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CHINA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY- A STRATEGIC CAMOUFLAGE OR RESHAPING SECURITY ORDER

The Indo-Pacific for all its geographical amorphousness, is a geo-strategically spatial concept marked as much by the shifting centre of gravity, away from the Euro-Atlantic swathe to the continental expanse and maritime continuum straddling Asia, as by the incontrovertibility of the buccaneering and robust rise of China whose performance quotient is anchored, in quintessentially predatory and unmistakably pioneering dimensions of national power projection.¹ The Indo-Pacific can also be understood as a littoral zone between the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. The Indo-Pacific is also about land—those countries which both directly and indirectly operate within it, in terms of trade, culture, and security—but whose heartlands exist beyond these oceanic catchments.²

The construct of the Indo-Pacific is as much riven by the preponderance of searing Sino-US global competition as by the substantive rise of a slew of middle powers navigating through novel processes of multilateralism, systemic multi-polarity, and trajectories of nifty and nuanced multi-alignment rather than ironclad old hub-n-spokes centrality. Increasingly, productive partnerships take precedence over the perpetuation and resurrection of 'zero-sum' alliances of reductionism.³ Preservation of liberalized commerce, sustainable integrity over multi-vectored connectivity, and

¹ Parulekar, D.D. (2023). Decoding 'Sovereign Strategic Networks' in the Indo-Pacific: Contesting China's 'Ascendant-Rise'. In: Singh, S., Marwah, R. (eds) China and the Indo-Pacific. Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7521-9_2

² Doyle, Timothy, and Dennis Rumley, (2020). The Rise of China and the Indo-Pacific', The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific (Oxford, 2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198739524.003.0008>

³ Singh, S., Marwah, R. (2023). China's Engagement and the Indo-Pacific. In: Singh, S., Marwah, R. (eds) China and the Indo-Pacific. Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7521-9_1

pluralized harness of the global commons in beneficent equity, not predatory hegemony, remain ardent impulses and idioms for strategic stability.⁴ However, these enjoinders also underscore the stratagems of power-play militating across the Indo-Pacific, seemingly inundated by the overbearing presence of rising China, but, whose burgeoned footprint is equally a function of the irresistible opportunities, that portend, for sovereign peers in interchange with it.⁵ Notwithstanding, the strategic churn of complex interdependence that pervades equations and engagement across the Indo-Pacific, is leading sovereign actors to seek new hues of strategic networks, rooted in institutionalized-cooperation-sans-the-institutionalism, a high transactional incidence of play-it-by-ear engagement, pitching for supple minilaterals and efficacious plurilaterals, in flexible aggregation and disaggregation, from overarching cordon-sanitaire bulwarks.⁶

On the one hand, Beijing has sought to expand its economic power, and on the other, modernize its army, especially its navy, to become the dominant military power in the region. Because one of the ways to protect economic and political gains is to be a deterrent military force. In particular, a military capability controlling the Indo-Pacific region is seen as essential to China's interests. Export-based growth and security of energy supply are two crucial indispensable keys for China's economic development. They are the two pillars of Beijing's rise and for this reason, the Indo-Pacific, which is the most vital area where both global trade and energy routes pass, represents the achilles' heel of China in a sense. Military spending also increased and Beijing is determined to modernize its armed forces and equip them with advanced military equipment.

China views Indo-Pacific strategy—as a US re-balancing strategy using India to contain China's rise in Asia—as a counter-narrative to the BRI. The Chinese analysts argue that Indo-Pacific strategy will bring India into the Pacific Ocean. India's rejection and criticism of Belt and the Road Initiative and perceived bold stand against Chinese ambitions in Indian Ocean Region convinced U.S that India is a determined balancer of China. It triggered the renewed Indo-Pacific strategy with India-U.S partnership as its core that developed over the years. Chinese analysts believe that Indian opposition to the BRI triggered Indo-Pacific strategy, it is viewed as a counter strategy to Belt and the Road Initiative.⁷

India has expressed significant concern regarding China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean and China's bolstered relations with Pakistan. In response, India has reinforced its participation in the United States-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).⁸ India has also adopted a new defensive approach. The US on the other hand has also demonstrated unease regarding China's actions, in particular with its 'debt-trap diplomacy' and its assertive tone on Taiwan.⁹ The US has not only expressed these concerns at the bilateral level, but

⁴ Jung, Sung Chul & Lee, Jaehyon & Lee, Ji-Yong. (2020). The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region. *Journal of Contemporary China*. 30. 1-16. 10.1080/10670564.2020.1766909.

⁵ Opcit

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ma, B. (2020). China's Fragmented Approach toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy: One Concept, Many Lenses. *China Review*, 20(3), 177–204. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26928116>

⁸ Opcit

⁹ Ibid

also at the international level, for example through NATO's Strategic Concept.¹⁰ Caught in the crossfire of three strategic perspectives lie the sea trade routes of the Indo-Pacific that connect the Middle East, Africa and east Asia with Europe and the US, over which the majority of the world's maritime oil trade and nearly one third of total worldwide trade passes. Along this route there are crucial passage points, which, if obstructed, could potentially bring the world economy to a standstill along with the strategic tension among the states in the region .

Ultimately, China's greatest advantage in the region lies in its proximity to the Indian Ocean and its control over most of the East China Sea coastline, as well as some of the coastline in the South China Sea. Proximity is a crucial asset to ensuring the rapid deployment of forces and can often lead to higher success rates in operations. For over a decade, China has been increasing its maritime presence¹¹ and its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.¹² With the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and renewed tensions between China and Taiwan, China's territorial claims and its artificial islands in the South China Sea, the security dynamic in the region has shifted. The dragon has revealed, in tacit and bold terms, its strategies for pan-Asian dominance by ramping up its naval capabilities, expanding territorial claims to areas like the East China Sea and the South China Sea, as well as arm-twisting smaller powers.¹³

The BRI also provides China with a stronger foothold in the region. Beijing seeks ports that are capable of hosting People's Liberation Army and People's Liberation Army Navy operations; which must contain built-in ramps to offload heavy cargo and deep-water ports to be able to dock large heavy vessels (such as warships), to accommodate PLAN personnel and store equipment. ¹⁴This type of commercial venture can then be used for both commercial and military capabilities, and China has conveniently located them along its Maritime Silk Road. Accordingly, China's 2015 white paper advocated civilian military integration, and President Xi Jinping has argued that this is vital for a strong PLA. Nevertheless, Chinese officials have consistently denied the dual use of BRI ventures, as the infrastructure is concealed in commercial environments. China can then use economic coercion to its advantage by forcing neighbouring countries to support or at least accept its policies towards Taiwan. It can also use its economic power to compel countries to accept its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Likewise, experts believe that the strategic location of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, depending on its capability to host China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) surface combatants, could safeguard China's interests in the Strait of Hormuz. ¹⁵

China's own multilateralism, its contours unfolding within the domestic to the external realm are symptomatic of the fact that China's all-pervasive influence extends to the Indo-Pacific region and

¹⁰ Opcit

¹¹ As early as 2012, China's then-leader Hu Jintao declared that the country had to become a "maritime superpower" in military terms.

¹² Opcit

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Jochheim Ulrich J and Barbosa Rita Lobo (2023). EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service [efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)751398_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751398/EPRS_BRI(2023)751398_EN.pdf)

¹⁵ Ibid

beyond.¹⁶ China itself has so far avoided entering into military alliances, with the exception of its historic relationship with North Korea. In recent years, however, Beijing has built security partnerships with Russia, Cambodia, Laos, Iran and Pakistan. A look at the current flashpoints in Asia, which form an arc around China, reveal the fragility of the security situation in the region.

However in terms of capabilities and power, despite the PLAN having the largest fleet of surface combatants in the world, the United States Navy has greater capabilities and on average larger and more weaponised vessels. More specifically, US Navy vessels carry a greater amount of offensive missiles and have a stronger strategic perspective when it comes to cruise missile launch. Furthermore, it has been argued that China has no reliable allies. At the same time, other powers in the region, such as the US and India, have fostered many security partnerships in the region and can therefore rely on other security providers, who also benefit from strategic proximity to the South China Sea. Finally, it has been noted that many of the ports and infrastructure investments that China has built through the BRI cannot support China's surface combatants, and therefore would most likely not be of much use in a potential conflict. Some of the above-mentioned ports are also located close to very challenging topography and/or close to an unstable region, which might render them vulnerable to potential attack in the event of a conflict.

¹⁶ Ibid