

US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Implications for South Asia

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Abstract

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ was first coined by the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, in his speech delivered to the Indian parliament in 2007 which was later adopted by the US as a strategic vision in the last phase of Obama’s tenure. In the past few years, Indo-Pacific has become part of the US strategic policy and it is characterised as a ‘priority theatre.’ The Trump administration repeatedly described it as a single, geostrategic region in which the rising powers will play and compete to gain supremacy in the geostrategic and the geo-maritime arena. The rise of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) has come in time of an increasingly complex geo-economics and geostrategic security environment. More so, it showcases the US’ reliance on regional and extra-regional countries in the form of allies, the Quad countries, as well as regional countries such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal to tackle shared challenges in the area. The following paper will explicate the aims and objectives of the US’ IPS and its central policy overtures towards South Asia. It will also study the implications (strategic and political) of this policy and its stern posturing in the region, especially towards Pakistan.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Strategy, Pakistan, South Asia, ASEAN, US, India.

Introduction

With both strategic and economic considerations of the Indian Ocean (IO) and the Pacific intertwined, a strategic geographic construct has been dubbed the “Indo-Pacific” (IP) region.¹ In recent years, the IP has

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¹ Mohan Malik, ed., *Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from China, India, and the United States* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 15.

acquired an economic and a strategic undertone and has become the arena of the next Great Game for global and regional powers such as the US, China, Japan and India.²

The US at the moment is the most powerful country present in the Indo-Pacific region as it constitutes a massive military presence, of air and sea facilities as well as communication outposts in the region.³ The Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) reflects an increase in attention in the Indian Ocean region as the region is increasingly becoming the centre for all geo-strategic exchange as it elevates maritime significance in the strategic discourse. It also highlights a growing interplay between geopolitics, geo-strategy, geo-economics and geo-energy. Its importance can be identified through several statements by President Trump and senior administration officials as well as documents such as the National Security Strategy (NSS) document,⁴ National Defense Strategy (NDS)⁵ and the Indo-Pacific strategy report.⁶

The US and China factor is critical in the region as both seek to exercise their respective influence and power in both the Pacific and the IO regions.⁷ However, the element important in the IP theatre will be the ability of the two powers to establish and exercise a mutually acceptable role to maintain a power balance in the region or simmer a new conflict in the region. The questions that the paper will seek to address and debate upon are that whether the IPS will become a hedge against China as both China and the US remain at a loggerhead due to trade war. Another important question that the paper will seek to address is whether the IPS will bring a drastic change in South Asia as the US strategically

² Ibid.

³ Randall Doyle, *The Geopolitical Power Shift in the Indo-Pacific Region: America, Australia, China and Triangular Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington Books December 11, 2013),11.

⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, The White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁵ US Department of Defence, *National Defense Strategy*, Department of Defense, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

⁶ US Department of Defence, *Indp-Pacific Strategy Report; Preparedness Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region*, Department of Defense, June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

⁷ Doyle, "The Geopolitical Power Shift,"11.

empowers India to curtail China. The paper will also look into the reasons for which Pakistan has failed to recognise the gravity as well the alarming nature of the security and strategic game in the Indo-Pacific and acknowledging it as a future national security threat.

Theoretical Framework

Realism as a school of thought carries a dominant approach in International Relations. Regardless of its complex nature, richness and forms, it remains associated and committed to the identities and realities in the world in kinship with the productivity of self-interests and power. Morgenthau's thought of international politics dismisses the idealist and utopian school of thought that believes in the application of 'universally valid abstract principles' and the rationale of moral political order. In contrast, he defends the case for 'political realism' and scout international politics through the prism of forces inherent in human nature.

The paper will develop its rationale with the help of the concept and theory of 'realpolitik' and 'power' instituted by the work of Morgenthau. Morgenthau is considered among the founding figures in the realm of International Relations (IR) as his writing continues to influence the contemporary understanding of international politics. His vision of realism in foreign policy highlights the relevance of a country's foreign policy in conjecture with its national interest and the changing world environment. In his book, *Politics among Nations*, Morgenthau elaborates on the framework of foreign policy and national interest. He argues that the entire political domination originates from what Morgenthau refers to as *the animus dominandi*, a desire for power with no limits, an element that is part of human nature.

Morgenthau's work emphasises the quest for power and authority while categorising the rationality of this pursuit as a norm. He identifies political realism as an important aspect of international politics that has elements of both completion and conflict running side by side. It is in contrast to idealism or liberalism which emphasise cooperation. He regards realism as a useful tool for devising policies in international relations.

There are two main pillars of Morgenthau's political realism, first, that there should always be a permanence of nations' self-interest and the

struggle for power. In his book *Struggle with Power: The Theory of Power Politics*, Morgenthau asserts that international politics, like any politics, is a struggle for power. The bedrock of Morgenthau's realist theory is the concept of power, "interest defined in terms of power" which lays the foundation of his second principle: that political leaders and statesmen "think and act in terms of interest defined as power." A rational foreign policy according to Morgenthau is a process of calculating the costs and benefits of all policies to determine their relative utility and its ability to maximise power.

US Indo-Pacific Strategy

The IP, in recent years, has become the most prominent and consequential region for the US and its strategic, economic and security calculus. The concept of the IP came into parlance in more recent years in the US. The significant shift from the Asia pivot to the Indo Pacific came in the US administrations during the second tenure of President Barack Obama. The term AF-Pak championed by the Obama administration became redundant by the end of his term as Indo-Pacific got prominence within the strategic arena for the US. The birth of the term "Indo-Pacific" came with the growing influence of China across the globe which the US started to see as a threat and challenge to its global position.

Hillary Clinton in her article published in November 2011 highlighted the importance of the Indo-Pacific, calling it the key driver of global politics and the next arena of the US' interest and investment.⁸ The article highlighted the new change in the US strategic thinking towards the Pacific. The stretch of water from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific runs through the busiest and vibrant energy and trade corridors. Unlike the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is home to four of six maritime chokepoints, the Mozambique Channel, Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Malacca.⁹ The US in its effort to ensure its sovereignty in the South China Sea and to curtail the expansion of China has joined hands with nations like Australia, India, Japan and South Korea. For US, the main objective of such a strategy is to bolster strategic and economic partnership to limit China's flexing.

⁸ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/#>

⁹ Malik, "Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific," 12.

In 2017, President Trump announced America's vision for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' at the APEC Summit in Vietnam and ensured its commitment to a free as well as safe and secure region that benefits all nations.¹⁰ The US' NSS and the NDS documents articulate Washington's vision to not only win in the IP region but to also compete and deter its adversaries. To achieve this goal the Trump administration set out a vision that required a combined effort of joint forces with the support of US' allies in the region. Similarly, to compliment the dominance through force, the US decided to increase its investments in the region with the help of its allies which in return ensured an approved a balance of power in the IP and further helped sustain the US' influence in the region.

For the past few years, the US has been remained proactive with its engagement in the Indo-Pacific with a massive US\$1.9 trillion in two-way trade.¹¹ In its strategic documents, Washington has repeatedly referred to the IP as 'free' and 'open' from any single power and a region in which all nations can exercise their sovereignty.¹² In 2018, the then Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, in his remarks during the Shangri-La Dialogue stated that the Indo-Pacific offers strategic partnerships, as the US is committed to maintaining the region's security, stability and economic prosperity.¹³

The values that the US plans to champion under the strategy include: independence and sovereignty for all the nations, resolution of disputes through peaceful means; free and fair trade, investment and connectivity, observance of international law and freedom of navigation plus over-flight.¹⁴ While the strategy talks about 'free' and 'openness' in the region, its language and posture boldly criticise China's ambitions in the region. The strategy paper calls China a 'Revisionist Power' which is trying to assert itself to achieve 'more expansive political, security and economic

¹⁰ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report."

¹¹ US Department of State, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific; Advancing a Shared Vision*, US Department of State, November 4, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision/>

¹² "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report."

¹³ Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, June 2, 2018, US Department of Defense, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>

¹⁴ "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

interests.¹⁵ Other components of the strategy include; multilateral engagements, bilateral partnerships, economic prosperity, infrastructure, energy, digital economy, human development, governance, peace and prosperity. The Indo-Pacific is a critical building block for the emergence of a new kind of geopolitical reality that is meant to curtail and overshadow China's growing role and influence across the globe.

In September 2019, the US held its first ministerial meeting with Australia, Japan and India, at the Quadrilateral Consultations later known as the Quad group.¹⁶ The Indo-Pacific vision laid down by the US aligns closely with the Quad's policy on the Indo-Pacific region, for example, Act East Policy by India, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, Australia's Indo-Pacific, Taiwan's New Southbound Policy and South Korea's New Southern Policy.

The Quad relies on a matrix of trilateral and bilateral relationships; it has convened more than three trilateral and six bilateral strategic dialogues and numerous military engagements and working groups at the ministerial level.¹⁷ Besides collective Quad consultations and engagements, the US is proactively involved at a bilateral level with the Quad countries to preserve its interests in the Indo-Pacific. Washington is separately involved with Japan, Korea, India, Taiwan and Australia to strengthen its hold and dominance not only in the region as a whole but also to retain its preeminent position as a military partner of choice in each of the Quad countries.

Similarly, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is situated at the geographical centre of the US' IPS; hence it maintains an important gravity for the success of the US's policy. 2018 witnessed US\$271 billion worth of US investments in ASEAN, as it remained one of the top destinations of the US investments in the Indo-Pacific region, more than the US's FDI in Japan and China combined.¹⁸

¹⁵ "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report."

¹⁶ "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

¹⁷ Dhruva Jaishankar, "The Real Significance of the Quad," *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Partnership Institute, October 24, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-real-significance-of-the-quad/>

¹⁸ "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

Implications for South Asia

While the construct of the IPS has increased the strategic importance and influence of South Asia in the global geo-economics and geo-politics, it has at the same time, deepened the imbalance of security, as well as strategic and power calculus in the region. The application of the strategy and its outlook, at the very outset, has given rise to the imbalance of power in South Asia as India remains hand in glove with the US's strategic ambitions. India in recent years has become a key player in the application of the US's security interests not just in South Asia but also in the IP region. It has laid the foundation of a power struggle in the already fragile balance of power in the region. Different countries now enjoy different strategic importance with regards to the strategies laid down by the US and China separately — two competing powers in the Indo-Pacific. This imbalance is giving rise to obstacles and increased restriction in regional cooperation and more so, the formation of any kind of regional cooperation in South Asia. There is no denying that the race for strategic superiority by the US in the Indo-Pacific is tearing down the strategic fabric in South Asia which is home to two nuclear power states.

Keeping in mind the theoretical framework discussed above, to maintain dominance and its power in the IP the US has stepped up its engagement in the region and its operations in the South China Sea. It has engaged the three biggest economies in Indo-Pacific — India, Australia and Japan through quadrilateral consultations, to achieve its objective as stated in the IP strategy document. While Washington's posture states a collective strategic, economic and political endeavour of the countries involved, and a promising strategic, maritime cooperation, the Quad has yet to show any deep inclination to form a military alliance against nations that primarily challenge US's dominance. A lot of ambiguity rests with the countries involved, as many, including the Quad, has not defined a fine policy guideline or a document like the US.

China is already establishing its maritime territory in the South and East China Seas. Its concurrent rise and rapidly changing dynamics of the region has made the construct of the Quad, for the US even more important. China's decision to stand up is being felt globally, especially by the US as it considers the region to be a major geopolitical factor in determining its rise and dominance. Beijing, on the other hand, has embarked upon not just a

physical construct, but a mental construct to challenge the US hegemony. It has deployed means to overcome state-on-state confrontation and geostrategic manoeuvring in the South and East China Seas. To get back at China's flex, the US and its Quad partners are engaging in multifaceted naval exercises and trying to increase their footprint in the maritime activities to push back China. Since 2007 the US along with Quad members have heavily engaged itself in carrying out the Malabar exercise designed upon the framework of the exercise that existed between the US and India — an attempt to bite back at China. Nonetheless, the Malabar drill turned out to be futile as Australia soon after the naval exercise backtracked and made its intention clear to not participate in future exercises.¹⁹

This also gave rise to a significant increase in the strategic as well as defence collaboration between the US and India, as New Delhi was seen as the only capital in the region for Washington to police against China. The term Indo-Pacific categorically highlights the increased and weighty role of India, not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the Pacific and the South China Sea — an expanded geographical reach. Washington is investing in India to strengthen it against not only China but also other pacific nations and regional powers such as Australia and Japan. The October 2020 Ministerial dialogue between the US and India and the signing of the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence, also known as BECA, has heightened India's position in the Indo-Pacific. The agreement comes in a backdrop of major regional developments; India's standoff with China at Ladakh, its falsely claimed airstrike at Balakot and growing anti-China stance in the US.²⁰

Not just the US but the Quads active engagement is also bringing larger and far more significant security trends and shifting regional dynamics in South Asia. Strategic, economic and security partnerships among the four nations are not only deepening but have accelerated after 2017. The growing number of strategic dialogues, military exercises and bilateral

¹⁹ Manoj Rawat, "Quad 2.0 is Off to a Good Start – It Must Keep Going," *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/quad-2-0-is-off-to-a-good-start-it-must-keep-going/>

²⁰ Mahrukh Khan, "US-India Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement: Providing India a Military Edge," Issue Brief, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, November 7, 2020, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IB_Mahrukh_Nov_7_2020.pdf

agreements are all manifestations of increased collective strategic views and assertiveness. This is an alarming trend as it will hit more on the balance of power in South Asia, especially between the two nuclear states of Pakistan and India. This will also hamper the prospects of any kind of regional cooperation between the countries as the power play will be dominated by one country. Similarly, a regional organisation like SAARC; that is already at a loss will be nothing more than a failed institution.

This also reflects that not only the US but the other Quad members also share the concern of the rise of China and its role in the South China Sea. The implications of such a strategy in South Asia stand at a big magnitude. With backing of a global power such as the US, it is more likely that India would act aggressively in South Asia, especially towards Pakistan and issue of Kashmir is one clear example. With such a complex situation at Indo-Pacific, Pakistan should play an active role in this grand strategic game. It can enhance its role as an economic hub and a geographical strategic point by taking China on board and opening the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the West as well as the Quad and the ASEAN countries.

Although the rhetoric and narrative of the Indo-Pacific is seen in full alignment with the countries involved other than the US, there still exist points of divergence and continued differences in the definition, application and rhetoric of the strategy by countries involved. Indo-Pacific as strategy and as a vision is used and defined varyingly by the Quad members, with overlapping connotations. India, Japan and Australia had to come up with their visions and strategies for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.²¹ On the one hand, Japan refers to it as a convergence between the two oceans — Indian and the Pacific. While India sees it as an opportunity to elevate its strategic profile at a global level. Similarly, ASEAN countries have had to establish a unified vision of the IP strategy as its approach is not of full-throated support but more of an effort to manage the diverging concepts by major powers like the US and to preserve its centrality.²²

²¹ Premesha Saha, “ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook: An Analysis,” Raisina Debates, Observer Research Foundation, June 28, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/aseans-indo-pacific-outlook-an-analysis-52542/>

²² Prashanth Parameswaran, “Indo-Pacific Conceptions in the Spotlight at China’s Xiangshan Forum,” *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2019,

Relations between New Delhi and Washington continue to move in an upwards trajectory and develop further in the realms of bilateral defence co-operation and economic development. However, in contrast, but not surprisingly, relations between China and India continue to decline. The US sees a strong India as a vital and more critical part of its Indo-Pacific strategy. The inaugural, 2+2 Dialogue between the US and India further enhanced their economic and defence corporation. Both countries in 2018, became a signatory to a bilateral Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, (CCSA).²³ In 2019 both held their first major joint military exercise that included all three of Indian forces; Army, Navy and Air Force, an event expected to become an annual exercise.²⁴ With a major power shift, India is not only leading the US strategic goals in the region, it is also attempting to establish its own dominance.

Implications and Challenges for Pakistan

For Pakistan, the Indo Pacific is a framework that has the potential to bring both economic and strategic challenges. It would be singularly challenging with growing overwhelming congruities in the US and India's common strategic interests, particularly vis-à-vis China. American support to build up India as a counter to China confronts Pakistan with a threat. The US is using its Indo Pacific strategy to counter China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while at the same time it is busy advertising BRI as a 'predatory project'.²⁵ There are few if any similarities between the two: the BRI is a multi-dimensional economic project that spans several continents and involves scores of countries and which has strategic implications; the IPS is principally a strategic project with some economic elements.

<https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/indo-pacific-conceptions-in-the-spotlight-at-chinas-xiangshan-forum/>

²³ "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."

²⁴ Ajay Shukla "Tiger Triumph Exercise: US Marines to Show Skills for First Time in India," *Business Standard*, November 17, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/defence/tiger-triumph-exercise-us-marines-to-show-skills-for-first-time-in-india-119111700006_1.html

²⁵ Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Pakistan in the Indo-Pacific: Caught in the Geopolitical Crossfire," *South Asian Voices*, February 14, 2019, <https://southasianvoices.org/pakistan-in-the-indo-pacific-caught-in-the-geopolitical-crossfire/>

This also sheds light on the frustration that exists in Washington with regards to the growing Chinese influence and its growing strategic footprint across the globe. Islamabad's and Beijing's growing strategic relations have remained irksome for both the capitals in India and the US. To meet this challenge Washington sees India as a natural partner in South Asia.

In 2018, Washington accredited India as a major defence partner, allowing a new phase of agreements with specific defence sales authorisations. The birth of the new phase of the US and India relations was given an impetus with Islamabad's and Beijing's strong relations and the development of the CPEC, giving China access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. A larger, stronger India is seen by Washington as an impediment to China's ambition to expand itself into the Indian Ocean.

Challenges for Pakistan

- a) Given the on-going Pakistan-US and Pakistan-India tensions, there is an inherent difficulty in promoting a positive Pakistan vision around the globe.
- b) The new phase of the militarisation of India is amongst the most significant challenge that Pakistan will face. This will also lessen India's desire to settle any dispute through peaceful means.
- c) The increased role of India will increase its weight in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, making it eventually a two-ocean power like the US and China giving it a position to maintain some kind of control over the water-ways. This can in return give rise to new conflicts in the region not just between Pakistan and India but also between India and China.
- d) Pakistan to realise that the emergence of an active IPS in which it has no or limited say will push Pakistan back as it will create new geographical, as well as geopolitical and geo-economic realities with significant challenges for Pakistan.
- e) In the long term, the IP would endorse a strategic concept that could easily polarise the region and force states to choose sides

which will be a problem for Pakistan as it shares equally important ties with China and the US.

- f) A greater Indian role in the IP can threaten Pakistan's maritime interests. Moreover, a strong Indian presence and nuclear-powered submarines and bases can easily target Pakistan's strategic assets.
- g) More active Indian and the US maritime roles could lead to increased complications in India-Pakistan already tensed bilateral relations.
- h) Although the challenges mentioned above carry significant weight for Pakistan, the biggest challenge Pakistan faces is its unwillingness to recognise the threat that looms over its head with the growing strategic and military might of India in the deep waters of the IO and the overall threat that the US' IP strategy brings to the region.

Recommendations

1. Since both Pakistan and China are also focused on economic development, Pakistan, along with China, should start manoeuvring to become partners in the IP strategy.
2. A strategy rooted solely in defence will never be sustainable in the long-term. Hence, instead of strategic understanding being a "one-off" event, Pakistan should institutionalise and regularise its strategic understanding by bringing economic elements into its policies.
3. A policy embedded primarily with economic elements — leading to strategic benefits will help ensure Islamabad of the sustainability of its allies and partners.
4. With regard to countering the IPS in the longer run, Pakistan must develop a workable policy entailing special emphasis on creating and sustaining a network of partners with an enhanced web of bilateral and trilateral and multilateral relationships.

5. Utilise Pakistan's economic potential to collaborate within the IP framework, by offering its ports in Gwadar and the CPEC project to trade through Pakistan to Central Asia.
6. Concurrently, strengthen and develop military capabilities to tackle emerging challenges. Among other measures, Pakistan requires to develop naval outreach capabilities, as well as missiles with the required ranges.
7. Similarly, Pakistan can enhance its engagement at a bilateral level with the countries involved in the IP strategy, such as the ASEAN nations, Japan and Australia.
8. In doing so Pakistan can make itself useful and eligible for new alliances outside its present rim of preferences and comfort. Failing to do so, Pakistan will entangle itself in the geopolitical, strategic and economic crossfire of different countries.

Conclusion

Even though the idea of IPS reflects Washington's desire to buttress a fraying US-led rules-based international order under a perceived threat from regional power shifts, the strategy is particularly aimed at countering China's rise and its massive, multi-pronged connectivity project — the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The IP is at its early stages and largely talks about economic development which may seem a lucrative proposition in the short-term.

Nonetheless, the military aspect of it in the long-term cannot be ignored, particularly in the realm of maritime cooperation that could build up to reshape the geopolitical realities and trading routes. The Trump administration also signalled its intention to engage closely with the IP by committing to new investments and strategic initiatives and economic cooperation with Japan, India and Australia. The resumption of the Malabar military exercise by the Quad in 2017 is not merely a symbolic manifestation, but a developing aspect plagued by the growing rivalry and confrontation between Washington and Beijing, in which India plays a pivotal role. India could become the new American 'policeman,' with one major difference: the policing would encompass a wide swath of Asia and

Oceania that could trigger a new wave of conflicts in the region. It is not hard to see that engaging these countries in the IP region aims at maintaining America's dominance in the international arena as the sole superpower.

The Indo-Pacific strategy was undertaken by the Trump administration in which India's role, increases exponentially may further destroy the concept of strategic security in South Asia. The already increasing role of India with regards to the international security paradigm has emboldened New Delhi to isolate any kind of regional framework that can lead to peace in the region. This may further deteriorate relations between Pakistan and India and the fragile balance of power. The US support for India may also further lead to a tag war between the two competing giants — China and the US.