

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Last month in New Delhi, the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Paparo, met with senior counterparts from Australia, India, and Japan. This informal group of four countries, known as the Quad, has repeatedly declared that it has no defense pillar, so a meeting of its military leaders is an extremely rare event. In January, a meeting of the Quad's foreign ministers also placed an unusually heavy emphasis on security.

From its inception, the Quad has grappled with nontraditional security challenges, such as natural disasters and illegal fishing. But its members have largely refrained from integrating their conventional military operations. That may be changing, and a change would be welcome: as China's power and influence grow, the United States and its partners in the region can no longer afford to deprioritize security cooperation.

Despite the size and importance of the Indian Ocean, American strategists have often treated it as a backwater. It's true that Washington's most acute security challenges lie in the western Pacific, where China and

North Korea threaten to plunge the region into war. But there is also much at stake in the Indian Ocean region. The sea-lanes that traverse the northern Indian Ocean connect the economies of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. And the ocean contains valuable fish and mineral resources on which regional food security and global supply chains depend.

Today, the balance of power in the Indian Ocean is shifting in ways that threaten the United States' interests and those of its partners in the Quad. Across the Indian Ocean region, China is expanding its influence, buying off political elites and building infrastructure such as railways and ports. In its bid to establish a larger military presence, Beijing is also rapidly building long-range naval ships and increasing intelligence gathering in the region.

If the United States and its partners fail to check Beijing's ambitions in the Indian Ocean, they will be increasingly exposed to Chinese coercion. Within a decade, an expanding Chinese naval presence will be able to imperil global shipping lanes, extract ever more resources from countries in the region, and project force far beyond its current capacities. Before it is too late, the United States must craft a comprehensive strategy for the Indian Ocean—one that addresses the concerns of regional states so they do not become beholden to Beijing and that increases Washington's own capacity to exercise military force in the region.

A UNITED FRONT

In recent years, U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific has been shaped by vague guiding principles. Washington's declared policy goal for the region, including the Indian Ocean, has been to work with its Quad partners to provide "international public goods" and to preserve a "free and open Indo-Pacific." These goals are broad enough to be uncontroversial but too broad to provide meaningful cues for action in the Indian Ocean. Unless the United States adopts a comprehensive strategy for the region, the security challenges that China poses will only increase in number and severity.

Washington must recognize that Beijing's military expansion in the Indian Ocean poses a long-term risk to the interests of the United States

and its partners. Chinese submarine activity will soon surpass India's (or any other single country's) wherewithal to counter. India's navy maintains vigorous operations across the Indian Ocean, but its investment in new capabilities is meager compared with China's and has slowed in recent years. New Delhi's occasional launch of an impressive new ship masks the fact that India is ill equipped to offset the risks of China's growing naval presence.

Given the stakes, Washington must take military cooperation with its Quad partners more seriously. In recent years, Quad members have collaborated to distribute COVID vaccines, conduct cancer research, set international telecommunications standards, and much else. The group's goal is to reinforce the capacity and resilience of smaller states, enabling them to fend off Chinese coercion. To that end, Quad members have helped regional states develop telecommunications infrastructure to reduce their dependence on China's government-linked supplier. They have delivered emergency aid following natural disasters, such as the landslide in Papua New Guinea and the typhoon in Vietnam last year. And they have helped dozens of countries across the region access commercial data to detect illicit fishing and shipping in their waters.

But to date, the Quad has eschewed any military cooperation that could be construed as building its combat power for fear of a backlash from Southeast Asian countries wary of a destabilizing security competition between the United States and China. Quad members have pursued military cooperation only outside the bounds of the Quad. For example, the annual Malabar series of naval exercises involves the four Quad member countries but is not branded as a Quad activity. Such exercises help build habits of military cooperation, but they do not tangibly alter the military balance with China. By restricting itself to the provision of international public goods, nontraditional security work, and highly limited military cooperation, the Quad is unable to deter Chinese military activities in the Indo-Pacific.

For now, India has assumed the role of the region's "net security provider," the guarantor of a favorable status quo. In line with its growing

capacity and interests, India frequently mounts humanitarian relief efforts and provides essential security assistance to smaller regional states. As of 2023, it has also been coordinating with the United States and its partners in the Combined Maritime Forces, a multinational naval coalition in the northwest Indian Ocean, to combat piracy. India's contributions to regional security are significant, but they will be dwarfed by what it will take to counter China's growing naval presence.

FOUNDATIONS OF POWER

A central goal of a new U.S. strategy for the Indian Ocean should be building collective military power. Washington must be sensitive to the economic and environmental interests that concern regional states, but U.S. strategy cannot be limited to the provision of public goods. Instead, Washington should craft an Indian Ocean strategy that also strengthens the enabling foundations of its military power and that of its partners: intelligence, operations, readiness, and modernization.

These foundations are mission agnostic, meaning they could serve a variety of tasks from humanitarian relief to combat operations. And they create policy options, empowering Washington and its partners to act nimbly while imposing uncertainty on their adversaries. Indeed, closer and more tangible military cooperation in the Indian Ocean would complicate Chinese planning and might even deter some of Beijing's most dangerous impulses when it comes to Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Intelligence is the most basic enabling foundation of military power. U.S. and partner militaries need better situational awareness not only of illicit fishing vessels but also of naval ships that are more capable of evading detection. Washington and its regional partners should improve their ability to share precise intelligence about adversarial forces. Currently, inadequate means to securely communicate and share data across platforms compromises the ability of U.S. forces to work with Indian forces operating U.S.-built equipment such as P-8 aircraft.

The task of laying the enabling foundations of military power also necessitates refining the processes by which Washington and its partners coordinate joint military operations. In 2003, the United States

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established the Combined Air Operations Center, in Qatar, to coordinate allied air forces throughout the Middle East area of operations. Such a model could be adapted for peacetime military operations in the Indian Ocean and adjacent areas. Given the United States' need to deploy force far from home, Washington depends on access, basing, and overflight rights in many foreign countries, but effective coordination would require the United States' partners, such as Australia and India, to extend more of those privileges to the United States and to one another.

Finally, the United States and its partners must pursue long-term efforts to enhance military readiness and modernize forces with new equipment. This includes efforts to maintain, repair, and overhaul equipment, including in other friendly countries. And over time, U.S. and allied forces must integrate their defense research and supply chains, pooling innovative talent and industrial capacity. Many of today's cutting-edge technologies can be developed and fielded rapidly. The U.S. defense technology company Anduril, for example, built a global supply chain to provide the Australian navy with uncrewed undersea vehicles in record time. And the AUKUS partners—Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—developed new algorithms to process shared data from one another's sonobuoys, devices that track submarines. Such new capabilities could quickly and meaningfully alter the military balance in the Indian Ocean.

Much of this work is already underway, but it remains scattered and disjointed. Washington needs a new strategy that sets military priorities and issues guidance from the top—to help coordinate both internally, among U.S. agencies, and externally, with the United States' allies and partners.

MUTUAL GAIN

No U.S. strategy can succeed without allies and partners, and that is especially true in the Indian Ocean region, since Washington rightfully

dedicates more resources to security competition in the western Pacific. India is the keystone power of the Indian Ocean region, with influence reaching across the entire ocean and a deepening strategic relationship with Washington. Australia, too, is a highly capable security actor, monitoring some of the ocean's most sensitive eastern chokepoints. Australia and India will be at the core of any U.S. strategy, but they can be joined by others, such as France, Indonesia, and Japan, all of which have significant interests in the Indian Ocean.

Each Quad partner will engage differently with the United States, bringing its own distinct advantages and interests. But for all of them, military cooperation with Washington augments their sovereign capacity to act. Collectively, they can adopt a more assertive military posture that would expand their own policy options in the Indian Ocean region. To that end, they should work with Washington to strengthen the enabling foundations of its military power in the Indian Ocean.

Over the past three months, the Trump administration has sown doubts about the United States' commitments to its partners. But the U.S. military establishment still has an interest in developing its capacity in concert with partner forces, which also have an interest in deepening security cooperation as Beijing becomes increasingly assertive. Amid the massive disruptions in U.S. trade and aid policy, American security policymakers should continue to offer the region an alternative to Chinese hegemony. The Quad has been built for that purpose. Its members should now recognize that meaningful steps to counter Chinese coercion and aggression are in and of themselves international public goods.