

Great Power Rivalry in Indo Pacific: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The term of Indo Pacific delineates a conceptual evolution in the US strategic community to contain and encircle China by countering it in the area of its influence. The underlined policy priority is to counter Belt and Road Initiative to contain China. While China's strict adherence to the previous geographical connotation of Asia Pacific establishes that it sticks to its policy of leading world by economic interdependence approach in Asia. This great power competition in the Indo Pacific region has wide ranging strategic and economic implications for Pakistan. This paper aims to discern into the factors which are making the strategic environment tensed thinning out the options for Pakistan. The two basic questions which this study addresses are: a. How does conceptual shift from Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific transform the strategic environment of this region? b. Why is this transformation so significant for Pakistan's geostrategic interests?

Keywords: Indo Pacific, Asia Pacific, QUAD, AUKUS, Indo-US alliance.

Introduction

Geostrategic transformations at the global level implicate the states at different degrees with the magnitude of their regional surroundings. Pakistan happens to be at a strategically determining location which absorbs and ripples a myriad of changes in the regional strategic environment. Pakistan's position in South Asia, connecting it with the Middle East, Central Asia, and a crucially important geographical position in the Indian Ocean, multiplies its opportunities and challenges. This region has been

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significant for global politics always but now the rapidly transforming global dynamics implicate it considerably. Geopolitical and geo-economic shifts have far-reaching impacts. But at the core of this now stands the power competition between China and the US.

Pakistan is not just affected by the regional changes, transformations surrounding it rather also from evolving maritime environment in the Indian Ocean. The most important factor currently at play is contesting relationship of China and the US. China's rapid rise, the US policies to encircle and contain China and efforts to curtail Russia's influence are setting the stage of entire global politics. India is the most important US partner in the policy of containing China. Along with crucially significant defence agreements with the US, India is enjoying the status of 'Net Security Provider' in the Indo-Pacific region. The US-Iran tensed relations always narrowed Pakistan's options to diversify its relations. The US policy of Free and Open Indo Pacific which theoretically upholds the right of all rim states of sovereignty and free navigation and trade actually surrounds China. After the hiatus of ten years the rejuvenation of Quadrilateral Security Agreement (QUAD) between Australia, India, Japan and the US and its further development to the trilateral defence agreement between Australia, UK and US are the plausible manifestations of US's active involvement in Asia. QUAD has a broad spectrum and policy outlook to encircle China and limiting its increasing influence within Asia rather AUKUS is narrowly aimed at military cooperation in the Indian Ocean. On the western end of the Indian Ocean, Israel is another important actor entering into the region through Abraham Accords, the deal through which the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and Sudan recognize the former and established diplomatic relations. The détente of Israel with the Arab world provides it with the opportunity to get involved in the Persian Gulf and confront Iran at the time of its choosing and sustainability.

The regional stability in South Asia is deeply knitted with security of Afghanistan. With the recent takeover of Taliban regime in Afghanistan Pakistan's security is deeply implicated. Currently, Pakistan's all major challenges and opportunities are regional. Its security dilemma with India is multiplying and as latter gets more significance concomitant to Indo-US alliance, former's security apprehensions augment. Similarly, Afghanistan's conundrum has been Pakistan's biggest security challenges which resurges. Pakistan's biggest opportunity lies in the region, too, CPEC. The relation with China is the major strength of foreign policy coming under the shadow

of China-US power competition. In the Indian Ocean Pakistan's stake and involvement increases with Gwadar Port, extended Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The alliances such as QUAD, AUKUS, Abraham Accords, Indo-US strategic partnership and much feared instability in Afghanistan brews a tough environment. This paper aims at analysing these presumably discrete developments but their cumulative implications for Pakistan.

Indo Pacific or Asia Pacific: US-China Power Competition

Indo Pacific is the term now more commonly used to refer to the areas in Asia making the rim of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. This term has geographical connotation more than geopolitical insinuation. For the last seven decades, this term retained its relevance in the context of the US influence in the region but now as the strategic environment changes the conceptual connotations also readjust. Indo Pacific is the term which is used more to refer to this region which implicates that it is not just the region encompassing the confluence of the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean rather alludes to the geostrategic realignment. It plausibly manifests the fast brewing rivalry between the US and China. The US policies of Pivot to Asia and Rebalancing to Asia now have transformed into a clear framework of the encirclement of China. In the official documents of the US-Indo Pacific Policy, it is now presented as the geopolitical and geo economic space central to its interests.¹

Indian Ocean is the hub of mineral wealth and global commercial maritime traffic with its eleven significant choke points. Annually, about 100,000 commercial vessels traverse this water body. The littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region have 35 per cent of global natural gas reserves, around 67 per cent of identified global oil reserves, 40 per cent of gold reserves and 60 per cent of uranium. Additionally, almost 80 per cent of all diamond deposited reserves.²

¹“From Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific Significance: Implementation and Challenges,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, July 9, 2020

² Muhammad Umer Hayat, Syeda Aqsa Sajad and Farrukh Shahzad, “Great Power Play in Indian Ocean: Implications for the Region,” *Global Political Review*, V (IV) (2020): 65-74.

The US approach to reevaluate its position in this region on the basis of its core and enduring interests is manifested in its most recent policy of “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) in 2019. While India was pursuing its policy of “Look East” for two decades which under the Modi government was re-conceptualised into “Act East.”³

According to the Indo Pacific Strategy Report of the US Department of Defence the “Indo Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future.” The US has two-way annual trade of USD 2.3 trillion with this region and its foreign direct investment is USD 1.3 trillion. The US presence in this region is vital to secure the sea trade routes on this part of the world as 60 per cent of GDP comes from this region. The principles of Free and Open Indo Pacific are the respect of sovereignty and independence, peaceful resolution of disputes, and free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements and connectivity. It also encapsulates the idea that adherence to international rules, norms, including those of freedom of navigation and over flights. By the word “free” it is associated that there must be freedom of sovereignty without coercion of other countries and by “open” it entails sustainable growth and connectivity.⁴ This clearly implicates that the freedom and openness this report advocates are from the China’s rise as it is mentioned here that “China’s economic, political and military rise is one of the defining elements of the 21st century.”⁵ China’s capability of Anti access/area denial (A2/AD) capability denying operations around its periphery, militarisation of Sparty Island in 2015, Chinese investment and its negative impacts for host country’s sovereignty, lack of transparency in “One Belt One Road” Initiative, and “Polar Silk Road” near the Arctic since 2018 are of particular concern for the US according to this report. The revitalised role of Russia with the military, economic and diplomatic rejuvenation is a “malign factor” for the US. Russia’s outreach to Asia for energy exports is alarming for the

³ Keynote Address by India’s External Affairs Minister, Salman Khurshid, in *Indo-Pacific Region: Political and Strategic Prospects*, eds., Rajiv K Bhatia and Vijay Sakhuja (New Delhi: Vj Book, 2014): xi–xii.

⁴ “Indo Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting Networked Region,” Department of Defense, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

⁵ “Indo Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting Networked Region.”

US interests in the region. Russia has also claimed for extended continental shelf in the Arctic Region.⁶

The Pacific Command of the US was renamed as the Indo Pacific Command in 2018. Currently this command holds the power of 2,000 aircrafts, 200 ships and submarines and more than 370, 000 soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, Department of Defence civilians and assigned contractors. In order to confront the perceived joint threat of China and Russia the strategy of promoting networked regions is proposed. The focus is also to enjoin the trilateral mechanism among the US, Japan, Republic of Korea, then US, Australia and Japan and US, India, and Japan. It also advocates the promotion and development of regional institutions.⁷

China's apprehensions about the super power involvement in Asia Pacific have been quite unequivocal since the time of Mao Zedong. It believed that the security architecture of the region must not be spoiled by the power games of the two rival super powers i.e. the US and the USSR. After the disintegration of the USSR, the regional security architecture is the outgrowth of the Cold War arrangement which should be altered in favour of the regional stakeholders. China's rise after 2010 and the increasing influence in the region threatens the US interests considerably despite China's defensive posture insinuated through the academic rhetoric emerging out of the strategic community of the country.⁸

China's first defence white paper underlined a limited role for the navy which evolved since then. President Hu Jintao expanded this role in 2004 by charging the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) with safeguarding the national interests and global peace. About 85 per cent of China bound oil passes through the Indian Ocean via the Strait of Malacca.⁹ The next white paper in 2006 underlined extending of the naval operations to deal with the rising security issues and international shipping routes. This role was further

⁶ "Indo Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting Networked Region."

⁷ "Indo Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting Networked Region."

⁸ Zhang Zhixin, "China's Pursuit of a New Asia-a Pacific Security Architecture: Underlying Rationale, Ongoing Actions and Future Prospects," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 1, no. 4 (2015): 573-578.

⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House Trade Paperbacks: September 13, 2011).

increased in the white paper of 2008 which underlined “cooperation in distant water” initiating PLAN’s counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden. The white papers of 2010, 2013 and 2015 sequentially augmented the ambitions to develop the blue water navy.¹⁰ The latest of the series is the white paper issued in 2019, “Chinese National Defense in the New Era,” it considers the Asia-Pacific region as largely stable and highlights the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to enhance cooperation through non-confrontation and non-alliance basis.¹¹ However, this policy considers the installation of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in the Republic of Korea by the US as an act undermining the regional strategic balance and security because through this act of the US is strengthening military alliances in the Asia Pacific. This document explicitly mentions the military outlook of Japan and Australia in the context of the Indian Ocean thus encrypting the Chinese response as “China’s Defensive National Defence in the New Era.”¹²

The US National Security Strategy in 2017 describes the situation in the Indo-Pacific region as the “geopolitical competition between the free and repressive visions of the world order.” The Chinese infrastructure and trade development in the Indo-Pacific, the area from the western coast of Africa to the eastern shores of the US, poses a threat to the US interests. The US counter strategy resorts to the partnerships and the alliances with all the nations in the region which could join it to undermine the Chinese growing influence.¹³ According to the US National Defence Strategy of 2018, China is the strategic competitor. This report declares that the military advantage of the US is eroding and if not addressed adequately it will undermine their ability to deter, “China’s aggression and coercion” which it terms the

¹⁰Joshua T. White, *China’s Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence and Military Advantage*, *China Global: Assessing China’s Growing Role in the World* (Washington: Brookings Institution,2020): 3-4, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf

¹¹ “China’s National Defence in the New Era,” Beijing: State Council of Republic of China, 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html

¹² China’s Defence in the New Era.

¹³ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” The White House, Washington: 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

“revisionist power.”¹⁴ China and Russia are recognised to be the basic and defining elements of the US rebalancing strategies. The Indo Pacific is deterministically important in this wake. The future posture required in Indo Pacific is proposed to achieve the strategic objective through evolving posture and balancing the key capabilities in South Asia, South East Asia and Oceania.

The US never had this much interest in the Indian Ocean as it had in the Pacific Ocean. It inherited the position and involvement after the withdrawal of the Great Britain from the Suez Canal in 1967. Later this involvement increased with oil crisis in the 1970s and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In 2011, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s proposal of naming this region as “Indo-Pacific” plausibly explains the US strategic preoccupation with the Pacific and the protection of the interests in it, too. The US had been dealing with the Indian Ocean through CENTCOM and PACOM dividing it under these two.¹⁵

QUAD

The approach of containing China gave new life and blood to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) after the hiatus of ten years. The ideas of FOIP and QUAD were conceived by the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe. He presented the idea of FOIP as its concerns of China’s aggressive connectivity across continents through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) enhanced. He believes that this region needs open and free navigation amid good governance ensured through an alliance with Australia, India, and the US; the states sharing the core interest to counter China’s rise. Shinzo Abe reinvigorated the idea in 2012 in “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond.” In 2007, he gave the idea of FOIP while speaking in Indian Parliament that the peace, stability and freedom of navigation in Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean were inseparable. Japan as

¹⁴ Summary of National Defence Strategy of the United States of America Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge, 2018, Department of Defence, 2-4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

¹⁵ Deepa M. Ollapally, “The United States and the Indian Ocean: Power Shifts and Uncertain Leadership, in Maritime Governance and South Asia,” in *Maritime Security and South Asia: Trade, Security Sustainable Development in the Indian Ocean*, ed., Jivanta Schottli (New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing, 2018), 99-105.

one of the oldest sea-faring democracies was in position to play more important role.¹⁶ Japan's major concern was the dispute with China in South China Sea at that time which according to Shinzo Abe that China was making into "Lake Beijing."¹⁷ QUAD after rejuvenation in its first summit level dialogue in February, 2021 also now clearly shows the same idea behind its objectives as of FOIP.¹⁸ The group of four nations which formed in 2004 to steer rescue and rehabilitation work in wake of Tsunami has merged to be an alliance with increasing military outlook.

The recent developments further complicate the strategic environment of this region. QUAD is emerging to be a stronger quadrilateral alliance with plausible outlook. The first ever in-person summit meeting of Australia, India, Japan, and the US was held in White House on September 24, 2021. President Biden hosted these leaders on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting. Though the focal points of the meeting were to disseminate Covid-19 vaccine and infrastructure development on the basis of G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) agenda¹⁹ yet it clearly manifested the design to dominate Asia and challenge China's acceptance across the continent. This followed the US's complete withdrawal from Afghanistan and takeover of Taliban of almost entire Afghanistan's territory which has produced another question of regional security and stability in the region.

AUKUS

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America Security Pact (AUKUS) announced by the heads of government of three states is a security alliance sharply transforming strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific. Through this pact Australia will be provided with nuclear propelled submarines. The agreement cements the US security alliances in the region

¹⁶ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," Project Syndicate, December 27, 2012, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe?barrier=accesspaylog>

¹⁷ Shinzo Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond."

¹⁸ From Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific Significance, Implementation and Challenges, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Research paper 9 (July 2020) Berlin, 16.

¹⁹ Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit, Briefing Room The White House, September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>

competing China.²⁰ For Australia, it is the strategic arrangement it could have sought in generations. Australia cancelled the diesel propelled submarines deal with France it signed in 2016. Undoubtedly, this pact provides a direct front against China in South China Sea as it creates considerable strategic and military advantage. It is the first time after the UK that the US is sharing its nuclear technology with any ally. One major implication is also that France considered it “stab in the back” on the cancellation of the submarine deal.²¹ France can be considered as one of the basic actors in the region as it holds large territories in the Oceania. It’s strong military and economic ties with India and Japan and its Indo-Pacific policy highlighting its aim to remain an active actor in the region insinuates towards another alliance to rival China. In September 2020, France inaugurated the “Paris-Delhi-Canberra Axis”; an effort seems to adjust into an arrangement like QUAD.²²

Indo-US Alliance

The US conceptualisation of this region had been confined to “Asia Pacific” until 2011, though then Foreign Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton used the term “Indo-Pacific” in 2010. US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates had pronounced the notion of ‘net security provider’ for India in 2009 at Shangri-La Dialogue. The conceptual underpinning in the US administration evolved to rename this region as “Indo-Asia-Pacific” to finally “Indo-Pacific” in 2017 as the earlier geographical term “Asia Pacific” did not converge with the US strategic objectives here. Until then the foreign policy orientation of the Obama administration in Asia remained “Rebalancing Asia.” In 2017, President Trump finally altered the conceptual geographical term to “Indo Pacific” contextualising it with India.²³ This term not only delineates the geostrategic adjustment of the US in the Indian Oceana and Pacific Ocean giving India elevated position. Rather it insinuates that Asia is now considered from the lens i.e. India.

²⁰ Louisiana Brooke Holland, John Curtis and Claire Mills, “The AUKUS Agreement,” House of Commons Library, October 11, 2021, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9335/CBP-9335.pdf>

²¹ The AUKUS Agreement,” House of Commons Library, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9335/CBP-9335.pdf>

²² Cleo Paskal, “Indo Pacific Strategies, Perceptions and Partnerships: A View from Seven Countries,” Chatham House, March 2021.

²³ Axel Berkofsky, Sergio Miracola and Paolo Magri, eds., “Geopolitical by Other Means: The Indo Pacific Reality,” Report, ISPI, 2019, , 24-26.

The interests of the US and India converge greatly now in the Indian Ocean in the context of the rise of China.²⁴ The US and India just signed a pact in October 2020 to share sensitive satellite and map data on accounts of the perceived threat posed by China. The strategic dialogue took place in New Delhi where the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper arrived to sign the pact; Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) and to discuss “the threat China posed to their security and freedom.” The pact will enable India to have access to a range of topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data vital for targeting of missiles and drones.²⁵ This agreement is the second of the three foundational agreements the US has with various countries with which it has close military ties. The foundational agreements enable the signing states to build the basic groundwork and promote interoperability between militaries through common standards and systems. In 2016, the US and India signed the foundational agreement; Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA) after a decade of negotiations. This agreement enabled India to access the string of the US military facilities around the globe and the US would in return benefit from the Indian facilities as being the biggest player in the Asia-Pacific.²⁶ The second of the series, Communication Capability and Security Agreement, was signed in 2018.²⁷ Dr. Khurana, the Executive Director of National Maritime Foundation of India, commented after the signing of LEMOA that the agreement was fructified with India at a crucial geopolitical and strategic environment in Asia where the Indo-US interests converged most though the proposal was floated in 2002. In 2002, India and the US entered into an agreement according to which India would provide naval escort to the high value US ships travelling through the Straits of Malacca.²⁸

²⁴ Author’s interview with Shahid Kayani, Former Ambassador of Pakistan, on October 22, 2020 (via telephonic communication.)

²⁵ Neha Arora and Sanjeev Miglani, “US Warns of Threat Posed by China, Signs Military Pact with India,” *Reuters*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-asia-india-idUSKBN27C00F>

²⁶ Dinakar Peri, “What Is Lemoa?,” *Hindu*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/What-is-LEMOA/article15604647.ece>

²⁷ Snehes Alex Philip, “The Three Foundational Agreements with US and What They Mean for India’s Military Growth,” *The Print*, October 27, 2020 <https://theprint.in/defence/the-3-foundational-agreements-with-us-and-what-they-mean-for-indias-military-growth/531795/>

²⁸ Gurpreet S. Khurana, “Indo-US Logistics Agreement LEMOA: An Assessment,” *Maritime Foundation*, September, 2016, <https://www.maritimeindia.org/View%20Profile/636089093519640938.pdf>

India developed quite fast economically and surpassed France in becoming the sixth largest economy and has started asserting itself in the region and beyond.²⁹ India has 7,500 KM coastline³⁰ and is deeply in the Indian Ocean as a large part of its territory makes a rim in the Indian Ocean. India's hegemonic ambition in the region directly aims at containing the Chinese rise and threatens Pakistan's strategic and economic stability in the Indian Ocean Region. India has developed 12 major ports and 200 minor ports. It has started a plan to double its maritime capability, the name of the project is Sagarmala.³¹ The US is actively supporting and facilitating the Indian hegemonic and aggressive role in the region against China. During a briefing on the Indo-Pacific strategy, Alex N. Wong the US Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs stated that actually 'India's weighty play of politics was in the best interest of the region and the US as India was a nation invested in the free order.'³² The US has given India the status of "Net Security Provider" in the Indian Ocean. This term is the umbrella term which describes the most important strategic role India has been delegated with under the US plan to influence the region and encircle China. The term implies that India is in position to ensure its security and rather provide security to the states of Indian Ocean Region and also enhance their capability and capacity through capacity building, military diplomacy, military assistance, and direct deployment as a responsible strategic actor.³³

India categorically rejected CPEC due to the reason that it is passing through the allegedly disputed territory of Gilgit Baltistan which it considers to be a part of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region.³⁴ India's move to

²⁹ "India Muscles Past France to Become World's Sixth Biggest Economy," *News 18*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/business/india-muscles-past-france-to-become-worlds-sixth-biggest-economy-1807957.html>

³⁰ "Length of Indian Coastline," *Statista*, 2019,

<http://www.statista.com/statista734258/lenght-of-coastline-by-state-India>

³¹ Ministry of Shipping, "Sagarmala: Concept and Objectives," Government of India, 2018, <http://sagarmala.gov.in/about-sagarmala/vision-objectives>

³² US Department of State, "Briefing on the Indo-Pacific Strategy by Alex N Wong, US Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs," US Department of State, April 2, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280134.htm>

³³ Suffian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, "India as a Net Security Provider in the Indo Pacific and Implications for the Region," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*, vol. 4 (1) (2021):26-39.

³⁴ Prabash K. Dutta, "Beyond Kashmir: Status of Gilgit-Baltistan Is a Case in Contrast," *India Today*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news->

revoke Article 370 regarding the disputed Jammu and Kashmir territory and declaring the Ladakh region as part of the union, in spite of the fact China had claim on it clearly delineates its efforts to restrain China and Pakistan from CPEC. This territorial move has direct impact on the security of Indian Ocean.

From the security perspective, India's nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean following the completion of the operational deployment of INS Arihant: an SSBN (Ballistic Missile Armed Nuclear Submarine) clear danger to the strategic stability in the Indian Ocean region. In fact, India's Indian Ocean policy under Modi has seen a major shift. It is far more aggressive and proactive than at any other time in the country's history. India has established a lot of surveillance and monitoring centres on the islands in the Indian Ocean. Arihant is the first step in India's plan to deploy five SSBNs in the Indian Ocean in the coming half century. These are meant to monitor important sea lanes of communication in the region creating a serious deterrence to Islamabad in favor of New Delhi.³⁵ New Delhi has also set up a naval base at Duqm (Oman) which will provide her easy access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This naval base will also provide repair and logistic support to the military.³⁶ India also signed strategic agreements like LEMOA which will provide Indian navy (along with the US navy) far more flexibility to conduct operations in the Indian Ocean as compared to its previous capacity. Under Modi, India has bolstered ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE whose navies were the traditional partners of Pakistan/Pakistan navy. Indian navy plans to have a fleet of 200 warships by 2027 duly centered around three aircraft carriers and a number of SSBNs (nuclear submarines). This poses significant challenge to the security interests of Pakistan.³⁷

analysis/story/beyond-kashmir-status-of-gilgit-baltistan-is-a-case-in-contrast-1580373-2019-08-13

³⁵ Yasir Hussain, "Arihant and Deterrence Stability: Why Pakistan Needs to Strengthen Its Sea-Based Deterrent," *Pakistan Politico*, December 12, 2018, <http://pakistanpolitico.com/arihant-and-deterrence-stability-why-pakistan-needs-to-strengthen-its-sea-based-deterrent/>

³⁶ Muhammad Abbas Hassan, "Indian Access to Chabahar and Duqm, Challenges for Pakistan," Issue Brief, Institute of Strategic Studies, March 16, 2018, <http://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-indian-access-to-chabahar-and-duqm-challenges-for-pakistan/>

³⁷ Author's interview with Commander (R) Azam Khan, Senior Research Fellow Naval War College of Pakistan, Lahore, October 18, 2020 (via email).

Various experts are of the opinion that currently the Indian Ocean is the most militarized water body as the centre of gravity of the global politics has shifted from Europe to the Asia Pacific. Though the signs are that the rise of China will be collaborative and peaceful as China wants a peaceful rise, yet the US defence policy now categorically mentions that China is a threat and also there is a contest between the regionalism and nationalism. The US also wants to engage China militarily as the military industrial complex requires such contestation. The permanent presence of the extra regional forces is also a major challenge. Though Indian Ocean is controlled by the eleven choke points, but the absence of regional security mechanism further complicates the situation.³⁸ The pace of the Chinese rise is actually alarming for the West in particular for the US.³⁹

The current maritime environment can best be described as volatile, disruptive and unpredictable. On the one hand, the US and India are increasing strategic naval and military cooperation as well as signing the ominous bilateral agreements like LEMOA, on the other hand is the US-Iran rivalry and an unraveling the Middle East. Geopolitical realignments are too underway. To compound the matters, China is entering the Indian Ocean in a big way. Apart from CPEC, China has recently signed multibillion dollar agreements with Iran involving long term infrastructure development and oil facilities in return. Tehran has meanwhile expelled India from Chahbahar project. There is also a contest for influence over Islands in the Indian Ocean besides efforts by various powers to establish bases in littoral states. Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Djibouti, Duqm (Oman) are few that are in spotlight. The factor of buildup of naval forces from regional and extra-regional powers amidst military nuclearization cannot be ignored either.⁴⁰

India's strategic partnership with Iran and its logistic and infrastructural involvement in the construction and development of Chabahar Port was aimed at checking China's trade through CPEC. India

³⁸ Author's interview with Admiral (R) Hisham Bin Siddiqui, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Head Islamabad Policy Research Institute, October 16, 2020, Islamabad (in person).

³⁹ Author's interview with Naghmana Hashmi, Former Ambassador of Pakistan to China, October 16, 2020, (Islamabad) and Author's interview with Shahid Kayani, Former Diplomat of Pakistan, October 23, 2020 (via Telephonic communication).

⁴⁰ Author's interview with Commander (R) Azam Khan, Senior Research Fellow Naval War College of Pakistan, Lahore, October 18, 2020 (via email).

is one of the leading buyers of the Iranian oil through Chahbahar Port, but it wanted to develop a link to Central Asia was widely dependent on the security situation in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Iran could not capitalise on its strategic partnership with India because of its economy is under sanctions. However, India was outmaneuvered recently by China-Iran Strategic partnership agreement for 25 years. The salient feature of this agreement is that both China and Iran agreed to cooperate against the US containment efforts and the attempts at damaging Iranian theocratic regime through economic sanctions.⁴²

India is also increasing its presence and maritime interests in the East Asia as it signed an agreement with Indonesia to acquire the strategic port of Sabang as the latter is also looking for the naval choke point like the Malacca Strait. Indonesia is also looking for options to escape the Belt and Road Initiative. India is also eyeing the rim of Africa in the Indian Ocean. In 2017, it announced Asia-Africa growth Corridor with Japan. This corridor will presumably be developed at a cost of USD 40 billion to enable the African countries to develop infrastructure and human resource. This project aims at targeting the Chinese investment in Africa. This may also enable India and Japan to use rich uranium resources in Africa for their nuclear needs. In the United Nations General Assembly, Africa has 54 votes which can enable India to play assertively in the UN. This investment will give India also an excuse to establish military presence in Africa and keep a check on Bab el Mandeb.⁴³ India also had tried to acquire two islands in Seychelles under its policy: Security of Growth for All in Region (SAGAR).⁴⁴ The deal fell apart as the very shocking details of the agreement surfaced on the internet.⁴⁵ India established its listening post in

⁴¹ Hassan, "Indian Access to Chabahar and Duqm, Challenges for Pakistan."

⁴² Alam Saleh and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, "Iran's Pact with China Is Bad News for the West," *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/09/irans-pact-with-china-is-bad-news-for-the-west/>

⁴³ Devirupa Mitra, "Details of Top-Secret India-Seychelles Military Agreement Leaked Online," *The Wire*, March 08, 2018, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/in-embarrassing-leak-details-of-top-secret-india-seychelles-military-agreement-made-public>

⁴⁴ Sushma Swaraj, "Sagar — India's Vision for the Indian Ocean Region," India Foundation, 2016, <https://www.indiafoundation.in/sagar-indias-vision-for-the-indianocean-region/>

⁴⁵ Mitra, "Details of Top-Secret India-Seychelles Military Agreement Leaked Online," <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/in-embarrassing-leak-details-of-top-secret-india-seychelles-military-agreement-made-public>

Madagascar which is serving as the early reconnaissance system providing India with the maritime traffic updates in Africa⁴⁶.

Abraham Accords

Abraham Accord: between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and UAE is a recent development in the region which may not only affect in the short term but can have significant long term implications if it transforms in to a military engagement⁴⁷ as it would bring Israel right on the other end of the Strait of Hormuz. From August to October, 2020 Israel signed these deals with the above mentioned four countries. Still the bilateral cooperation rests on cultural and economic relations which can enhance to other important states in the Middle East which would implicate the strategic environment significantly as Iran will not be much tolerant to such developments if these engagements turn to the point where strategic blockage of Strait of Hormuz would be possible. Same threat extends to Pakistan. These developments further entangle Pakistan and Iran with China, and Russia for strategic interests in the broader Indo Pacific.

Israel has the adequate capability to become a direct actor in the Indian Ocean and the sufficient support of allies, too, i.e. the US, India and now the Arab countries. Iran-Israel rivalry was already a major factor in the security and political dynamics of the Middle East which has now extended to South Asia. In case of any military standoff or tensions between Iran and Israel in Strait of Hormuz or nearby, Pakistan has direct as its major engagement in the Indian Ocean remains Gwadar Port and sea lines of communication traversing its coastal line. Pakistan's primary and fundamental threat, India also converges here as having already deep strategic, military and economic relations and technology partnership with Israel which now has plausible tendency to increase in wake of renewed Indo-US alliance. Recently, Israeli Foreign Minister hinted at Free Trade Agreement between India and Israel

⁴⁶ "India Activates First Listening Post on Foreign Soil: Radars in Madagascar," *Indian Express*, July 18, 2007,

<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/indiaactivates-first-listening-post-on-foreign-soil-radars-in-madagascar/205416/>

⁴⁷ Patsy Widakuswara, "How the Abraham Accord might Impact the Middle East," *Voice of America*, August 1, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/how-abraham-accord-might-impact-middle-east>

which they aim to finalise by mid-2022.⁴⁸ The US already holds most powerful position in Indian Ocean too as the headquarter of the Fifth Fleet is in Bahrain. Furthermore, the US led Counter terrorism Maritime Task forces are in this region which will provide potential support and security to Israel if it considers entering into this region directly.

Afghanistan — A Renewed Conundrum

For at least one hundred years Afghanistan is theatre of conflict and instability. It was the buffer zone during the classical great game between the Great Britain and Russia. Later it became the decisive battleground of the Cold War but led to much regional instability. Since 9/11, the US and NATO troops had established a temporary system to control chaos. But the abrupt withdrawal of the US now in 2021 without reaching a comprehensive power sharing agreement with the stakeholders led to the speedy take over of Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Taliban government and control over Afghanistan raises various questions of international concern on the international acceptance of the regime. There are various legal and political questions which until resolved will not open the way for Afghanistan's development. In this situation there is heightened fear of humanitarian crisis. Afghanistan's 40 per cent GDP comes from foreign aid which makes it aid dependent and with stoppage of it the economy is approaching terrible catastrophe. World Food Program warned in September, 2021 that only 5 per cent of the families had sufficient food.⁴⁹ Any such crisis increases the likelihood of terrorism. The global community is already wary of the presence of Daesh elements in Afghanistan⁵⁰ which may get bold in absence of international support of the regime.

⁴⁸ "India, Israel to Start Talks on Free Trade Agreement Next Month," October 19, 2021, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/india-israel-start-talks-free-trade-agreement-next-month-2021-10-18/>

⁴⁹ "Afghanistan Facing Desperate Food Crisis, UN Warns," *BBC News*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59011501>

⁵⁰ "UN Warns of Expanding Threat from Deash and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan," July 25, 2021, *Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/un-warns-of-expanding-threat-from-daesh-al-qaeda-in-afghanistan/articleshow/84731386.cms>

This evolving situation involves China, Central Asian Republics, Pakistan and Russia as direct stakeholders of this scenario. The US-China competition in Indo-Pacific may replicate in this conflict zone too. China requires amicable situation in Afghanistan because of the threat it may pose to BRI and prospects of Afghanistan chaos affecting the security situation in Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Russia, too, requires stable environment in this region as its interests here are increasing. This region provides a strong potential energy and trade market for Russia via Afghanistan.

The interim government of Taliban is Pashtun dominant which has not widened to other ethnic groups yet. Majorly all leading members of Taliban cabinet are still on US's terrorist list which hinders further the chances of cooperation.⁵¹ However, the regime has been successful in harboring diplomatic relations with China, Pakistan, and Russia. The interdependence of security makes these states vulnerable towards each other's security environment. Pakistan's focus on Afghanistan depended on its concern against Indian involvement with the former since its inception. The current regime at least favours Pakistan's security interests in Afghanistan against India. The other major challenge Pakistan faces is of terrorism by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan on which the Afghan Taliban has the capacity to exert influence to reach at peace with Pakistan.

Implications for Pakistan

South Asia is one of the largest growing regions in the world but least integrated and one of the least developed. Inhabiting almost a quarter of the global population it also hosts a myriad of traditional and nontraditional threats making the strategic environment highly ambiguous, vulnerable, and complex. A gamut of traditional threats and concomitant struggle for balance of power, and highly volatile surrounding environment penetrating into the region as to the porous nature of the regional structure have wide ranging implications for Pakistan, the regional power. The security dependence of Pakistan on various regional and extra regional factors is its major challenge.

Pakistan happens to be at the strategic choke point of various regions and at one of the very important locations of the Indo Pacific. Its major

⁵¹ "The Taliban in Afghanistan" Council on Foreign Relations, September 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>

interest in the Indian Ocean lies along the coastline where the SLOCs traverse which is imperative for the global oil trade. Pakistan's another interest is its EEZ which is now 290,000 square kilometers after the extension. Pakistan's maritime border with India is still undecided which is its security concern. Beyond that though Pakistan has not developed any direct stake in the Indo Pacific, yet the broader maritime environment implicates the strategic environment of South Asia. Pakistan thus is most affected by this transforming strategic competition between the US and China. Pakistan is the undoubtedly significant state of BRI due CPEC; flagship project connecting SLOCs of Indo pacific (Road) with the roads and railway networks (Belt). US's policy of competing China in this region and containing its increasing impact through the connectivity BRI is creating in Asia. As India's status is elevated by the US in the region as its closest ally, China's rival and net security provider, Pakistan's strategic challenges multiply. India's important role in Quad make is strategically bold further. Though this quadrilateral alliance apparently focuses on soft power, to influence entire Asia in order to dispel the augmenting effect of Chinese rise but has now military outlook too. After the first summit level meeting of QUAD member countries in March 2021, Australia joined the Malabar naval exercises led by India in the Bay of Bengal. The trend of militarisation in Indo pacific is further elevated by the AUKUS agreement which will provide Australia with nuclear submarines. In wake of this increasing, the Indo US alliance directly counters Pakistan's strategic and economic interests with China through CPEC. Unequivocally, the developments during 2020 and 2021 trigger a tensed environment in Indo Pacific which is also cultivating territorial implications. The US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan without a strongly supported power sharing agreement and freezing of Afghan financial assets of USD 9.5 billion to pressurize Taliban regime leaves a huge security vacuum. Pakistan's stake in Afghanistan lies in its territorial proximity with border issues, social and cultural linkages which also may support Pakistan's looming threat of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan if Da'esh or Al Qaeda elements reinforce there. This security vacuum will have strategic threats for BRI putting pressure on CPEC which Pakistan cannot afford to hinder. Additionally, any tension between the US and Iran or after the Abraham Accords between Israel and Iran, will directly affect the northern Arabian Sea which is the area of maximum interest of Pakistan. This entire situation requires that Pakistan's foreign policy must focus on a separate policy for Indo Pacific to address all these rapidly transforming realities. In case of China's encirclement by the

US and allies Pakistan at least provides a quick alternative route for Chinese oil imports from Iran. This reality further brings Pakistan on the forefront in this picture of great power competition.

Conclusion

The dawn of twenty first century proved to be a geo political upheaval. The turning point of 9/11 diverted the super power axis towards the East. Though the Asia Pacific was significantly focused throughout the twentieth century yet the new geo strategic goals set a new direction. The region which was important because of strategic interests around the confluence of Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean became more important with the oil trade through the region. But the rapidly changing realities and great power competition has elevated this to be the most significant and part of the world. The conceptual transformation from Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific is not just an academic approach in evolution rather it delineates the geo strategic interests of this century which is at the base of evolution of the maritime environment in the Indian Ocean. The unipolar world after the demise of Soviet Union is being challenged by the rise of China which certainly is transforming into a multi polar world. Indo Pacific now denotes the strategic interests of the US in the region with the primary objective of competing China. The structural evolution puts Australia, India and Japan very close to the US interests in the form of rejuvenated QUAD, creation of AUKUS and Indo US strategic alliance aim at encircling China. The same structural approach triggers an evolving geo strategic engagement among China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia which needs to be given a policy approach. Though the strategic outlook is the prominent feature yet the geo economy in the region is the bedrock of this transforming strategic environment in the region determining the future course of global politics. In wake of this discussion formulation on Indo Pacific and its implications for Pakistan the author recommends few policy options which are as follows: a.) Pakistan requires formulation of an independent Indian Ocean Policy apart from the National Maritime policy with focus on its strategic interests and foreign policy options in Indian Ocean as now the strategic environment of the Northern Arabian Sea is more tightly dependent on the entire Indo Pacific region. b.) Pakistan should reconsider its geo economic engagements with China, Central Asian Republics, Iran, Russia, and Turkey and augment its trade relations to cement strategic

interests with these nations. c.) The diversification of foreign policy options and trade ties with regional countries will enable Pakistan to balance the relationship pressure it has to bear from the US. Then Pakistan can reconsider its ties with the US on balanced approach on long term basis.