

Agenda 2021: U.S.-Europe-India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific will remain a crucial region in 2021, both for the United States and India, as evidenced in the initial signs coming out of the Biden administration, but also for Europe which is in the process of formulating an EU strategy for the region this year. Nilanthy Samaranyake, Frédéric Grare, and Darshana Baruah outline areas and instruments that all three actors should prioritize in 2021, particularly in the Indian Ocean region, and suggest how to strengthen the strategic and operational convergence between the United States, India, and Europe.

The Agenda 2021 series is part of the India Trilateral Forum conducted in partnership with the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Observer Research Foundation and is edited by Garima Mohan (GMF) and Dhruva Jaishankar (ORF).

U.S.-India Cooperation on Indo-Pacific Security

Nilanthy Samaranyake

The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy framed the U.S.-China relationship in terms of great-power competition. Although the Biden administration's strategy toward the Indo-Pacific is not yet clear, it is difficult to imagine it departing significantly from this framework in any enduring way. Over the last decade, a broad-based competitive dynamic across multiple dimensions has defined the U.S.-China relationship. As a result, the work that has gone into the Indo-Pacific strategy over the past four years is likely to continue. Crafting effective U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific will need to be part of a global approach by the Biden administration to strategic competition with China and Russia. There are areas for cooperation with India—including alongside European powers—but also some challenges that they will need to navigate.

First, India's threat perceptions of China have also evolved. For several years there has been heightened tension between India and China, especially along their contested border, as well as a deepening of the U.S.-India strategic relationship. The United States is likely to pursue an incremental approach to security cooperation with

India, but U.S. policymakers should also begin to formulate long-term goals. The United States expects that India will continue to stick to the path of deeper security engagement. This includes working multilaterally with U.S. allies. For example, the MALABAR 2020 naval exercise achieved a milestone with India inviting Australia to participate for the first time since 2007. The United States will want Australia to again be included again in this high-profile exercise this year.

As their relationship has soared to new heights the pattern for much of the past two decades has been for the United States to keep pushing India out of its strategic comfort zone. They signed the [latest in a series of foundational defense agreements](#) last October. The U.S.-India 2+2 ministerial dialogue was the culmination of years of effort from Washington's perspective. This year, the United States could begin laying the foundation to seek an agreement to permit its military to visit India, as it has done in recent years with Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Navy-to-navy engagement has driven much of the strategic cooperation between the United States and India. While the expansion of naval cooperation has been positive overall for the relationship, the prospects for cooperation between the other military services have lagged by comparison. The United States should devote greater attention to developing bilateral air force, army, [marines](#), special forces, and coast guard engagements in 2021.

Second, while the space for bilateral cooperation remains large, the United States and India will confront challenges this year. At present, they are the two countries [worst-affected by the coronavirus pandemic](#). How their governments address the domestic public-health challenges while balancing their pandemic diplomacy with strategic partners will be an issue that they need to navigate with each other. On the defense front, Washington's recent imposition under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act of sanctions on Turkey for its purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system [raises questions in New Delhi](#) about how the Biden administration will view India's purchase of the same system.

While U.S. policymakers too often conceive of these close allies in a transatlantic context, India recognizes their Indo-Pacific interests and operations.

Third, beyond bilateral cooperation, proposals such as the Summit for Democracy, a D10, and Quad Plus share a common theme: expanding the membership of existing institutions and frameworks to include more like-minded partners. This trend can be seen in the larger context of emerging multinational responses to the threats from China and Russia, and it is reinforced by the progress made by the Quad over the past four years. India appears to be open to expanding its network of partners, which includes U.S. allies such as France and the United Kingdom. While U.S. policymakers too often conceive of these [close allies in a transatlantic context](#), India recognizes their Indo-Pacific interests and operations. For example, in the past two annual Raisina Dialogues, India has included on its panel of Quad military leaders the heads of the French and U.K. navies.

Given this backdrop of interests, alliances, and partnerships, there are many ideas that can foster U.S.-India-Europe cooperation. If the Quad Plus grouping begun by the Trump administration as a coronavirus coordination response group continues into the Biden administration, the United States could add France and the United Kingdom to it. The United States and India also could encourage France—as chair of the Indian

Ocean Naval Symposium through 2022—to place more emphasis on the concern about the grey zone activities discussed in the English translation of [France’s Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific](#). Meanwhile, the United Kingdom’s new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, will transit the Indo-Pacific region during its [first overseas deployment](#) this year. Such deployments to the region by the French and navies suggest the possibility for including them in the MALABAR exercise as it continues to evolve and expand its participation.

The U.S.-India relationship is set to grow over the next decade. The officials in the Biden administration are well equipped to propel it forward. They will need to manage the relationship in the context of more focus on great-power competition between the United States and Russia, which may pose short-term challenges. Yet the range of cooperative opportunities as detailed above suggests overall strategic and operational convergence between the United States and India. As the Pentagon conducts its [Global Force Posture Review](#), Washington will need to work closely with India and European allies to leverage their collective, deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Nilanthi Samaranayake is the director of the Strategy and Policy Analysis program at CNA, a non-profit research organization. She is the author of numerous publications on Indian Ocean security issues, including a 2020 book chapter on “India’s Naval and Maritime Power,” and studies U.S. alliances and strategic partnerships globally. The views expressed are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which she is affiliated.

Europe-India Cooperation on Indo-Pacific Security

Frédéric Grare

The German government’s publication of its [“Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region”](#) last September, in which it announced that it would work with the French government to elaborate a European strategy on relations with the Indo-Pacific has opened-up a new debate within the European Union. After months of hesitation, Brussels is finally considering the possibility of adopting an Indo-Pacific strategy of its own, following a joint initiative by France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Yet, the three countries quite naturally disagree on the nature and scope of a potential European commitment to the security of the region. If they converge on the broad security objectives that an EU Indo-Pacific strategy should promote, they differ on the political and military means they are capable and willing to commit to the region. Also, and perhaps more importantly, they differ on the role member states should play. Because of its populations and territories in the Indo-Pacific, France’s strategy includes a military dimension that is largely absent from the documents issued by Germany and the Netherlands. The other two countries insist essentially on the normative dimension of security and see their contribution much more through the prism of reinforcing existing security institutions.

China is the central issue for Europe. If the EU now considers it as a [“systemic rival and competitor,”](#) there is still no consensus among the member states on the ways and means to address its rise. The coronavirus pandemic, among other issues, has significantly deteriorated China’s image in Europe, but individual vulner-

abilities and the degree of political risk each country is willing to take in its relationship with Beijing still inhibit the definition of a common position on China. These differences are likely to inform the larger European debate on the Indo-Pacific. But they may not prevent the adoption of an EU strategy that will inevitably be based on a larger set of economic, political, and environmental considerations. The adoption of an EU Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to happen this year, even if there is a real risk that this timeline is at the expense of diluting the strategic concept.

Individual vulnerabilities and the degree of political risk each country is willing to take in its relationship with Beijing still inhibit the definition of a common position on China.

In this context, security cooperation with India will be a significant priority, as can be inferred from the importance of the country in the existing European national strategies. The challenge is less to identify new themes of cooperation between the two sides than to give them substance. Cyber and maritime security, regularly identified as topics for dialogue, should be given priority. Maritime security is a generic term that covers activities as diverse as naval cooperation, maritime domain awareness, coast guard or customs training, radars and spatial cooperation, intelligence sharing, and the larger field of capacity building in third countries in which India and some EU member states are active and coordinate bilaterally.

The aim should be to create an EU-India framework that ensures optimal efficiency and avoids duplication. Joint EU-India choices of thematic priorities, not just technical ones, would also matter. Issues chosen for cooperation should differ not only by the technical means through which they can be addressed but also by their potential for political mobilization. Counter-piracy and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing are usually listed in the same category of activities because they both require maritime domain awareness and coast guards. But they differ radically in terms of their potential for political mobilization, domestically and internationally. They both contribute to the sovereign control of exclusive economic zones while offering the additional possibility to mobilize an entirely different set of political, normative, and economic coercive options.

In this perspective it could be argued that India and the EU should jointly define the terms and framework of their security cooperation in advance of the adoption of an EU strategy in order to allow for an effective quid pro quo between two quite parallel visions on the Indo-Pacific and manage their expectations as well as their actual cooperation. India knows that the value of the EU as a security actor in the Indo-Pacific should not be assessed solely through its hard-security assets and that the EU is reluctant to adopt an overtly confrontational posture vis-à-vis China, both considerations that have also informed its own vision of, and policies in, the Indo-Pacific. It also knows that defense and security have never been operations of all EU member states at once. India moreover understands that the nature of the EU makes it more comfortable with a “comprehensive security” role that India has also defined for itself. Therefore, India needs the EU to define Indo-Pacific security cooperation that will allow cooperation or coordination at the union level when possible, or bilaterally with member states, but in an integrated and coordinated manner.

Europe has a set of sub-strategic-level options which it can use in the region. Its capacities developed to counter-piracy and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing are no more than law-enforcement mechanisms but they contribute to a more effective control of a country's exclusive economic zone. They restrain the space for

maneuver of external powers and contribute to regional stability. Moreover, they fall strictly within the limits of international law. Therefore, they are likely to help constrain China and to change its behavior to follow international norms while facilitating the emergence of a new perception of Europe as a security actor in the region. This could in turn facilitate relations with India whose security approach to the Indo-Pacific is framed in comparable terms. This would require that the EU elaborate a real strategy and does not satisfy itself with the enumeration of innocuous objectives.

India and the EU should jointly define the terms and framework of their security cooperation in advance of the adoption of an EU strategy

In this context, the various existing formats (expanded G-7 or Quad Plus, democracy summits) or planned ones follow a similar dynamic. The commonality of values around which they are built constitute a useful reminder of the ties that exist between the protagonists of the Indo-Pacific debate even if each of them has defined the region on their own terms. There is every reason to prefer the most inclusive grouping of democracies, including the EU. But they can play a meaningful role only if their democratic agendas integrate meaningful concrete steps. In that sense technology alliances offer a greater potential for mobilization and impact than strictly ideological ones. No country, though, is willing to trade security (irrespective of its nature) for symbols.

Frédéric Grare is nonresident senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's South Asia program. He has been advisor responsible for the Indian Ocean at the Center for Analysis, Planning and Strategy, at France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also served at the Asia bureau, the Directorate for Strategic Affairs in France's Ministry of Defense from 2008 to 2012.

India and the Biden Administration: Consolidating and Rebalancing Ties

Darshana M. Baruah

While the Biden administration will no doubt pursue its own foreign policy priorities, the inheritance of the Indo-Pacific as a theatre for collaboration with India will remain important within their broader strategic collaboration. The challenge will be in implementing or operationalizing the converging areas of interests between Delhi and Washington in the region. To begin with, they have different geographic priorities. For Delhi, the Indian Ocean will remain a key priority area while the Pacific will continue to dominate Washington's thinking. However, there is a convergence of interests as far as strategic threats are concerned since both face a common competitor in China.

While they will continue to share views and concerns on broader issues such as the rule of law, democracy, and regional institutions, it is the maritime domain where India and the United States will share intent, interests, and priorities within their own Indo-Pacific visions. the Indian Ocean emerges as a common theatre of

interest for India, the United States and Europe. While for Delhi, it is its home theatre and its area of responsibility, key energy lines transiting the region make it a priority for all countries dependent on these routes for their energy supply. As such, the Indian Ocean assumes a central position in geopolitical competition where key actors compete to gain leverage and strategic advantage over each other.

While there has been a steady concern regarding Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean, the [Ladakh border standoff](#) from the [last year](#) dramatically accelerated the conversation in Delhi about China and strategic priorities. As a result there has been an [increase in attention](#) on India's strengths in the Indian Ocean as a pressure point for on China. The Indian navy will take advantage of this to address some of its capability gaps in the region. As Sino-Indian competition spills over there, the need to strengthen India's ability to track and monitor sub-surface vessels will be a priority. For the United States, as it navigates through its many commitments from the Middle East to the Pacific, India's importance as a strategic partner in the Indian Ocean will only deepen.

As Sino-Indian competition spills over there, the need to strengthen India's ability to track and monitor sub-surface vessels will be a priority.

Additionally, as Washington debates the idea of an [Indian Ocean fleet](#), conversations and collaborations with India will become a necessity. For both countries, being aware of Chinese movements and developments in the region will be a common concern creating an opportunity to collaborate on maritime domain awareness (MDA), information and intelligence sharing, and anti-submarine warfare (ASW).

To maximize limited resources, India and the United States could look to [utilizing strategic assets in the Indian Ocean](#) for MDA and ASW missions. For instance, they could conduct joint MDA and ASW missions using common platforms such as the U.S. P-8 Poseidon aircraft. Such operations with a focused mission allow for better interoperability and exchange of lessons on areas that are crucial for both navies. MDA and ASW missions create awareness and prepare India and its partners for responding to new developments in the Indian Ocean. The recent [refueling of a U.S. Navy P-8](#) on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands certainly reflects a new era in the India-U.S. relationship as well as the political will and intent to work together in the maritime domain. India and the United States should now take advantage of the foundational agreements for using strategic islands such as Andaman, Diego Garcia, or even Australia's Cocos (Keeling) Islands to strengthen their capabilities in the region on MDA, ASW, and information sharing. Although there is a political difference between [Washington and New Delhi](#) regarding the dispute over the Chagos Archipelago, there are ways to overcome such differences.

While India and United States focus on specific military and strategic collaboration, the Indian Ocean is undergoing considerable geopolitical changes. China's rise as an alternative security player to India, the United States, France and United Kingdom in the region complicates the geopolitical dynamics there. A significant change is the overlapping strategic implications of traditional and non-traditional security issues. If India and United States are concerned with MDA and ASW, other littoral countries and small island states face more non-traditional threats such as climate change, illegal fishing, and natural disasters. While India and France have undertaken efforts to engage with and around the island states, there remains a perception gap on security challenges. If the goal is to remain engaged with the region and retain its importance, India will have to find the right balance between its military and non-traditional security engagements. As such, engagements with

European nations and even with the European Union provides an opportunity for India in the Indian Ocean. India and European nations should look to leverage existing regional initiatives such as the [International Solar Alliance](#) and the [Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure](#) to engage and offer practical solutions to non-traditional security threats in the region. Europe's experience and technical knowledge in executing projects on blue economy and sustainable development will allow for realistic deliverables addressing issues of concern in the region. India could utilize its [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative](#) in collaboration with European nations to address existential threats such as natural disasters and to create a model for sustainable development. India and European partners could also undertake capacity-building efforts through training maritime forces and law-enforcement bodies to better prepare and respond to traditional and non-traditional threats. Training with island and littoral states on issues of law enforcement and security allows India and Europe to act on issues of common interests such as the importance of regional institutions and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

India and European nations should look to leverage existing regional initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure to engage and offer practical solutions to non-traditional security threats in the region.

In the last few years, India, the United States, and European countries, as well as Australia and Japan have established the importance of the Indo-Pacific and their converging interests. It is time to deliver and act on the expressed intent and priorities in the Indo-Pacific. To do so, Delhi and its partners could utilize existing platforms and initiatives to collaborate on issues of common interests ranging from blue economy, capacity building, anti-submarine warfare, maritime domain awareness, and information sharing. While overarching commonalities such as the rule of law and maritime security remains important, India and its partners could narrow down the issues of priorities within the announced initiatives and platforms, and deliver actionable and meaningful projects.

Darshana M. Baruah is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a visiting fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Tokyo. She is currently writing a book on the strategic significance of islands in the Indian Ocean region.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan policy organization committed to the idea that the United States and Europe are stronger together. GMF champions the principles of democracy, human rights, and international cooperation, which have served as the bedrock of peace and prosperity since the end of World War II, but are under increasing strain. GMF works on issues critical to transatlantic interests in the 21st century, including the future of democracy, security and defense, geopolitics and the rise of China, and technology and innovation. By drawing on and fostering a community of people with diverse life experiences and political perspectives, GMF pursues its mission by driving the policy debate through cutting-edge analysis and convening, fortifying civil society, and cultivating the next generation of leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a tribute to the Marshall Plan, GMF is headquartered in Washington, DC, with offices in Berlin, Brussels, Ankara, Belgrade, Bucharest, Paris, and Warsaw.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC

www.gmfus.org