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The US and India tighten “Indo-Pacific” security cooperation

In the past decade US and India security cooperation has increasingly reflected shared concerns concerning China’s geopolitical and geoeconomic rise in the Western Pacific, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, both countries have also adopted “Indo-Pacific” frames of reference, reflecting their view of the Pacific-South China Sea-Indian Ocean as one strategic arena to operate and cooperate in together against the rising shared challenge of China. This was on show with the inaugural meeting of the 2 + 2 Meeting on 6 September 2018; when Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman welcomed Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James Mattis to New Delhi.

At the practical level, interoperability of India-US forces was deepened by the signing at the 2+2 Meeting of a Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). Naval cooperation is already well established between the Indian Navy and the US Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM), whose remit covers the eastern Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean; but the 2+2 Joint Statement announced similar moves between US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Indian Navy in the western Indian Ocean. The Joint Statement had a whole section titled “Partners in the Indo-Pacific”, with two sustained China-centric concerns in clear play.

First was that *“both sides committed to work together and in concert with other partners toward advancing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, based on recognition of ASEAN centrality and on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, rule of law, good governance, free and fair trade, and freedom of navigation and overflight”*. India’s concerns over China-bashing led to the inclusion

of the phrase “inclusive”; but the reference to a “free, open Indo-Pacific” pointed to the China-centred Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy being pushed by Japan since 2016 and the US since 2017; with the references to rule of law, territorial integrity, freedom of navigation and overflight aimed at China’s increasing sway in the South China Sea.

Second was, “*noting the importance of infrastructure and connectivity for the Indo-Pacific region, both sides emphasized the need to work collectively with other partner countries to support transparent, responsible, and sustainable debt financing practices in infrastructure development*”. This was implicit criticism of China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, which has been criticised as “debt diplomacy” and a vehicle for geopolitical extension of Chinese maritime power.

This China-related Indo-Pacific security was further shown the following week when India’s National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met his US counterpart John Bolton and also Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in Washington on 14 September. A further element to be evaluated by Beijing.

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