

ASIA PACIFIC GEOPOLITICS: US STRATEGIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

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Abstract

China's rise has made her the centre of the regional and international politics. Its power potentials and geopolitical and geo-economic influence in the region has made the region pivot of major power politics. Chinese outreach through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and naval assertiveness along with its expansion of interests has generated countervailing measures from the major powers especially US and some regional states especially Japan, India, and Australia. This paper hypothesises that China's rise has made US and its regional allies concerned about the future of the regional order in which their interests are imminently would be marginalized against Chinese power, therefore, US with its allies has adopted provoking and assertive strategies to counter Chinese power and influence. In this paper effort has been made to analyse the dimensions of the Chinese rise and its perceptions by the US and its regional partners. It also endeavours to find out the nature and conduct of US strategies to balance and counter Chinese ever-expanding interests and influence. Finally, effort has been made to trace out the implications for China's interests, influence, and goals in the region.

Keywords: United States, China, Indo-Pacific Strategy, Geo-politics, Strategic Alliances

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INTRODUCTION

Indo-Pacific region has become the hot bed for the great-power rivalry. Power positionality and its related politics has made this region a geopolitically vital region of the power. China's rise has made the status quo (United States and its regional allies) fearful of Chinese intentions and the future direction of the regional order and its impacts on the international politics. As China has massively strengthened its military and naval power and has re-organized its potentials to become a predominant power of the region, US and its allies has made an effort to balance China's power. In fact, US has adopted strategies to strengthen its maritime and continental and re-organized and redefined its role in the region and its relationship with the regional states. China's rise and US's countervailing strategies to counter China through military build-up and alliances has made the regional politics a clear case of balance of power. Balancing is the norm of the day in Asia-Pacific and specifically in Indo-Pacific.

Since Obama Administration, successive US administrations have given the area strategic vitality. This power and geopolitical competition can best be explained. According to the balancing framework, states make alliance with other states of the world to create an advantage over the competitor to uphold or maintain its security and relative power (Waltz, 1979). Insights have been taken from Realist framework of balancing to evaluate the geopolitics in India-Pacific, especially, US strategies of strategic alliance and naval build-up in the region against China.

This study dissects the geopolitical issues in Indo-Pacific. It focuses on the China's rise and its perception by the US, China's rejuvenation dream, US efforts to balance the exponential growth of power in the region and beyond. It hypothesizes that China's rise has made US and its regional allies concerned about the future of the regional order in which their interests are imminently would be marginalized against Chinese power, therefore, US with its allies has adopted provoking and assertive strategies to counter Chinese power and influence.

CHINA'S DREAM OF REJUVENATION

China, under president Xi Jinping, has witnessed a new profound global goal and role. China has aspired to vision and strive to fulfil China Dream of revitalization of the nation. 'China Dream' is the new robust construct that portrays China's ambitious foreign policy agenda under Xi Jinping. It provides new vision and direction for China's regional and global role and destination as a nation. According to Xi China Dream is linked with great rejuvenation of the nation (Xi, 2014). For the realization of China Dream two goals have been set. President Xi himself stated:

We have put forward two centenary goals... to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020... and to build China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious, and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by the middle of the century (Xi 2014, p. 70).

These goals are meant to make China stable and prosperous at domestic level and respected and influential in the international community.

US-PERCEPTION OF CHINA'S RISE AND ITS GOALS OF REJUVENATION

China is a potential rising power based on her national wealth and large population, and her increasing influence on regional and global level, make her neighbours to feel insecure by her- the emerging hegemon. However, it is hard to predict how long the international order would take to declare China 'Hegemon' based on existing uncertainty in her relations with the other states as contemporary, only the weaker states like Vietnam and Laos are getting benefit with Chinese economic growth (Stromseth, 2019), which bring US allies more closer to each other for cooperation to deal with said emerging threats, under the framework of US defense commitments (Swaine,

Deng, & Lescure, 2016). The rising China is being perceived as a threat to national interests, defense commitment and democratic values by the US, which ignited a competition over power and influence, between US and China. To deal with the Chinese threat, India is playing a pivotal role to serve the US' interest in the region and help the US in establishing the link with other regional and international players in Central Asia and Asia Pacific. While Chinese leaders have perceived the strategic opportunity to expand their interests and influence in the region, they have also realized that their behaviour is restrained by regional and international actors and factors (Mirza, Abbas & Malik, 2020).

It is to be expected that China could retaliate on actions taken under US defense commitment with hostility, but China is utilizing the policy of economic incentives to strengthen the bilateral relations with US regional allies, which leads to economic engagements between them. Besides it, China punishes the other regional states in the Asia-Pacific, if they harm the Chinese interests (Tian & Crossley, 2001). Substantially, China seeks to secure and protect three fundamental objectives: No threat from neighbours, peaceful order, and the successful resolution of Taiwan issue, in the region. While China takes the US led security order in the region as a threat, to all the three stated interests, in the region (Xinbo, 2000), which makes hard to avoid tensions between the two countries.

China started to rise as an influential player on global order in around 20 years back and have been facing the 'Rise Dilemma' since then, as the more she rises, she has to face with more external reluctance, from the other states, particularly the US allies, because it is to be perceived as the only power that could alter the contemporary unipolar world order. Due to this, she is trying to build and strengthen her relations, and cultivate partnerships with the other states on state-by-state approach (Sun, 2018; Xinbo, 2000; Xuefeng, 2013). China's BRI is the representation of China's grand strategy to alter the existing international order, by becoming 'Rule-Maker'

rather than 'Rule Braker' (Liu, 2021). Chinese ambition like promoting BRI and attaining hegemonic position could also make Chinese leader to look or seek for increasing their confrontation stance vis-a-vis US.

Since the early 2000s, China understands that due to the concrete nature of unipolar world, she had to operate under the American prominence, but she has been trying to establish and deepen ties with other multipolar countries across the globe, to facilitate them if US could not, with the aim of altering the existing international order in future, to the Chinese interests (Foot, 2006). With the rise of China, prelisting the nature of international order and the American position of global political landscape is hard because of the unknowing nature of the emerging polarity, because it has become more difficult for states to translate the economic power into advance military capabilities (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015).

Until 2016, China is not only engaging with other states, particularly the Southeast Asian states, with economy, but also in improving behaviours and military capabilities, while avoiding any sort of direct confrontation with the US (Salman, 2017). Although, it is very hard to predict the Chinese foreign policy towards the US, in future, but the Chinese policy refers to the US power loss as her inability to sustain the hegemon position on the international order (Bader, 2012). Whereas China's tries for hedging against the existing order, is still unclear. However, it seems like that she is trying to nurture the options that could accommodate her in side-lining the US centric preferences, which makes the increasingly important for the US policy makers to think about the viability of her strategic partnership with the other regional actors including India, in context to contain China.

Today, India is a key strategic partner of US for her security interests, but the risks of vulnerability, also exist in the strategic alignment against China (Kumar, Verma, & Shah, 2020). The mobilization of partnering states in the region, is one of the fundamental security strategies of both, the US and India (Abraham, 2020). However, policy

options are always available to big powers to keep the peace and stability, but the pursuit of conflicting point worsens the competitive rivalry.

How the geopolitics of the world, particularly Asia-Pacific, would be in the next few decades? All is dependent on the degree, manner, and pattern in which the US would respond to the rising power 'China', either it cooperates with China, or pullback herself limited to Western hemisphere. The Asia Pacific is emerging as pivotal region around which the foreign policies of major powers are manoeuvring, with respect to security aspect, as US perceives it as most important geopolitical and geostrategic point (Doyle & Rumley, 2019). Some scholars think that the Washington and Beijing's views are at much divergence that would not let them to go for cooperation or managing rivalry (Heath & Thompson, 2018). The US-China competition has been portrayed as a geopolitical happening, the ongoing US-China competition is for power dominations (Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlforth, 2013).

Now, scholars across the globe, have started to refer the decisive point in China-US ties, as the meeting between the senior officials of both sides in Alaska, reflected that involved states of both sides are at peak, in the recent years (Medeiros & Blanchette, 2021). However, China is ambitious to get dominance in the region, as it is to be expected but these efforts may also be surprising for American strategists, if China deviates from the expected path (Anonymous, 2021). However, the power shift would not solely spell the armed countries between US and China, because the competition between them has variety of dimensions including ideological, security, strategic and technological, and these dimensions are hard to manage for conflicts, from both sides.

US STRATEGIES IN ASIA-PACIFIC

The US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, caused distraction of her power shift that undermined the American traditional strategic

influence in the Asia-Pacific region, subsequently, the Chinese influence increased. Initially, US was sought to manage the growing Chinese influence by the policy of 'Self-Containment' by developing ties with other democratic countries, but on a longer run, opt the policy to strategic partnerships with the other powerful regional influential states.

Multilateral Political and Defense Pacts: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a group of four countries US, Australia, Japan, and India, that meets to discuss the strategic concern of the Asia-Pacific region. The group was established in 2007, with a primary focus objective of free, prosperous, and inclusive Asia-Pacific region. QUAD has witnessed many ups and downs, with the group, as it's a loose commitment than a formal alliance. The QUAD member's intentions were not aligned: Japan emphasized on the democratic notions of each member state, India aspired for functional cooperation, and Australia was not intended to posture any that would represent QUAD a formal alliance, in the initial years. Later, The QUAD member states aligned themselves to common interests like: technological advancement, supply chain reliance and climate change, and formed a joint working group (Smith, 2021).

The member states also participated in joint military exercise, and now leaders are committed to meet once in a year (Australia Joins Exercise Malabar 2020, 2020). To work with these nations is neutral and beneficial for the US. The US worked closely with the member states during Trump's administration. However, President Biden intends to broaden the Quad's agenda. The Asia Pacific region is important for the US, firstly from maritime and trade diplomacy perspective as it comprises two oceans: Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, and big volume of US' export passes through the region. Secondly, Chinese presence in the region, which worries the Washington to work more closely to counter Beijing's growing influence.

AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States)

AUKUS is a trilateral agreement among Australia, United Kingdom, and US, signed in 2021. The founding objective of this agreement is to build the nuclear-propelled submarines, to work jointly to counter China- a common threat, and the advancement of technologies. This agreement bounds Australia to end her contract with France for the advancement of submarine fleets. The significant feature of the agreement is that it enables Australia to get the nuclear propulsion technology from the US, previously, the US shared this technology with the United Kingdom. Relations of these states with China, were at low, even, before the agreements. Although this agreement does not have the name 'China', but it is understood that it was signed in response to China's expansion in South China Sea. However, it was responded very swiftly by China, as the Lijian Zhao -spokesperson to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated 'should abandon the obsolete cold war zero sum mentality and narrow-minded geopolitical concepts and respect regional people's aspiration and do more that is conducive to regional peace and stability and development – otherwise they will only end up hurting their own interests' (Davidson & Blair, 2021).

Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework was the first major trade imitative, launched by US under Joe Biden's Administration, in 2021. This initiative aims to expand the US economic engagements in the Asia-Pacific region. Although, US also aimed to peruse the economic engagement in the said region through Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement during US former President Barack Obama's administration, which was later withdrawal by US former President Donald Trump in 2017 (McBride, Chatzky, & Siripurapu, 2021). Thirteen countries: US, Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam, account for 40 per cent of global economy, joined this initiative. Connected Economy, Resilient Economy, Clean

Economy, and Fair Economy, are the four main pillars of IPEF. Connected Economy – the first pillar, aims for digital economy. Resilient Economy- the second pillar, intends to deal with the Supply-Chain Challenges. Clean Energy- the third pillars, aspires to tackle the climate related issues: renewable energy, decarbonisation, energy efficiency standards, carbon removal, and methane emissions reduction. Fair Economy- the fourth Pillar, would focus on Tax and Anticorruption policies, which promotes the multilateral commitments among the member states.

China is a part of the Asia Pacific region and the biggest economy of the region, but it was not include in the IPEP, which shows that IPEF is a tool to counter China's economy and supply change. Although it is to be claimed that IPEF is an economic venture, but its objectives are not seemed to be economic. Basically, it is established to serve the US political, economic, and geographical interests linked with Indo-Pacific strategy, and to contain China to ensure the sustainability of existing US hegemony, which, in fact is totally different form the regional economic integration.

Surge in Naval Build-up

Since 2009, China has been engaging in the region through a variety of tactics including, reclaims islands, militarizing, and legal and diplomatic influence, however, it did not give any posture to confront with the US. The US military expansion was started in 2011, under her 'Rebalance of Asia' strategy announced by US President Barack Obama (Hang, 2001). The strategy was warmly welcomed by US ally Japan, which also intended to strengthen her bilateral relations with other US regional allies including Australia, South Korea, and Japan (Jimbo, 2014). The present US policy towards the Asia Pacific regions ensure her hegemonic role in the international order, while building cooperation and harmony among her allies for the regional prosperity, safely and security. In 2016, the US secretary of defense Ashton B. claimed that the US has ensured peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region, for a long time, as a hegemon, he states

“America’s men and women in uniform have worked day in and day out to help ensure the security of the Asia-Pacific. Forward-deployed U.S. personnel in the region . . . have helped the United States deter aggression and develop deeper relationships with regional militaries.” and conclude that many regional leaders are having strong desire for the American presence and support, for peace and stability in the region (Carter, 2016).

The military engagement with China in the South China sea, is building cooperation and competition of power. Since 2016, either it was the 2017, 2018’s National Security Strategy of the United States, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, or the 2019 Missile Defense Review, all directs for the military build-up and expansion in a peaceful and prosperous security environment, by following this strategy, US compete China, and expresses her willingness to cooperate on various security concerns. This could help to engage for cooperation, peace and security, while ensuring trust. In 2020, China created the two new districts in the South China Sea, to claim her strength of administrating control (Panda, 2020). However, it would not be much easy to predict that China would claim more gain in the region or use such tactics, in the future.

The South China Sea in the Asia Pacific region is important for the US for three reasons: major route for commercial traffic, continuous disputes among China and US’ allies, the expanding sphere of China’s influence. These are the factors that bring US attentions to the region and emphasized her to devise policies to the minimization of dispute among her allies and China, and to ensure the smooth flow of commercial traffic through the South China Sea. However, the US’ actions and statements are not much achieving these objectives. Subsequently, the tension could increase, and the US-China would worsen.

Thinking that China would not make such attempts to strengthen her position in future, may not be rational choice. She could also make such claims in future too, depends on her domestic political situation

and the dynamics of international order. Such action could bring these two powers for military confrontation. However, The US is strongly willing to restrict China to opt assertive way to get the control of the South China Sea. The open and free access through South Asian sea's waterways is not significant for the economic point of view, but also for the international norms of freedom of navigation. The US also fears of having confrontations with China due to the defense treaty with the Philippines – a claimant of a contested territory. Having control of waterways would be benefice; for displacing the US from the Asia-Pacific region, which could eventually help her in expanding economically and reordering the region to her favour. To restrain China for doing it, is one of the central objectives of US National Security Strategy. For it, US should avoid the confrontations, and keep restraining the Chinese expansion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

The US and its allies' provoking and countering discourses and strategies impose several key Challenges and implications to China's core security interests, its socio-economic and connectivity initiatives and its trade and energy needs. Few significant has been traced out and explained in preceding sections.

Challenges to its Core Interest

Recently, the tensions between China and US were escalated over the former's concern on exiting core interests: Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Hong Kong. Theses interests are so fragile that it could erupt a fraction, leading to military confrontation between the two countries. Interestingly, there interests, are those through which the US devise her foreign policy. Basically, the US main aim in the region is to counter China, and for that, she had to focus on the core interests. Be a one China by the unification of Taiwan, is a political, economic military objective of Chinese policy. Taiwan is one of two (the other is Hainan) largest Island in the South China Sea. It was the part of Chinese in Qing Dynasty, later, it was transferred to Japan under the

Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Later, in the mid-20th century. The United Nation through its resolution, gave the right to China for the governing Taiwan, which is not materialized due to the international factors.

Threat to BRI and Regional Connectivity Model

It seems impossible to cracking the China's ties with most of other regional countries. Over the years, China has developed such a fascinating network of supply chain and economic integration that offers low assembly and manufacturing cost, which is, in fact, hard to find elsewhere in the world. China also offers financial incentives to the major economic stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental cooperation based in other regional states, insists their governments to more strengthen their state's relations with China.

Although President Biden's administration tries to contain China, but it has realized that breaking the China's economic clout, is not an easy task, because the other regional states are keen to expand their economic engagement with China, further. This is probably because these states are intimated with China's rapid economic and military growth. No regional state is willing to be a part of the ongoing tussle between US and China, in the Asia-Pacific region, that is why they are reluctant to take side of either side if the tensions escalate. Although, the US allies including Australia, Japan and Korea are less interested to threat China, in fact, they are being aligned with China, as a counterbalance strategy, and wishes to have good economic relations with China.

Challenges to Trade and Energy Security

The rapid rise of China challenges the US in various sectors including technology and military production, along with global influence, and it has managed to push back US successfully to its edge, through establishing new partnerships in the region. Amidst the ongoing tension in the Eastern Europe between Russia and Ukraine, the US engaged the regional states and take back her 'Indo-Pacific' policy.

The Biden's approach to deal with China, is influenced by the members of his team. In fact, her team views for China is divided in two different groups: 'Competitors' and 'Engagers' (Rogin, 2022). The Competitors advocates the necessity to compete with China until the US takes necessary steps, while the 'Engagers' believe on the engagement on the certain issue. However, most of the pundits of Politics and International Relations are of the view that President Biden himself, is more inclined to the competitor (Rogin, 2022). It does not mean that the US-China relations are solely based on competition, in fact, the relations of the two countries are the smooth blend of competition and cooperation. However, sometimes, the US tries to defuse the Chinese's ambition for regional influence in the Asia-Pacific region, by cooperating with other regional power (Abbas, Qazi, & Behan, 2022).

Today, the ever-expanding China growth and expansion, has created serious concerns for the US, and now, the completion is seen as inevitable for US leadership, due to domestic and international pressures. The US under Biden's administration to nurture more international engagements and partnership to compete with China-the rising power. But, it needs more assurances from the US allies to help her if the time needs, to get back to the arena of international partnerships, which were withdrawal during Trump's era. For this, President Biden undo the various Trump decision by signing 17 Executive Orders, proclamations, and memorandums, to reboots the economic recovery (Shearm, 2021). The Biden's decision to reverse back the Trump's decisions also hints the regional allies is necessary for the US, to deal with Chinese problem.

In the age of complex independence. both, the US, and China, rely more on economic dominance, and the completion on trade has now become their favourite field to confront each other, and the countries impose ban on the imports, to hurt the other economically, and rebalance the own economy. Last year (in 2021), the US imposed ban on the import of Solar panels made by Chinese company 'Hoshine

Silicon Industry, on the wake to expressing solidity with the Xinjian region, over the allegation of forced labour (US Department of State, 2021). The said ban also reflects that the US also tries to ban card to gather the support of native Chinese, to damage the Chinese position, internally and externally. Although, the ban disrupted the ongoing projects in the US, but it also hurt the China's economy. Since 2019, the two countries have been using these strategies for some period, but the leaders of sides fully understand that keeping imposing such bans are not possible for the long time, in the age of globalization. Whether the two countries compete, they also take care of global supply chains, for the smooth operational flows across the globe.

Greater Risk of War

The roots of strategic competition between US and China are being found in the domestic political system of both countries. China advocates the China's Communists Party System, which claims the deliverance of huge benefit to the Chinese people. On the other hand, US aspires for the promotion of democracy, and US President Joe Biden enthusiastically works to rejuvenate the democratic values that fractured during President Trump's era. The political ideological difference could be observed in the ongoing escalations between Russia and Ukraine, in which China backs Russia, and US supports Ukraine. The two counties are spreading the narratives that rise the tension and narrowing down the space for compromise. However, the political difference has been changed into military competition in the premise of South China Sea. US under the Trump's administration, started to expand the forces in the region, to check and deter what she perceives as China's attempt to alter the international order. On the other side, advancing the military capabilities, and their mobilization in the region, is much easier for China, to protect the sovereignty and national security of the country.

The two counties have been increasing the military in the region, however, due to the no direct contact between the defense ministers of both states since August 2020, could create ample space for

misjudging each other's intentions on any sensitive matter, particularly the current Taiwan issue. The two countries military operates close to each other, which also hints the chances of confrontation between China and US, at any time.

CONCLUSION

China's exponential growth and its expansion of interests and influence has made the Asia-Pacific region a geopolitical one. Recent politics in the region revolves around the maximization of power and its balancing, strategic measures and countervailing measure from the US and its Allies and China and its partners. United States (US) and its regional allies are fearful of Chinese intentions and the future direction of the regional order. Chinese military modernization, naval build-up, and assertiveness along with its development initiatives like BRI has given it a geo-political and Geo-economic leverage. US could not match the power competition unilaterally, therefore, it has pursued political and security 'minilateralism', creating small group strategic partnerships and defense pacts like Quad and AUKUS.

Regional states in this geopolitical moment are conscious of regional political and security developments. They seem vary of taking sides and are narrowly focused on their relative interest and needs while making and strengthening relationships with the two heavyweights. They are reluctant to take side because of the fear of escalation of the conflict and its fall-out for the region. Although, the US allies including Australia, Japan and Korea are less interested to threat China, in fact, they are being aligned with China on economic agendas.

US strategy of balancing through alliances and naval bullying on the pretext of freedom of navigation would further provoke China to make effort to expand its influence via countervailing measures. This will lead to a further polarization of political and security architecture of the region. As the two counties are spreading the threat narratives against each other, the tensions would rise and would narrow down

the space for understanding and compromise.

Recently, the political difference and trade competition has changed into military competition in the South China Sea as US has started to increase the naval forces and hardware in the region. Advancing the military capabilities, and their mobilization in the region would not establish balance and stability but will increase the risks of escalation of conflict into a direct war. In combination, US provocations especially related to Chinese core interests would further the mistrust between the two. US's violation of agreement between US and China on On-China policy over the issue of Taiwan along with its military build-up and alliances may cause a misperception and miscalculation moment leading to war. This will only implicate the Chinese core interests, trade and energy interests but also critically damage the regional stability and security.

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