



How to Better Leverage the “Indo” in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Michael Kugelman

Executive Summary

Washington has sharpened its focus on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in recent years, with the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) accordng ample attention to a massive maritime space that includes South Asia and stretches from eastern Africa to the west coast of Australia. This heightened focus can be attributed to intensifying geopolitical rivalry and US-China competition: Deepening US-China tensions have coincided with a westward push by Beijing across the Indo-Pacific to expand influence, both military and non-military.

However, Washington faces bureaucratic, strategic, and diplomatic challenges in making the IOR a more substantive part of its broader IPS. These include separate US military commands overseeing the IOR and a lack of clarity about what parts of South Asia are considered to be a part of the Indo-



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Pacific; concerns about future US-India security partnership because of New Delhi's unwillingness to participate in alliances; and Washington's fragile relations with many South Asian states due to disagreements over US democracy promotion and concerns about getting dragged into great power competition.

To address these challenges, this policy brief offers a series of recommendations. It proposes that Washington prepare a new South Asia strategy that articulates how the region fits into the Indo-Pacific. It calls for an expansion of non-military strategic cooperation with India (especially in terms of tech collaborations and public goods delivery), and for an embrace of New Delhi's existing role as a net security provider—all of which highlight how India can serve as a substantive US security partner in the Indo-Pacific, even while operating outside the alliance system.

Additionally, this policy brief calls for Washington to better tie values to interests in its relations with South Asian states, and not simply promote rights and democracy as an end in itself. It advocates for a more supportive position on strategic autonomy, a foreign policy principle espoused by numerous South Asian capitals, arguing that the flexibility engendered by this policy gives these countries the diplomatic space to take positions that align with US interests. Finally, the brief calls on the Indo-Pacific Quad to focus more activities specifically on South Asia, particularly in terms of public goods delivery, in order to provide more alternatives to Beijing in a region where it enjoys an ever-deepening footprint.

Policy Recommendations:

- Develop a new South Asia strategy tied to the US Indo Pacific strategy.
- Expand non-military strategic cooperation with India and embrace its role as a net security provider.
- Tie values to interests in relations with South Asian states and avoid promoting rights and democracy as an end in itself.
- Accept that strategic autonomy can help, not hinder, US interests.
- Pursue more Quad activities in South Asia.

Introduction

The original motivations for the US rebalance to Asia were largely tied to considerations about the Pacific Ocean region. This is unsurprising, as it is home to US treaty allies Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and to other close friends like Taiwan. It hosts some of the world's fastest-growing economies. It's also where two serious flashpoints with major implications for US interests play out: The Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, both of which directly impact top American allies and partners and are threatened by increasingly aggressive Chinese maneuvers and provocations.

However, in more recent years, amid the emergence of a US Indo Pacific strategy (IPS), articulated by both the [Trump](#) and [Biden](#) administrations, the “Indo” part of the Indo-Pacific—the immense spaces encompassing the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which include South Asia—has come into sharper strategic focus in Washington. This policy brief explains why and how US officials are allocating more policy space to this area of the Indo-Pacific, discusses key remaining challenges of better integrating the IOR into the IPS, and identifies additional steps that US policymakers can take to strengthen relations with South Asian capitals in ways that address American interests and help advance the IPS.

Washington's Indian Ocean Ingress: Manifestations and Motivations

In 1897, the distinguished American naval analyst Alfred Thayer Mahan [wrote](#), “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.” This view that would later find

many takers within IOR capitals, and especially New Delhi—but fewer further afield, including in Washington.

However, in recent years, thinking in Washington has changed about the IOR. IPS policy documents during the [Trump](#) and [Biden](#) administrations have highlighted the importance of the Indian Ocean and called for deeper engagement with more South Asian countries in areas ranging from counterterrorism to anti-piracy and maritime cooperation. In a landmark decision during its final weeks in power, the Trump administration [announced](#) a decision to open an embassy in the Maldives. During the first few years of the Biden administration, there were surges in high-level engagements with other smaller states in South Asia. The US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has scoped out potential investment projects around the region, concluding [several in India](#). In November 2023, it [announced](#) a half-billion dollar investment in a port development project in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Significantly, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a state visit to Washington in June 2023, the two sides [announced](#) a new Indian Ocean Dialogue. Additionally, the [statements](#) that emerged from the most recent Indo-Pacific Quad leaders summit, in 2023, make [multiple references](#) to cooperation in the IOR.

This all marks a major change from earlier years, when US officials took a more geographically limited approach to South Asia: They promoted deeper relations with India, prosecuted a war in Afghanistan, and pursued a turbulent partnership with Pakistan—while essentially giving strategic short shrift to the rest of South Asia. Even President Trump, during his first year in office, [unveiled](#) a new South Asia strategy that only mentioned Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

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The main drivers of this shift are intensifying geopolitical rivalry and US-China competition. Deepening US-China tensions have coincided with a westward push by Beijing across the Indo-Pacific to expand influence, both military and non-military. In 2017, it [opened](#) a military base off Djibouti. It used its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and (to a lesser extent) [COVID vaccine provision](#) as vehicles to expand its footprint and leverage across South Asia. It [ramped up](#) aggressive maneuvers and incursions on its disputed border with strategic rival India. It scaled up its [naval presence](#) in the IOR, and its commercial vessels—suspected by many analysts of harboring intelligence motivations—have been seen in areas ranging from [Sri Lankan](#) and [Maldivian](#) ports to the [waters](#) near the Andaman Sea.

This [widening Chinese clout](#) across the IOR prompted a greater US strategic focus on the western reaches of the Indo-Pacific. US officials aim to boost ties with South Asian capitals to ensure they don't become fully reliant on Chinese economic support. The DFC is meant to offer alternative investment options to BRI projects, which US [officials](#) have [described](#) as opaque, inequitable, and debt-ridden. Washington's deepening relationship with New Delhi is driven in great part by the view that India—with its large military, rapidly growing economy, strategic position astride the Indian Ocean, and its own competition with China—is well-positioned to cooperate with the US to counter China in South Asia.

In reality, there are compelling reasons beyond power politics for Washington to apply a sharp strategic lens to the IOR. In addition to its sheer size—it stretches from East Africa to western Australia—it houses critical sea lanes, some of the world's fastest growing economies, and [about 35%](#) of the global population. It also is home to critical and destabilizing vulnerabilities,

from acute climate change risks to terrorism threats. In 2010, more than a century after Mahan's work crystallized the IOR's importance, another influential American strategic analyst, Robert Kaplan, published [Monsoon](#), a book about the geopolitical significance of the IOR. He argued that the "Greater Indian Ocean... may comprise a map as iconic to the new century as Europe was to the last one." Great power competition may be the core driver of Washington's stronger strategic emphasis on the IOR, but it behooves US interests to maintain a robust policy focus on the IOR even if geopolitical rivalry settles down in the coming years.

Enduring Challenges

Despite this progress, Washington faces numerous challenges in making the IOR a more substantive part of its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy.

One is bureaucracy. Even senior US officials [acknowledge](#) the difficulties of approaching a region with separate military commands (INDOPACOM covers the eastern parts of South Asia along with East Asia, while CENTCOM covers Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Middle East). At the State Department, the South Asia bureau is grouped with Central Asia. This conundrum is compounded by the fact that Washington has not formally stated what part of South Asia is considered to be a part of the Indo Pacific. In all likelihood, most countries in the region are a part of it, though not Afghanistan (led by a Taliban regime unrecognized by Washington). Additionally, Pakistan's status in it is unclear, as is that of Bhutan (which has friendly but no formal relations with Washington).

Another challenge is New Delhi. Washington views India as its best strategic bet in South Asia. But India doesn't participate in the

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alliance system, suggesting limits to security cooperation with the US. Also, fears in Washington about growing illiberalism in India have raised additional concerns, given that Washington has [linked](#) the principles of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific to democratic values. These concerns have been heightened by allegations made in a [US indictment](#) unsealed last year that an Indian official orchestrated (unsuccessfully) an attempted assassination of a Sikh separatist—a US citizen—in New York.

Furthermore, US relations with South Asian capitals are friendly but also fragile, and for various reasons—in some cases ([especially Bangladesh](#)) because of unhappiness about being pressured by Washington on rights and democracy issues, and in others because of fears that they’ll get dragged into US-China or broader US geopolitical rivalries. For nearly three years, before relenting in 2022, Nepal’s parliament [refused to ratify](#) a badly needed infrastructure grant from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which US officials [described](#) as a formal part of the IPS, because of fears that it would embroil Nepal in US competition with China. Most South Asian governments are nonaligned and aim to balance relations with all major powers—including Russia. This helps explain why four of the eight South Asian states have regularly abstained from UN resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. With three different rivalries—US-China, India-China, and US-Russia—playing out across South Asia, South Asian capitals are feeling the pressure.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations can help address the challenges highlighted above.

Craft a New South Asia Strategy Linked to the IPS

The US government has not had a formal and publicly articulated South Asia strategy since the geographically limited one announced by President Trump in 2017. Washington should prepare a new strategy that lays out how South Asia fits into the IPS, and explicitly identifies the South Asian countries that are a part of the IPS. A new South Asia strategy should also aim to address bureaucratic bottlenecks. Some of these—such as the existence of separate military commands for different parts of the IOR—are too complex to be addressed in a single strategy document. But a new South Asia strategy can and should provide guidance on more manageable bureaucratic issues—such as offering clear delineations of responsibilities within the interagency community. For instance, a new South Asia strategy can identify which US government agency or agencies will lead on the new US-India Indian Ocean Dialogue—an initiative that will have relevance for many US government agencies and bureaus.

Expand Non-Military Strategic Cooperation with India...

Often overlooked in commentary about US-India security cooperation—and the joint exercises, arms sales, technology transfers, and intelligence sharing that come with it—is that Washington and New Delhi are also working actively to counter Beijing through non-military means. In effect, it’s not just about strengthening India’s military capacity to push back against China’s growing power.

The chief example lies in tech, with Washington and New Delhi working to strengthen India's capacities as a global tech power, so that it can become a bigger part of more diversified global supply chains that reduce the world's reliance on China, and bring more tech production to India. Two of the biggest recent developments in US-India relations—a new [initiative](#) on critical and emerging technologies and an [MOU](#) on semiconductors—focus on countering China through tech. Other non-military efforts to counter China include projects, especially through the Indo-Pacific Quad, that focus on public goods delivery across the Indo-Pacific. The US and India should ramp up these efforts and focus on addressing obstacles—such as export controls and a lack of sufficient skilled workers on the tech front, and a lack of momentum for Quad-driven public goods delivery.

...And Embrace its Role as a Net-Security Provider

Expanding this type of cooperation can ease US concerns about India not being in the alliance system, given that these activities strengthen US-India security partnership and help advance American interests. A related example is how India—in defiance of [criticism](#) that it punches below its weight on the global stage—has quietly developed the capacity to serve as a net security provider.

A recent example is India's [plan](#) to send Brahmos missiles to the Philippines. If finalized, this would strengthen the capacity of a US treaty ally in the Indo Pacific to counter and deter China—at a time when the Philippines have been increasingly threatened by Chinese provocations in the South China Sea. India has also [deployed](#) naval ships in the Red Sea to help commercial vessels targeted by Houthi missile attacks. And it is [building](#) a new

naval base in the Lakshadweep archipelago, off the southwest coast of India and in the Arabian Sea, which will further strengthen its power projection capacities. In effect, India is showing that it can be a substantive US security partner in the Indo-Pacific even while operating outside the alliance system.

Be More Strategic About Democracy Promotion: Tie Values to Interests

The Biden administration's values-based foreign policy—one that emphasizes the promotion of rights and democracy—has caused frictions with some democratically backsliding South Asian states. They resent US pressure, viewing it as hypocritical at best and meddling at worst. Washington can't afford tensions with Indo-Pacific partners, but it also has a strong interest in more democratic outcomes in South Asia. To this end, as Washington pursues its policies with South Asian states, it should better tie values to interests, and not simply promote rights and democracy as an end in itself (and more broadly, Washington should frame the idea of a “free and open” Indo Pacific through a lens of security and stability, not of rights and democracy).

For example, Washington has a strong interest in seeing the DFC sponsor infrastructure investment projects in Bangladesh in order to counter a surge of Chinese infrastructure projects in that country. But the DFC has [ruled out](#) investments there because of poor labor conditions. Accordingly, Washington should work with Dhaka on improving labor rights, making the case that this would strengthen US investment prospects. Similarly, India often resorts to [internet shutdowns](#) and engages in heavy content regulation and sometimes [outright censorship](#) on social media—including pressuring tech firms to restrict accounts and material New Delhi does not like. These policies

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could discourage some Western tech firms from investing in India. Washington should express its concerns about these policies to New Delhi, arguing that they could undermine efforts to drive more companies from China to India—a core interest of both New Delhi and Washington.

Accept that Strategic Autonomy Can Help, Not Hinder, US Interests

Many South Asian capitals seek to avoid getting caught up in geopolitical competition, wishing to avoid taking sides in great power rivalries and remaining unaligned to give themselves as much flexibility as possible in charting their foreign policies. In an era of especially intense great power competition, such a position can be problematic for Washington, given that these countries—including close partners like India—are not willing to push back against China or Russia in ways the United States would prefer. And yet, the flexibility engendered by strategic autonomy also gives these countries the diplomatic space to take positions that *do* align with US interests. Bangladesh, for example, has produced an “Indo Pacific Outlook” [document](#) which, by articulating a series of principles that accord with the positions of both Washington and Beijing, advances its balancing goals vis-à-vis great power competition. However, its embrace of key elements of the IPS—including support for “open, transparent, rules-based” systems—provides scope for cooperation with the United States.

Similarly, Sri Lanka may value Chinese commercial support and refuse to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. But it has [joined](#) the US-led military coalition against Iran-sponsored Houthi attacks in the Red Sea—likely in part because of its [close ties](#) to Israel. Also, India has a deep partnership with Russia—but that gives it the freedom to pressure, [at times publicly](#), Moscow to end its war in Ukraine. The more

US officials convey their acceptance of these nonaligned positions of Indo-Pacific partners in South Asia, the greater the capacity to manage potential tensions.

Push for More Quad Activities in South Asia

Donald Lu, the senior South Asia-focused official at the State Department, recently [said](#) the IPS is based on the premise that the US and its allies and partners can “provide a better proposition” (presumably relative to China). He and other officials have [described](#) the steps Washington and its friends are taking to provide alternatives to China’s investments and other offerings in South Asia: financial aid, agricultural assistance, more equitable loans, satellite data, naval supplies, and so on (US backing for emerging connectivity projects in South Asia, such as a new Bangladesh-India-Nepal [electricity-sharing project](#), would be another useful contribution). The Quad, through public goods delivery, and the DFC, through infrastructure investment, are serving similar purposes. Still, on many levels, the US and its allies are still playing catch up with China—and especially in much of South Asia (with the exception of India), where Beijing’s commercial footprint is deeper than that of Washington.

The Quad, arguably the most influential multilateral initiative associated with the IPS, should step up efforts to deliver public goods to South Asia. It has pledged to do so, though progress has been slow. The non-India Quad members all have good relations with South Asia, and Japan is one of the region’s top bilateral donors. South Asia badly needs a range of public goods, and especially infrastructure (it’s one of the world’s least integrated regions); climate mitigation technologies (it’s deeply vulnerable to climate change); and medicines and vaccines (many public health epidemics plague South

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Asia). It also suffers from deep levels of poverty. In this sense, scaling up public goods delivery to South Asia could not only serve the strategic goal of countering China; it could also help advance development and stability, which are also key US interests in the region. Furthermore, such efforts would help bolster Washington’s outreach to the Global South. The Global South has become a hotbed of competition between China and India, but it also has pushed back against many US policies—from wars to climate change mitigation. More US engagement could help ease these tensions with Global South states in South Asia.

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Conclusion





In recent years, Washington has come to better appreciate the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, with its stated emphasis on the IOR, is a clear indication of that shift—one fueled in great part by intensified great power competition and US-China rivalry. But bureaucratic, strategic, and diplomatic challenges have hampered US efforts to complete its pivot to the IOR.

This policy brief aims to provide guidance about how to overcome these obstacles. But it also argues for Washington to play a long game with the IOR—one that entails accepting the inherent importance of the region for reasons that transcend contemporary considerations about great power politics. Mahan may have been hyperbolic in arguing nearly 130 years ago that the world’s destiny will be decided on the Indian Ocean’s waters. Still, his observations about the region’s great importance were strikingly prophetic—and could well remain valid for another 130 years as well.



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