

US Maritime Bullying Targets “Ally” India

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Tensions temporarily spiked between Washington and New Delhi when US warships conducted a “freedom of navigation operation” (FONOP) inside India’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in early April.

The US’ own 7th Fleet [website](#) in an announcement would claim:

On April 7, 2021 (local time) USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53) asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India’s exclusive economic zone, without requesting India’s prior consent, consistent with international law. India requires prior consent for military exercises or maneuvers in its exclusive economic zone or continental shelf, a claim inconsistent with international law. This freedom of navigation operation (“FONOP”) upheld the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging India’s excessive maritime claims.

The Times of India in its [article](#), “In unusual move, US navy conducts operation near Lakshadweep without India’s consent,” would report concerns by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA):

“The USS John Paul Jones (US guided missile destroyer) was continuously monitored transiting from the Persian Gulf towards the Malacca Straits. We have conveyed our concerns regarding this passage through our EEZ to the US government through diplomatic channels,” added the MEA.

The article would also note:

...the “tone and tenor of the aggressive public declaration” of FONOPs in India’s EEZ, at a time when the US is seeking India’s closer cooperation through the Quad and other mechanisms to foster “credible deterrence” against China in the Indo-Pacific, raised the hackles of the Indian security establishment.

Washington’s claims that it conducted this operation to uphold “the rights, freedoms, and

lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law” means that it sailed its warships into India’s EEZ solely for this purpose, fitting into a much wider pattern of America’s self-appointed role of enforcing its own interpretations of international law.

According [to the 2015](#), “US Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation Program Fact Sheet,” the US claims:

The Program is actively implemented against excessive maritime claims by coastal nations in every region of the world, based upon the Department’s global interest in mobility and access. The Program is principle-based, in that it is administered with regard to the excessive nature of maritime claims, rather than the identity of the coastal nations asserting those claims. As a result, US forces challenge excessive claims asserted not only by potential adversaries and competitors, but also by allies, partners, and other nations.

But of course FONOPs are inherently political, because they provoke political reactions from those targeted by them. Those reactions are most certainly calculated and understood before FONOPs are conducted.

Thus, far from objectively “enforcing” what the US claims is “international law,” the US FONOP in India’s EEZ had a definitive political message; the US holds primacy over the Indo-Pacific region, not only primacy over adversaries like China, but also primacy over “allies” like India.

Far from conjecture, the US itself in its own policy papers admits this.

US “Freedom of Navigation” Operations Protect Primacy, Not International Law

A [paper](#) titled, “US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific” published as part of the White House archives for the departing Trump administration would open by stating its first “national security challenge” in the region was:

...how to maintain US strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity.

While some might point out that China was mentioned specifically by name, that is only because China is a near peer competitor of the United States and the foremost threat to US primacy in the region at the moment.

Through the US Navy’s FONOP in India’s EEZ, it’s clear that the emergence of any socio-political or economic order in the region independent of Washington’s influence and challenging US primacy would also constitute a threat, including nations the US attempts to court into its sphere of influence as allies.

It is not any specific threat China represents that has prompted America’s adversarial and disruptive posture in the Indo-Pacific region, but rather the very general threat posed to American primacy, a threat that clearly nations like India or regional blocs like ASEAN also potentially pose.

The pursuit of primacy drives America’s “freedom of navigation program” in the Indo-Pacific

region, not any genuine threat China or India pose to either the national security of the US itself or alleged threats to “international law” the US uses to justify its “freedom of navigation” program.

New Delhi and other rising powers in the region might take note of America’s declared and demonstrated agenda in the region, avoiding overly committing to US activities in a bid to balance regional power in regards to rising China. Other, more reliable partners should be sought, because should the US be allowed to create an overbearing political, military and economic presence in the Indo-Pacific region, that leverage will be used against all nations, not just current adversaries like China.

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