisation

As the primary global commons linking Asia, which accounts for 40.5% of the world's nominal GDP<sup>1</sup> and is acknowledged as the world's most economically dynamic region, the Indo-Pacific remained the focus of geopolitical competition in 2022. China's One Belt, One Road, designed to "develop China-centred and controlled regional and global infrastructure, transportation, trade and production networks"<sup>2</sup> was buttressed by its unprecedented naval expansion. This provided China the heft to exercise grey zone coercion and assert claims not in consonance with international law in its maritime neighbourhood, thus subverting long-established international law in its favour. Pushback against China's actions coalesced, though not sufficiently to deter its unilateral activity in the near term. Construction of a stable Indo-Pacific balance remained work in progress.

By 2021, the PLA already had the world's largest navy, comprising over 340 battle force ships<sup>3</sup>. This was substantially higher than the 296 ships of the US Navy at the same time<sup>4</sup>. It inducted 14 frontline warships and submarines into its fleet in 2022, the same number as commissioned by the navies of US, India, Japan, Australia, France and the UK combined. Moreover, while the navies of major world powers will shrink or maintain their size in the near term, the PLA (Navy) is projected to grow to 400 ships by 2025 and 440 ships by 2030<sup>5</sup>.

China's Anti-Access/ Area Denial capability already gives it the ability to place at risk US naval forces within the Second Island Chain, making all US bases within this region vulnerable and forcing the search for forward bases beyond the strike range of MRBMs. Its expanding nuclear force, including operationalization of the JL-3 SLBM, deters forceful intervention. The world's

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<sup>1</sup> IMF estimates of GDP, Current Prices, October 2022, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>

<sup>2</sup> CRS Brief IF 11735 "China's One-Belt, One Road Initiative, Economic Issues, December 22, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>

<sup>4</sup> Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress, December 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32665>

<sup>5</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, Op Cit.



largest Coast Guard and maritime militia give China the ability to dial up coercive activity while remaining below the threshold of war.

## Sub-Regional Developments

### East Asia

In East Asia, China's campaign of wearing down Taiwan expanded substantially, with nearly 1200 intrusions by the PLAAF into Taiwan's air space till December 25, 2022. US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in August 2022 resulted in a full-fledged blockade of the island nation for over a week, with China firing missiles across the country and into Japan's EEZ without eliciting a military response. The development enhanced already serious concerns about regional security in Japan. As the year approached an end, however, US President Biden asserted that he didn't see an imminent threat of China attacking Taiwan<sup>6</sup>.

China's partners contributed to enhancing regional instability. North Korea set new records in missile tests: as of December 25, 74 had been 'tested' during the current year, including hypersonic vehicles, cruise missiles, an ICBM capable of reaching continental United States, an SLBM and a tactical nuclear weapon delivery system.

Meanwhile, Russia's Exercise Vostok 2022, joint bomber patrols with China and the joint Russia–China Sea Cooperation exercise from December 21–27 enhanced regional security concerns.

### South East Asia

China retained control of the South China Sea in all circumstances short of war with the US. It enforced domestic law in this international waterway, with only occasional protest by way of Freedom of Navigation operations from the US and allies. Negotiations on the Code of Conduct meandered along and ASEAN nations, notwithstanding their vaunted unity, were unable to arrive at a common stand that went beyond ritual reaffirmations of the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety and freedom in the

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<sup>6</sup> Biden Says He Doesn't See 'Imminent' Threat of Taiwan Attack, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-14/biden-says-he-doesn-t-see-imminent-threat-of-taiwan-invasion>



South China Sea and pleas for compliance with international maritime law and UNCLOS<sup>7</sup>.

As the year ended, reports emerged of new construction work by China at Eldad Reef, Whitsun Reef, Lankiam Cay and Sandy Cay in the Spratly Islands. Its ships forcibly seized suspected rocket debris being taken by the Philippines Coast Guard to Thitu Island in November. Chinese vessels were reported to be swarming in the vicinity of the Iroquois Reef and Sabina Shoal, both within the Philippines' EEZ. These are warning signals to President Marcos, who has been contemplating turning his country back towards the US and is expected to visit Beijing in January 2023.

### The Southern Pacific

In the Southern Pacific, China signed cooperation agreements with Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Cook Islands and Niue<sup>8</sup>. It also signed an agreement to "assist the Solomon Islands in maintaining social order"<sup>9</sup>, opening up possibilities for establishment of the first Chinese base in the Southern Pacific. In response, the US hosted the first ever US-Pacific Islands' Summit in Washington DC<sup>10</sup>. Great power competition has been well and truly joined, bringing an end to long years of relative neglect of the region by the US and Australia.

### The Indian Ocean

China launched two initiatives to reshape the Indian Ocean geopolitical environment in its favour. The first was intended to create an alternate to IORA, through the Indian Ocean Region Development Forum hosted by the China International Development Cooperation Agency at Kunming on November 21, 2022. The second was President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia on December 8 & 9, 2022, during which the first China-GCC and China-Arab States Summits were held. China continued its now 13-year-long regional presence through the 42<sup>nd</sup> Chinese anti-piracy escort force off the Horn of Africa even though

<sup>7</sup> Chairman's Statement of the 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Summits, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/01-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-40th-and-41st-ASEAN-Summits-2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202205/t20220524\\_10691917.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202205/t20220524_10691917.html)

<sup>9</sup> Wang Yi on China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Cooperation, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202206/t20220603\\_10698478.html#:~:text=The%20bilateral%20security%20framework%20agreement,not%20impose%20anything%20on%20anyone.](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220603_10698478.html#:~:text=The%20bilateral%20security%20framework%20agreement,not%20impose%20anything%20on%20anyone.)

<sup>10</sup> US-Pacific Island Country Summit, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-pacific-islands-country-summit/>



there have been no reported piracy incidents in the region since 2017. It also maintained and expanded its base in Djibouti.

Russia, China and Iran conducted a joint naval exercise in the Arabian Sea in January 2022; reports indicate that this will be repeated soon. Media reports also indicate that a second China-Russia-South Africa naval exercise will be conducted in February 2023, to follow the previous one in 2019.

Pakistan's first two China-built Tughril-Class (Type 054) frigates were commissioned in January and June 2022 respectively. The visit by the Chinese spy ship, Yuan Wang-5 to Hambantota in August created a media furore. These events indicated that while large-scale Chinese deployment in the Indian Ocean may be a few years away, there can be little doubt that the infrastructure is in place and the deployment will take place, sooner rather than later.

Leaders of the I2U2 (India, Israel, US and UAE) came together for their first (virtual) summit on July 14, 2022. The I2U2, somewhat like the Quad to which it has been likened, has the potential of expanding into an Indo-Abrahamic partnership to create a favourable balance of power and stabilise West Asia.

In the Western Indian Ocean, conflicts continued in Yemen, the Tigray region of Ethiopia and in Mozambique, necessitating the presence of extra-regional warships to keep the sea lanes open and secure. There were sporadic attacks by unmanned aerial systems on merchant ships.

Russia's new maritime doctrine, promulgated on July 31, spoke of turning the Indian Ocean into a zone of peace and stability and expanding cooperation with India, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other states.

As the year came to an end, Xi Jinping's successful visit to Saudi Arabia and meetings with Arab and GCC leaders stood in sharp contrast to the visit by President Biden in July, which did not achieve its primary objectives. The coming year will tell how far this translates into greater Chinese maritime presence in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

## **The US, Japan and India**

### **The US**

The US published its Indo-Pacific strategy in February, followed by its National Security and National Defence Strategies in October. China's "coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavour to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences" was

unambiguously identified as “the most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security”<sup>11</sup>.

However, despite the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific being prioritised as the most consequential and pacing challenge, the US remained tied down by Ukraine and a high priority commitment towards strengthening the Indo-Pacific was not in evidence. NDAA 2023 does provide \$ 11.5 billion towards strengthening the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and substantially increases funding for USN shipbuilding, but the stated objective of a 355-ship navy is not in sight<sup>12</sup>.

The Biden-Xi Jinping meeting on November 14 has restored some guardrails in the China-US relationship, but the wide divergence between perspectives of the two great powers will continue to raise tensions through the coming year.

The US focus remains the Western Pacific. The only move to strengthen the balance in the Indian Ocean is a direction in NDAA 2023 to the State and Defence Departments to engage with India to expand cooperation on emerging technologies, readiness and logistics.

## Japan

Japan shook off past inertia and turned towards a more robust defence and security posture through a revised National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy and Defence Build-up Programme promulgated on December 16, 2022. The NSS described China’s current external stance and military activities as a matter of serious concern presenting the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan as well as the peace and stability of the international community. It decided to substantially enhance its own defensive capability, including through the acquisition of ‘counterstrike’ weapons; strengthening the alliance with the US, building a stronger security partnerships with Australia and India, strengthen the domestic defence industrial base and enhance defence technology and capability exports. Japan also decided to stockpile a sufficient stock of ammunition and fuel to enable sustainment of combat operations for prolonged periods.

<sup>11</sup> National Security Strategy, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> 30-Year Plan: Navy Puts 355-Ship Cap on Fleet Size; Plans to Introduce Large Combatant, CHAMP Auxiliary Hull, <https://news.usni.org/2019/03/21/long-range-ship-plan-outlines-355-ship-cap-on-fleet-size-plans-to-introduce-large-combatant-champ-auxiliary-hull>





The Defense Build-up Programme envisages defence spending for the 2023-2027 period rising to ¥ 43 trillion (about \$ 314 billion), a rise of about 56% over the level of ¥27 trillion for 2019-2023. This will also raise Japan's defence spending to 2% of the GDP. In the process, Japan will acquire about 500 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US. Japan's future path has been set and can be expected to continue notwithstanding possible changes in government.

2022 witnessed Japan raising its target for public and private investment in India over the next five years to ¥ five trillion, from the ¥ 3.5 trillion for the previous five-year period. The year also witnessed the operationalization of the Reciprocal Logistic Support Agreement and Japan's participation in Exercise MILAN at Visakhapatnam for the first time. India's Navy Chief participated in Japan's International Fleet Review as well as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium hosted by Japan in November 2022, while ships from its Eastern Fleet participated in Exercise Malabar off Yokosuka.

Defence R&D and industry cooperation, however, remained far below potential. India will hope that eased rules for transfer of defence technology envisaged in Japan's NSS result in the Taegei / Soryu class submarines being put forward for India's P75I project, thereby providing a fillip to defence industry cooperation.

## India

In consonance with SAGAR, the IOR continues to remain the first priority in India's developmental assistance and maritime outreach. India commissioned the aircraft carrier INS Vikrant and the Project 15B destroyer INS Mormugao in 2022. The IN also took delivery of the fifth Scorpene Class submarine INS Vagir; this will commission in early 2023. Three frigates of the Nilgiri class were launched; these will commission in 2024 onwards.

India's navy continued its leading role in the Indian Ocean, through delivering pandemic assistance to regional nations as well as maintaining its mission based deployment to provide security against non-traditional challenges. IN warships also displayed their presence across the world, from Rio de Janeiro to San Diego, to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence. In addition, the IN participated in numerous bilateral and multilateral exercises, with at least one warship being deployed into the Pacific every month from May 2022. The Indian Air Force exercised with counterparts in Australia and Malaysia, and is slated to exercise with Japan early in 2023.



## Evolving Regional Architectures

Two different types of Indo-Pacific security architectures have taken shape. The first, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving India, Australia, Japan and the US, is a partnership intended to shape the regional environment and make it more resilient (and thus less susceptible to China's coercion). It is perhaps the most significant regional initiative and will play a large part in shaping the region's free and open future.

The Tokyo Quad Summit on May 24 focused cooperation on eight pillars, including peace and stability, pandemic response, infrastructure, climate change, cybersecurity, critical and emerging technologies, people-to-people contacts, space and maritime domain awareness.

The Quad ministers met on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly on September 23 and brought into force guidelines for the HADR partnership, as well as a joint statement on ransomware, while committing to meet in New Delhi in person in early 2023.

The military element of the Quad remains recessed, in the form of Exercise Malabar (the 26<sup>th</sup> edition was hosted by the JMSDF in the Philippines Sea off Yokosuka in November 2022), but irrespective of how it is projected, Exercise Malabar ensures China will remain convinced that the Quad is directed against it. The Quad Ministerial Meeting at New Delhi in early 2023 as well as the Summit to follow in Australia will indicate how effectively the leaders have been able to sustain their momentum.

The other is hard security alliances, the most prominent of which is AUKUS. A review of AUKUS in December indicated that the allies are on track to finding a way to provide Australia with nuclear attack submarine capability and will announce their path by March 2023<sup>13</sup>. The central issue still awaiting solution is whether defence industry competition can be set aside and national capacities combined to address the expected China threat. The path adopted by the US with Australia will guide increased defence industry cooperation with others in the region, including Japan and India. In parallel, Australia and Japan arrived at a substantially expanded declaration on defence and security cooperation<sup>14</sup>, while the Japan – South Korea – US trilateral also moved ahead.

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<sup>13</sup> AUKUS Defense Ministerial Joint Statement, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3239061/aukus-defense-ministerial-joint-statement/>

<sup>14</sup> Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html>



## Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, China's asymmetric power advantage and efforts to change the status quo and reshape the regional environment in its favour will continue to impact regional stability adversely. The pressing need is for the formation of a balancing coalition to deter unilateral military and grey zone assertion, particularly in the maritime commons, as well as a broader partnership that keeps the US engaged in Asia and provides economic and security alternatives to regional nations, helping to build their capacities, infrastructure and resilience. Until this can be done effectively, security and stability in the broader Indo-Pacific will remain elusive.

Unlike in the Western Pacific, there is little sign of action to construct an effective balancing coalition for the Indian Ocean for when the inevitable challenge of Chinese assertion and revisionism arises. Multilateral structures including IORA can hardly be expected to do the job; they can at best address soft security challenges. If India is to "work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region that delivers us all to the shores of prosperity"<sup>15</sup>, it will have to not only substantially strengthen its own maritime capability, but also construct a balancing coalition with like-minded powers, including its Quad partners. US ability to provide such a balance will be constrained by capacity limitations; India will have to do much of the heavy lifting required. The time to start is now; delaying this will result in strategic surprise for India in the vital maritime domain in the years ahead.

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<sup>15</sup> Extracted from Text of PM's Remarks setting out his SAGAR vision, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=116881>



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