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## How “Strategic” is India’s Indo-Pacific “Vision”?

By P. S. Suryanarayana

### SYNOPSIS

*As a gesture of goodwill towards China, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not refer to the Quad in his Indo-Pacific “vision” statement at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018. Now, while China continues to oppose the Quad – an Indo-Pacific security dialogue forum comprising the United States, Japan, India and Australia – Delhi seems to be moving closer to Washington. The strategic nuances of this bilateral relationship between the US and India may influence the Quad leaders’ summit which India will host in 2024.*

### COMMENTARY

At the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) on 3 June 2023, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin emphasised Washington’s new [“initiative](#) on critical and emerging technology with India”. The objective was to “explore new ways to co-develop key defence platforms”, he said.

Travelling to Delhi after Singapore, Austin met his Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh. They announced on 5 June, a [“roadmap](#) for US-India defence industrial cooperation”. The strategic backdrop of the roadmap is the current unsettled US-China and Sino-Indian relations.

In Austin’s view, the roadmap would help “fast-track high-priority co-development and co-production projects”. He said in televised remarks that “advancing some of those projects” could happen during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s summit with US President Joe Biden in Washington on 22 June 2023.

### Moves to Expand the US-India Convergence

Back in June 2018, Modi said at the 17th SLD that “India’s global strategic partnership

with the United States ... has [already] assumed [new significance](#) in the changing world". For him, a key aspect of this partnership was a "shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region". However, it was clear from Austin's remarks on 5 June 2023 that the US-India efforts to amplify the "new significance", especially in the Indo-Pacific, are still very much a work in progress.

The proposed [project areas](#) under the Austin-Singh roadmap are "air combat and land mobility systems; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; munitions, and the undersea domain". "Air combat" system is the code for a fighter jet engine. "Undersea domain" cooperation could mean the co-development of drones and/or submarines.

An "India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem ([INDUS-X](#))" would also be launched on 21 June. While officially described as "cutting-edge technology cooperation", Austin said that the aim would be to "jumpstart partnerships between the US and Indian defence innovation centres".

Unsurprisingly too, the US has (so far) not imposed sanctions on India for buying Russia's high-tech weapons in 2018. Indeed in July 2022, the US House of Representatives recommended [a waiver](#) for India under the *Countering of America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA) of 2017, which identified Russia, Iran and North Korea as America's adversaries.

On the other hand, the CAATSA sanctions were imposed on China's current Defence Minister [Li Shangfu](#) and the Equipment Development Department of China's Central Military Commission in September 2018 for making purchases from Russia.

These developments collectively revealed the potential for an expanding congruence of US-India interests in facing China in the Indo-Pacific.

### **India's Vision Statement**

Three focal points in Modi's Indo-Pacific "vision" statement at the SLD in June 2018 deserve a review now in the context of these converging India-US interests.

First, cognisant of China's opposition to the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, Modi had noted that Delhi and Beijing "have displayed maturity and wisdom" in "ensuring a peaceful border". Ironically, though, the Sino-Indian border "peace" was shattered on 15 June 2020; India and the US are of the same view that China should be blamed. The Chinese and Indian armies are still locked in a standoff despite the negotiated withdrawal by both sides in some areas.

Second, Modi was confident in 2018 that his summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April, at the latter's initiative, "helped us [cement](#) our understanding" on several issues. In stark contrast, however, Xi and Modi have not met for crisis-busting talks to end the Sino-Indian military standoff, ongoing since mid-June 2020. Instead, Delhi seems eager now to cement ties with the US.

Third, in Modi's worldview in 2018, India did "not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members". He sought to avoid offending China which has opposed the "United States [Strategic Framework](#) for the Indo-Pacific" that was

approved by President Donald Trump in February 2018. Furthermore, China is not well-disposed towards [Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) of February 2022. In this escalating situation, the Quad summitry, initiated by Biden in 2021, offered India new options to deal with its China challenge.

### **India's Enhanced Prospects in the Indo-Pacific**

For India, the Quad has become attractive because it focuses on economic cooperation driven by a potential sharing of high-tech opportunities. Such cooperation is a new trend among three or more partners in the region since the [first Quad summit](#) in March 2021. The ambitious but relevant mantra about the "[transformative power](#) of technology" was highlighted at the Quad leaders' summit in Hiroshima on 20 May 2023. Furthermore, as agreed at the first Quad summit, a "working group on critical and emerging technology" has been functioning.

The Quad is quite different from the US-launched Indo-Pacific Economic [Framework](#) for Prosperity (IPEF). Nonetheless, Beijing will monitor the IPEF's progress, not just the Quad's.

In all, four factors in the current strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific will be relevant to India's ballooning China challenge.

First, the US is now offering a substantive high-tech defence collaboration with India on a purely bilateral basis although India has been America's "major defence partner" since 2016. Much of that cooperation, which might continue barring unforeseen circumstances, was in terms of India's equipment procurement from the US and in joint military exercises. Washington seems to have made the high-tech offer in June 2023 because of India's escalating China challenge, not just Delhi's membership of the Quad. In a recent [opinion piece](#), China's state news agency *Xinhua* commented that the "US wants loyal vassals not allies". Neither India nor the US shares this view.

The proposed US-India co-development of "air combat and land mobility systems" and projects relevant to the "undersea domain" relate to India's needs vis-à-vis China. A point to note is that co-development and co-production will take time, even if there are no unforeseen hurdles. Notwithstanding this, an optimistic Indian view is that the new US offer could be a strategic morale booster for India.

Second, the sophisticated annual *Malabar* naval exercises involving all four Quad members help India to update its military preparedness in the maritime domain. Visiting India's first home-designed and produced aircraft carrier, *INS Vikrant*, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that his country would [host](#) the next edition of Exercise Malabar later this year.

Third, India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) Initiative, focused on the western Indian Ocean littoral (Africa's east coast) as well, has now been endorsed by the Quad.

Fourth, while not competing with China and the US for military facilities in the Pacific Islands, Modi visited Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in May 2023. While there for

his [third summit](#) with the Pacific Islands Forum, he sought to build greater economic linkages under India's renewed focus on the Global South.

In all, it is evident that Delhi's Indo-Pacific approach has several pathways. And should the US-India defence collaboration in critical high-tech areas of the future take off, Delhi's strategic leverage with China might receive a boost.

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