

Webinar Report - India-US Strategic Maritime Partnership

Topic:

Discussions on The Evolving Dynamics of The Strategic Maritime Relationship Between India and the United States.

Held on March 19, 2025

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Webinar on the 'India-US Strategic Maritime Partnership' **Approaches Both Partners Bring to the Maritime Domain**

Introduction:

The Maritime Research Center (MRC), India, in collaboration with the Near East South Asia Centre for Strategic Studies (NESA), USA, successfully hosted a pivotal webinar on March 19, 2025, titled “India- US Strategic Maritime Partnership – Approaches Both Partners Bring to the Maritime Domain.” This high-level event brought together a diverse group of strategic thinkers, domain experts, policymakers, academicians, researchers, and other key stakeholders, all united by a shared interest in enhancing the India-US maritime partnership.

The webinar provided a platform for engaging discussions on the evolving dynamics of the strategic maritime relationship between India and the United States. Participants explored various aspects of this partnership, including the complementary approaches each nation brings to securing maritime interests, ensuring regional stability, and advancing shared goals in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Experts deliberated on the challenges and opportunities within the maritime domain and the growing importance of collaboration in addressing maritime security threats, safeguarding international trade routes, and promoting sustainability in the oceans. The event aimed to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the ways both countries can strengthen their maritime engagement and forge a path forward in a rapidly changing global maritime environment.

Through thought-provoking discussions, the webinar explored practical pathways to strengthen India–U.S. strategic maritime cooperation, aiming to translate ideas into action for mutual benefit and lasting regional stability.

Background :

The United States (U.S.) now has a new administration in charge upon the inauguration of President Trump in January 2025. President Trump and Prime Minister Modi’s meeting in February 2025 showed both countries’ continued commitment to the partnership. The Indo-Pacific exists at the core for both countries, given the geoeconomic and geostrategic importance it has taken on. As the bilateral relationship reflects, the maritime spaces of the Indo-Pacific loom large. Traditional maritime domain awareness (MDA) efforts remain security and military-driven, critical for overall maritime security. This is essential, but does not reflect the larger ecosystem of factors that shape MDA. Small Island Developing Nations (SIDN) and developing littoral states throughout the Indo-Pacific often have different calculations and capabilities from more developed maritime powers.

The tropical characteristics of the Indo-Pacific demand regionally driven approaches. Science and technology are vital, but they must be integrated into MDA efforts with as much inclusivity as possible. One element of MDA that is key for the Indo-Pacific but remains underdeveloped and unanalysed is the underwater domain. Thus, Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) needs prioritising by all actors, including the U.S. and India.

India's geostrategic location in the Indo-Pacific will allow it to play a greater role. India has emerged as a significant player across varied dimensions to bolster its claim as a regional power. The demographic advantage, if utilised effectively, can be a game changer in leading capacity and capability building efforts in the tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific strategic space. India's civilisational legacy, combined with the U.S.'s superiority in modern science & technology, could be a game changer. The government of India has made strategic strides to become a significant maritime player. The Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision is a starting point for strengthened collaboration. How India and the U.S. partner regarding UDA must be part of the more significant depth of engagement that already exists, and such conversations must consider economic, regional, and security dimensions.

The UDA framework proposed by the Maritime Research Center (MRC) encourages the pooling of resources and the synergising of efforts by the stakeholders and nations in the IOR and beyond. India and U.S. conversations on UDA can progress with conversations such as this. Not only do variables defining the underwater domain need greater visibility, but innovative solutions and new policymaking approaches can and should be brought into focus. This conversation helped us start what will likely be a valuable conversation between India, the U.S. and many of their regional partners. The digital transformation could be a game changer and allow the optimal resource deployment for a larger strategic objective. India could be a formidable partner given its talent pool of young and aspirational human resources. Local site-specific field experimental R&D will be critical. More about the UDA framework is available at <https://udafoundation.in/>.

Important points highlighted by individual speakers

Presentation by Dr (Cdr) Arnab Das, Founder and Director, Maritime Research Centre, India

Dr. (Cdr) Arnab Das presented on the topic "UDA Framework for Safe, Secure, and Sustainable Growth for All in the New Global Order," emphasising the importance of various initiatives to safeguard the Indo-Pacific and underscoring its strategic relevance. He noted that the UDA Framework (Click here to read the concept note- [LINK HERE](#)) had not received sufficient attention and highlighted the considerable work required, especially for the Global South and the Indo-Pacific region.

Dr. Das stressed the urgent need to focus more on issues such as natural disaster preparedness, maritime security, and sustainability in the tropical waters of the Indo-Pacific. He pointed out the challenge posed by the degradation of sonar performance in these waters, which can drop by as much as 60%. To address this, he emphasised the need for UDA to be customised to meet better the challenges unique to the region's tropical waters.

In his presentation, Dr. Das also referred to the Maritime Research Center's (MRC) strategic perspective of "People, Economy, and Nature." This approach aims to address critical issues through inclusive governance for coastal and riverine communities, enhance connectivity via water, ensure energy security, and promote a sustainable blue economy.

You can watch his full presentation from here- [LINK HERE](#).

Keynote address by Mr Michael Kugelman, Director of South Asia Institute, Wilson Centre, USA

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has recently become a significant concern, emphasised Mr Kugelman as he began his keynote address. Over the past decade, the Indian Ocean has gained increasing strategic importance, with the United States identifying it as the second most crucial region globally. Shared concerns, particularly regarding China, have often shaped bilateral relations between India and the U.S.. Additionally, mutual worries about Islamic terrorism—highlighted by the 26/11 Mumbai attacks—have further brought India and the U.S. closer together.

Mr Kugelman mentioned that while maritime cooperation remains a focal point in India-U.S. relations, it is unlikely to fully translate into substantial policy shifts. Nations closer to the U.S. will likely be given more prominence, with India being taken seriously but not to the same extent as these countries.

He further mentioned that the maritime cooperation between India and the U.S. has become more clearly defined, with this area prominently featured in the joint documents produced by both nations. One area of focus is small-scale multilateralism, with initiatives like IMAC (Indian Maritime Affairs Cooperation) potentially coming into sharper focus.

Mr Kugelman also mentioned the UDA in the recent meeting between US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The leaders had pledged to accelerate defence technology cooperation across space, air defence, missile, maritime, and undersea technologies, with the U.S. announcing a review of its policy on releasing fifth-generation fighters and undersea systems to India.

You can watch the full keynote address through the following link- [LINK HERE](#).

Keynote address by Captain Sarabjeet Parmar, Distinguished Fellow, Council for Strategic and Defence Research, India

Capt. Parmar began his insightful presentation by delving into the origins and evolution of Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA). He underscored the unique challenges associated with UDA, particularly because the vast majority of what lies beneath the water's surface remains unseen. This reliance on technology to gain an understanding of the underwater domain poses significant hurdles in both detection and monitoring.

A key point of discussion was the distinction between UDA and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Capt. Parmar raised an important question—are these two domains interrelated, or are they separate, standalone entities? This query sparked a deeper exploration into the specifics of each framework, with UDA being much more focused on underwater environments, while MDA takes a broader approach to include both surface and sub-surface elements. The clarification of these domains is crucial for developing effective maritime security strategies.

Capt. Parmar also highlighted a common association with UDA: when the subject is raised, most people immediately think of submarines. Indeed, submarines represent a key component of the maritime security aspect within the broader UDA framework. However, the discussion extended beyond just submarines to encompass the myriad of challenges that arise from underwater threats, including issues of territorial waters, underwater surveillance, and the strategic importance of the oceans.

A significant concern raised by Capt. Parmar was the financial burden of enhancing UDA capabilities. Given the high costs associated with advanced technology and the infrastructure needed to monitor and secure underwater domains, many smaller nations struggle to bear the expenses. To mitigate these challenges, international cooperation is essential. Countries with more advanced technological capabilities, such as the United States, Russia, France, and India, can partner with smaller nations to enhance UDA capabilities and ensure a secure and effective global maritime system.

Furthermore, Capt. Parmar took time to reflect on the growing significance of underwater surveys being undertaken by China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These activities have raised concerns among many nations in the region and beyond, particularly regarding the strategic implications of China's underwater exploration efforts. The increased presence and operations in these vital waters have generated heightened awareness about securing underwater domains, particularly in sensitive maritime zones.

In conclusion, Capt. Parmar's presentation illuminated UDA's complex and evolving nature, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts to overcome technological and financial challenges. As underwater threats grow in scale and sophistication, enhancing our collective understanding and capabilities in the underwater domain is more critical than ever.

You can watch the full keynote address through the following link- [LINK HERE](#).

Dr. Sameer P Lalwani, South Asia Expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, USA

Dr. Lalwani provided valuable insights into the United States' perspectives on maritime partnerships, emphasising the critical role that the USA plays in such collaborations. He noted that the United States brings significant technological expertise, strategic naval capabilities, and a well-established global presence to maritime partnerships, particularly in regions with complex security dynamics. The U.S. has a long history of engaging with international allies to enhance maritime security, with a focus on ensuring free and open access to international waters and protecting global trade routes.

Dr. Lalwani also highlighted that maritime security concerns primarily drive the U.S.'s growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region. With its vast and strategically vital waters, the Indo-Pacific has become a central focal point for U.S. policy, especially regarding the security of shipping lanes and the prevention of any disruptive naval activities. The United States perceives the Indo-Pacific as a critical region to monitor and influence, largely due to its significance in global trade and its proximity to rising maritime tensions, particularly with China.

However, Dr. Lalwani also addressed a more pressing issue in U.S. foreign policy: the terms and ideas surrounding the Global South and sustainability. He pointed out that under the current U.S. administration, these topics do not appear to be high on the political agenda. The prioritisation of immediate national security concerns, economic recovery, and technological innovation has shifted the focus away from more long-term global sustainability initiatives and the development priorities of the Global South. He noted that this strategic pivot will likely continue for the foreseeable future as the U.S. remains focused on pressing domestic and regional priorities.

He then elaborated on the U.S. administration's interest in the Indo-Pacific, specifically noting its strategic drive to track and monitor Chinese submarines and other Chinese vessels operating in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With China expanding its naval presence in these waters, the U.S. has intensified its efforts to maintain a dominant maritime presence to counterbalance China's growing influence. This includes advanced surveillance, intelligence gathering, and partnership building with key regional actors to safeguard maritime security.

Finally, he echoed Capt. Parmar's earlier point regarding the U.S. reluctance to share advanced technology with smaller nations. He clarified that this hesitance is primarily due to the need to protect U.S. technological superiority and military capabilities. Dr. Lalwani compared this approach to the actions of other major maritime powers, including France and Russia, who similarly restrict access to their advanced maritime technologies to protect their own strategic interests. Such policies, while often frustrating for smaller nations, reflect the delicate balance of international security and technological competition in the modern era.

In summary, his comments provided a nuanced view of U.S. maritime strategies, offering insight into the motivations behind the country's engagements in the Indo-Pacific, its technological safeguarding policies, and its stance on global priorities like sustainability. The discussion highlighted the complex interplay of national security, technological competition, and regional dynamics that shape the U.S. approach to maritime partnerships today.

You can watch the full keynote address through the following link- [LINK HERE](#).

Dr. Sanjaya Baru, Political Commentator and Policy Analyst, Distinguished Fellow, United Service Institution of India (USI), India

During his remarks at the webinar, Dr. Baru highlighted several key points from Dr. (Cdr) Arnab Das' presentation on Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) and emphasised some significant historical events that have had a profound impact on regional security and development. Dr. Baru first brought attention to two major incidents: the 26/11 attacks in India and the 9/11 attacks in the United States, both of which were pivotal moments in shaping national and global security priorities. These events, he noted, served as stark reminders of the security threats that exist in today's interconnected world.

Dr. Baru also pointed out another critical event that shifted security parameters—the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean Region. The devastating impact of the tsunami on coastal communities across the region highlighted the vulnerability of nations and the need for better disaster preparedness and response frameworks. In response to this catastrophe, the former Indian Prime Minister took a landmark step by establishing the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in India, which became a turning point in the country's approach to both security and development. Dr. Baru stressed that the tsunami disaster provided an unexpected opportunity to foster greater regional cooperation as countries came together to deliver humanitarian assistance and collaborate on the establishment of frameworks for regional disaster management.

He pointed out that such incidents serve as a catalyst for raising awareness about the vulnerabilities of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the opportunities for greater regional collaboration. The tsunami response, in particular, opened avenues for greater interaction and partnership among countries, and established a foundation for cooperation that goes beyond individual national interests.

Looking forward, Dr. Baru emphasised the importance of working together with a broad range of nations to ensure both security and growth in the region. While the United States plays an important role, he noted that it is equally essential to engage with other regional powers such as Japan, South Africa, Indonesia, France, and others. Relying solely on one partner for security and growth would not be effective in addressing the complexities of the region. Dr. Baru stressed that a more inclusive, multilateral approach is needed—one that involves collaboration with diverse nations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the region and to collectively promote peace, stability, and prosperity.

In conclusion, Dr. Baru underscored that the challenges and opportunities in the Indian Ocean Region can only be effectively addressed through joint efforts and shared commitments. The region's security, growth, and development depend on collective engagement, mutual trust, and a coordinated approach involving all relevant stakeholders.

You can watch the full keynote address through the following link- [LINK HERE](#).

Ambassador Anup Kumar Mudgal, Former Indian Diplomat; Member, Blue Economy Task Force, Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), India

Ambassador Anup Kumar Mudgal commenced his keynote address with a powerful reminder of the critical role oceans play in maritime security and maintaining the overall health of our planet. He stressed that protecting our oceans must go beyond national and regional security concerns and extend into the environmental and ecological domains that sustain life globally.

Highlighting the multifaceted value of the oceans, Ambassador Mudgal pointed out that they are fundamental to the growth and sustenance of the blue economy. This includes sectors such as fisheries, tourism, shipping, and marine biotechnology. However, he emphasised that the oceans' contributions go well beyond economic interests. They play a vital role in supporting global energy requirements, particularly through offshore energy resources and maritime trade routes essential to energy security.

A central theme of his address was the urgent need to enhance Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA). Ambassador Mudgal argued that to truly understand and mitigate ocean ecosystem damage, we must improve our capabilities to monitor, map, and analyse underwater activities and environmental changes. He underscored the detrimental effects of unsustainable practices such as overfishing, marine pollution, and unregulated seabed exploitation, noting that these threats are often invisible and underestimated due to the limited awareness of what occurs beneath the ocean's surface.

Ambassador Mudgal advocated for collaboration between governments, scientific communities, and civil society to build robust frameworks for ocean observation and data sharing. He called for a more integrated and science-driven approach to ocean governance. He concluded by noting that only with this deeper understanding can we ensure the sustainable use of ocean resources while preserving marine biodiversity and planetary health for future generations.

American commentators:

Additional comments from American speakers reflected on the trajectory of India–U.S. relations. Speakers noted that while the two democracies have traditionally shared cordial and respectful ties, the depth and strategic character of the relationship have significantly matured in recent years. Comments emphasised that what was once primarily a polite diplomatic engagement has now evolved into a robust and multidimensional partnership—one that is increasingly anchored in economic cooperation and, more prominently, in strategic and security collaboration.

A key set of remarks highlighted the growing convergence between India and the U.S. in the maritime sphere, driven by shared interests and mutual concerns over regional stability, freedom of navigation, and countering non-traditional security threats such as piracy, trafficking, and climate change impacts. The current geopolitical landscape, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, demands greater synergy between like-minded nations.

The Indo-Pacific region holds immense strategic importance for both countries, serving as a central theatre for economic growth and geopolitical competition. At the same time, the region faces numerous challenges, including aggressive assertions by certain powers, environmental degradation, and increasing militarisation of sea lanes. Addressing these challenges cannot be achieved by any one nation alone, regardless of its power or capabilities.

Security is a collective endeavour. A collaborative and layered approach that brings together government-to-government cooperation, industry-to-industry engagement, and most importantly, community-to-community interaction is vital. The emphasis on people-to-people and culture-to-culture connections added a human dimension to the strategic discourse. These grassroots exchanges are essential for fostering mutual understanding, building trust, and ensuring that maritime cooperation is not limited to naval exercises and diplomatic agreements, but includes cultural, educational, and civil society engagement as well. Both India and the U.S. should reaffirm a commitment to strengthening the India–U.S. maritime partnership, especially within the broader framework of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific

Conclusion:

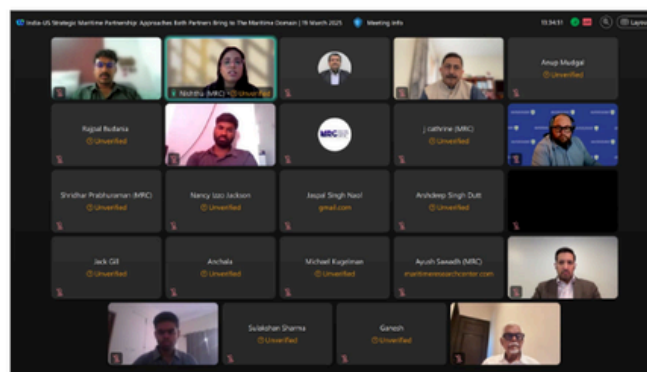
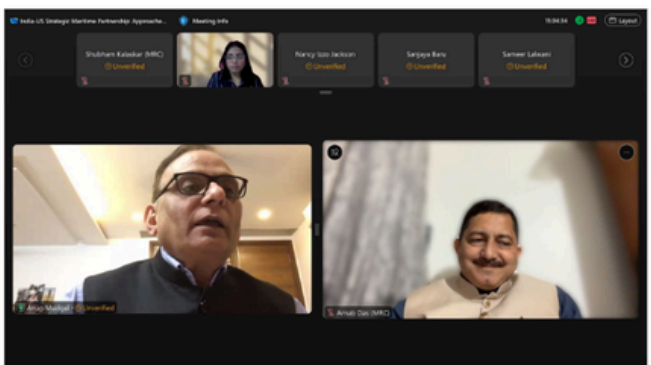
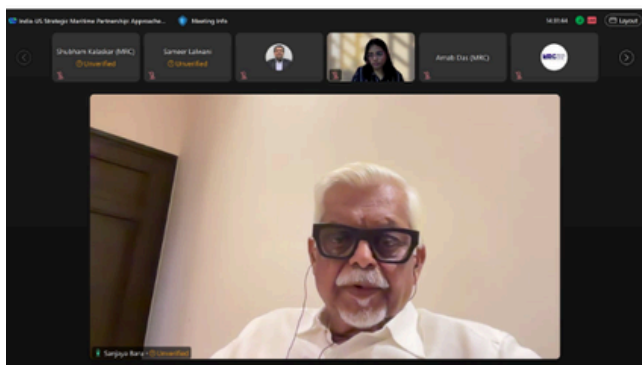
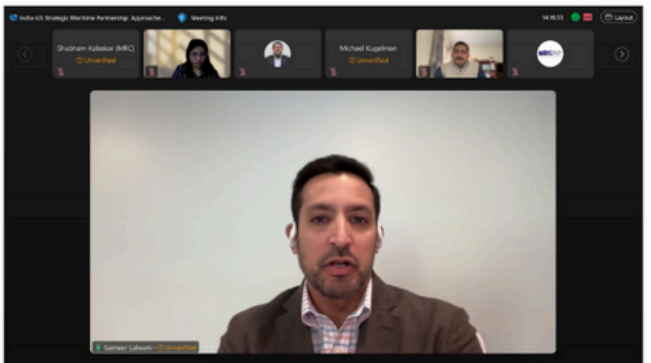
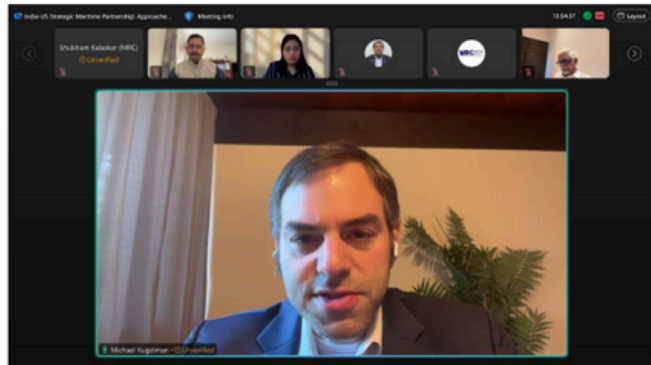
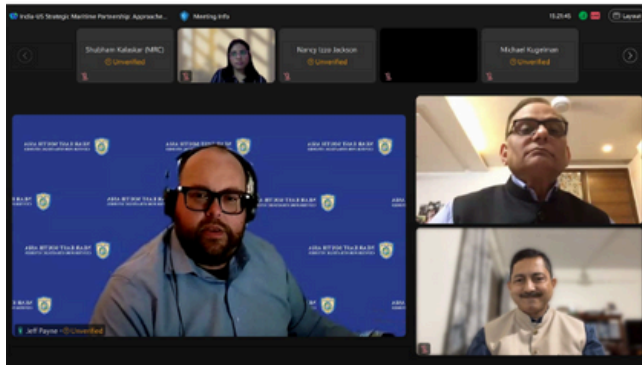
The webinar on India–U.S. maritime partnership offered a comprehensive overview of the evolving strategic, security, and sustainability dimensions of bilateral cooperation, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Speakers highlighted the significant deepening of India–U.S. ties, which have grown from cordial diplomacy to a multi-layered partnership anchored in shared concerns over China’s expanding presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and a mutual interest in safeguarding regional stability. Maritime cooperation was identified as a key pillar of this relationship, underpinned by joint efforts in defense technology, naval exercises, and emerging domains such as Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA). The discussions emphasised that security in the Indo-Pacific is a collective endeavour, requiring coordinated action between governments and industries, coastal communities, and global partners.

UDA emerged as a recurring theme, with experts pointing to its critical role in disaster preparedness, maritime security, and sustainable ocean governance—particularly in tropical waters, where sonar performance is significantly degraded. The speakers stressed that the high cost of UDA technologies often limits access for smaller nations, making international collaboration vital. While the United States remains cautious about sharing cutting-edge technologies, it continues to bring unmatched naval capabilities and strategic depth. The importance of the blue economy, environmental protection, and inclusive development was underscored on the civilian front, primarily through models such as the Maritime Research Center’s approach of the “People, Economy, and Nature” framework. The event also revisited past events, like the 26/11 attacks and the 2004 tsunami, to emphasise the need for stronger regional cooperation frameworks in security and humanitarian response.

In closing, the webinar reinforced that the path forward lies in small-scale multilateralism, deeper technological collaboration, and a holistic approach that balances power dynamics with sustainable growth, regional inclusivity, and long-term ocean health.

The link to the full webinar- [Link here](#).

Image Gallery:



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