

# America's "Pivot To Asia" Policy: Implications For The Indo-Pacific Region

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## Abstract

In an opinion piece published in 2011 by the Foreign Policy Magazine, the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outlined "America's Pacific Century," underscoring the relevance and significance of Asia-Pacific region for the US in maintaining its global ascendancy. This realization of the role of Asia in shaping the future geostrategic landscape of the world and the need for American greater involvement in regional affairs was put forth as "pivot to Asia" policy. The noun "Asia" in Asia-Pacific was later replaced with "Indo-" to include Indian Ocean Region in American strategic calculus and increase American regional sphere of influence. The US Indo-Pacific strategy, or Asia Pivot, is explicit in two ways: considering and treating China as the foremost competitor in the region, and India as the key ally and bulwark against Chinese growing influence. This consideration has strengthened US-India relations to an unprecedented level, potentially disturbing the traditional regional balance of power. China, on its part, has attempted to enhance its influence in the region (and beyond) primarily through geo-economic connectivity. This power contestation, centered mainly on the US and China, affects the security and stability equation of the Indo-Pacific region with far reaching implications. This paper attempts to discuss broad contours of American Indo-Pacific strategy, the dynamics of US-India nexus and their impact on the security calculus of the Indo-Pacific as well as on Pakistan. It also briefly covers the Chinese policy and practice to neutralize the effects of the US strategy.

**Key Words:** Asia Pivot, Indo-Pacific, Pacific Century, "Outdated Cold War Mentality and Zero-sum Mindset," Balance of Power, US-India Nexus, China, Pakistan.

## Introduction

The end of the Cold War and dismemberment of the Soviet Union (USSR) resulted in the rise of the US as the sole global super power. This status remained largely unchallenged till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the international power canvas started to change with the emergence of "revisionist" or "unsatisfied" states, having global outreach, such as China. With distances reducing, security mosaic becoming more complex and geo-

economics moving to the center stage of world politics, the states became more self-aware of their potential and significance than ever before. This ushered into the emergence of different power centers in the political world, with China being the most formidable one. Chinese rise from the debris of the "century of humiliation" to prominence was (and is) perceived by the West as a threat to American-led status-quo oriented international order.

It would be safe to say that the rise of China as a global power has created strategic anxiety of a sort in Washington, the godfather of the American-created world order, which now wants to curb the growing influence of Beijing around the world, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. Increasing Chinese economic and strategic influence in the region as well as nuclear tests by North Korea were probably two main factors that pushed the US to adopt the “pivot to Asia” policy as an indispensable and most crucial element of its global strategy. As part of the new policy the US started to create a sophisticated network of allies and like-minded states, revolving around a diverse range of issues of mutual interest and concern, primarily to check the rising tide of China’s power. The policy of engaging regional states initially included China as well, and the visit of Chinese President HU Jintao to the US in January 2011 was considered as a major milestone in the history of the bilateral relationship.

But this trajectory did not last very long. By the end of 2011, America’s Asia pivot or Asia-Pacific policy came to the front and started to take the shape and direction, making it clear that two major powers of the world would soon be contesting for dominance in the region and beyond. Since then, the situation has taken a downward trajectory from optimism which prevailed at the beginning, to all out resentment, especially in geo-strategic paradigm. Today, the US seems to be fully committed to the policy objectives of Asia Pivot, and has found India—presumably as a counter weight to China—to be the partner in pursuit of its policies. This power politics has polarized the region, which would have far-reaching implications for the region, as well as Pakistan.

In this article, an effort has been made to briefly discuss and analyze major tenants of America’s Asia Pivot policy including India as a net security provider, and its implications for the region. To relate Asia Pivot with the international relations, the theoretical framework of offensive

realism has been applied. The study endeavors to highlight broader contours of Indo-Pacific strategy, its progression and expansion over the years, and the extent of US-India relations under this strategy. It also attempts to explain as to how China is countering this strategy through geo-economics and connectivity and what implications this power contestation has for the region as well as Pakistan.

### **I. Offensive Realism and Sino-US Contest for Regional Supremacy**

If power matters in international politics, great powers matter more than small or middle powers. They shape or reshape the international structure, set the rules of the game, and wield power beyond their territorial borders. They also compete with each other for greater influence across the globe. They do not remain content with what they have; rather, strive to achieve global hegemony. Since no great power can achieve hegemony, they remain locked in, to quote Mearsheimer (2014), a “perpetual great power competition” (p. 2), and it is what he has called “the tragedy of great power politics.”

According to offensive realism, international politics is a “ruthless and dangerous business” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2) thanks to the anarchic structure of the system. In this business every great power is fearful of others, and pursues a revisionist agenda of turning the global balance of power to its interest. For Mearsheimer, a great power is essentially defined by its military capability to fight a full-fledged conventional war against the most militarily formidable power in the world. If an economic power, such as Japan, lacks such a capability, it may not qualify as a great power. Likewise, if China fails to translate its growing economic might into military power, it may not be considered a threat by the US to its global leadership. But, the issue is that China is turning its economic power into military strength, and is expected to follow in the footsteps of the US in establishing its hegemony in Asia-Pacific by pushing the US out of the region. This would

trigger a fierce security competition between the Eagle and the Dragon with serious repercussion for the region. In short, the two global giants are destined to lock horns with each other if China's power continues to grow. If we see the current course of competition between the two states through the pessimistic lenses of Mearsheimer's offensive realism, the prospects of their escape from, What Allison (2017) has called, the "Thucydides's Trap" seem grim.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism is based on the premise that great powers compete against each other for power and they aim at achieving hegemony. This central claim is rested on five interlinked "bedrock assumption" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 30) about the nature and character of the international system. The five assumptions include anarchic nature of international system, great powers' possession and likely use of offensive military capability to inflict harm and (in some cases) destruction on each other, uncertainty about the intentions of states regarding the use of military force against others, survival (maintaining territorial integrity and political independence of the state) being the primary goal of great powers, and the rational character of great powers. According to Mearsheimer, when these assumptions are embedded together, powerful incentives are created for great powers to think and act offensively against each other, resulting into three patterns of behavior, namely fear, self-help and power maximization.

In the updated edition of the *Tragedy*, Mearsheimer (2014) has included a new chapter (chap. 10, pp. 360-411) with exclusive focuses on China's rise, which he has termed as "the most significant event" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 28). The title of the chapter ending with a question mark ("Can China Rise Peacefully?") itself suggest that he sees the future of Sino-US relations gloomy. The crux of his argument is that if China's economic growth continues unhindered, it will attempt to dominate Asia just as the US dominated Western Hemisphere. The US, on its

part, will do its best to prevent China from reaching to the status of the regional hegemon. Most of Beijing's neighbors, including India, will rally round the US to frustrate China in its bid for regional dominance. This, in turn, will unleash a security competition of such magnitude that may lead to war.

Why the US will resist China's attempt to become regional hegemon? Mearsheimer's answer is simple: once a great power acquires hegemony in its region, it is unlikely to tolerate any rival great power becoming hegemon in another region. The fear in Washington is that if China acquires hegemony, it may attempt to force the US out of Asia-Pacific in the same way as the latter pushed European powers out of Western Hemisphere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another dimension of the fear is that China will not be content with having hegemony in the Asia-Pacific; rather, it will try to expand its influence in other parts of the world and create problems for the US even in its backyard. And this is something which is unacceptable for Washington, which has enjoyed an unrivaled position of being the sole superpower for decades. For China, on the other side, American military presence and activities in the region and its close strategic ties with Beijing's traditional regional rivals and foes is a threat to its security and economic prosperity. China's sensitivity towards American military strategy seems to be representative of what Mearsheimer (2014) has called in a Foreign Affairs article "Geopolitics 101," that is, "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory" (pp. 5-6).

## **2. The conceptual contours of Asia Pivot**

America's "Asia Pivot" policy was enunciated in 2011 by Hillary Clinton, the then US Secretary of State. The rationale behind the policy was the assumption that the "future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action" (Clinton, 2011, p. 57, emphasis added).

She emphasized that Asia-Pacific—the “broader Asia” or the region marked by the “confluence of the two Seas” as Shinzo Abe described it in 2007 in a speech given at Indian parliament (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007)—region, spanning Indian and Pacific oceans, was now a key driver of global politics, thanks to factors such as human population, natural resources, key maritime transit routes, promising regional markets, and the rise of regional powers to the ranks of global powers. These are among the few factors the US cannot overlook, as its strategic interests (whether economic, commercial, technological, maritime, or military) are deeply connected with this region. These aspects coupled with maintaining peace and stability in Asia-Pacific, have become critical for maintaining global order. A “strategic turn” to the region, therefore, “fits logically” for the US in its pursuit of maintaining its “global leadership” (Clinton, 2011, p. 58).

Clinton gave the idea of “forward deployed diplomacy” (p. 58), implying six lines of action that include stronger bilateral security alliances, improving relations with emerging powers including China, engaging regional forums, enhancing commerce and investment, maintaining broad based military presence and working for democracy and human rights. She called treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Australia and Thailand as “fulcrum for US strategic turn” (p. 58) to Asia-Pacific for their contribution to maintain and enhance American regional presence and leadership. While dilating on China, she termed the relationship between the US and China as “one of the most challenging and consequential” one her country “has ever had to manage” (Clinton, 2011, p. 59). Given the challenging nature of the bilateral relations, she has called for a careful and dynamic approach, which is embedded in reality, focused on results and is in line with the principles and interests of the US. While she has underlined the dividends of working closely with China in various economic fields, concerns

regarding Chinese discrimination against foreign companies, prioritizing domestic firms, promoting Yuan as well as disregarding provisions of international laws and more open political system are equally highlighted. Highlighting relations with India and Indonesia as important partners, she argued that both countries are main drivers of global economy, and contribute significantly towards peace and security in the region and have rich democratic values. Talking specifically about India, she emphasized the prospects of enhanced security and peace in the region with greater Indian role on the global stage, more prosperity with open Indian markets, benefits of Indian advancement in science and technology and inspiration for others in Indian vibrant and pluralistic democracy. She termed India as the “linchpin” (Clinton, 2011, p. 60) of the economically integrated and politically stable South and Central Asia. She concluded with the argument that “pivot to new global realities” demands accelerated efforts, for which the route is being paved since past two-and-a-half years (Clinton 2011, p. 60).

The “America’s Pacific Century” gives us the first and a broader insight of how the US, more than a decade ago, looked at the unfolding future international environment and how important this region is for it to maintain global dominance.

### **3. Asia Pivot and Subsequent American National Security Strategies**

A closer review of the National Security Strategies (NSSs), issued by the White House over past decade, reflects progressive increase in concerns about China, while signifying relations with India. In the 2010 NSS, the US mentioned China and India as two states becoming more engaged globally, expressing a desire to build deeper partnerships with both of them (The White House, 2010). Similar intent can be found in the next strategy, released in 2015, which referred to development of constructive relationship with

China (The White House, 2015). However, in the same paper, the tone can be observed changing with mention of calling for managing competition with China from a “position of strength,” insisting upon China to abide by international rules and norms on issues ranging from maritime security and trade to human rights. It also expressed concerns about China’s military modernization and expansion while emphasizing the need to strengthen strategic and economic partnership with India to enable it to become “regional provider of security” (The White House, 2015, p. 25).

The strategy paper took a more direct tone in 2017 by describing China and Russia as challenges for American power, influence and interests. It was also alleged that the two states were developing weapons and military capabilities that could threaten American critical infrastructure including command and control outfits. Chinese reassertion of influence regionally as well as globally and heavy investment in global infrastructure was seen as an attempt by China to displace the US as a key actor in the Indo-Pacific region. As to India, the paper welcomed its emergence as a global power and a strong strategic and defense partner of the US, underlining the intent of expanding defense and security cooperation, and supporting Indian leadership in Indian Ocean security (The White House, 2017). While referring to competition with China, the latest strategy paper (National Security Strategy, 2022) underlines next ten years as “decisive decade” for the US and the world (The White House, 2022, p. 6). Supplementing the 2017 NSS and reaffirming the previous stance on China, it views China’s behavior as a challenge to international peace and stability and China as the only competitor with intent and capability to reshape the international order by enhancing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India has been mentioned implicitly as a “like minded state” (The White House, 2022, p.12). It also highlights the necessity to revitalize the Quad to address security challenges in the Indo-

Pacific, and the resolve to work with India bilaterally as well as multilaterally to pursue “free and open Indo-Pacific” (The White House, 2022, p.37).

The examination of American NSSs makes it quite clear that the direction of the Asia pivot policy has been consistent since 2011. Over the past twelve years, the US has been acting upon the underlying logic of the “American Pacific Century” with more vigor and vitality. The tone becomes more direct and aggressive in every new NSS. Another significant aspect of America’s Asia Pivot policy has been the symbolic renaming of the US Pacific Command (PACOM) to US Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, signifying the growing relevance of India to the Pentagon (Ali, 2018). Ghosh (2023) opines that change of name from “Asia Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” denotes the geo-politics of the twenty first century. Asia-Pacific, coined in 1960s, was not inclusive of some important regional countries including India, and it also did not account for the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean. The term “Indo-Pacific” has a more geo-political tone to it. This term is also seen suspiciously by China, claiming it to be a deliberate strategy to encircle China.

A closer look at the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022) also reflects significance of this region for security and prosperity of the US and has been linked with its claim of being an Indo-Pacific power. Calling this decade as the “decisive decade” (Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022, p.6), the greatest challenge has been claimed emanating from China, which is employing its economic, military, diplomatic and technological leverage to become world’s most influential power. The strategy emphasizes to shape the strategic environment in favor of the US and its allies. In this regard, strengthening defense partnership with India, supporting its role as net security provider and its rise as a regional leader have been underscored. These and other official sources of the US clearly reveal that Washington is unwilling to accept China as a peer competitor

in the Asia-Pacific region, as offensive realism suggests. To check the momentous rise of China as a global power, capable of challenging American dominance even in its traditional informal spheres of influence, the US has developed a sophisticated web of allies and friends. It seems that the focal center of American Asia pivot policy is to make the surrounding strategic environment of China inhospitable and hostile to its expansion of influence in and beyond the Asia-Pacific. Among the allies the US has enlisted to counter Chinese influence, India stands most prominent. The projection and promotion of India by the US as a formidable regional power owe not only to its booming economy and geostrategic location, it is also because of the uneasy historical relationship between New Delhi and Beijing, not to mention the recent border skirmishes between the armed forces of the two states that have exacerbated the existing feelings of mistrust and antagonism.

#### **4. Manifestation of the Asia Pivot Policy**

The US seems acting upon the policy guidelines of the NSSs and the Asia-Pacific Strategy in one way or another. There have, however, been some instances where it ostensibly sacrificed the spirit of Asia-Pacific regionalism on the altar of its national interest. To give an example, in January 2017, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement, which was introduced by itself in 2016. The withdrawal was perhaps driven by President Donald Trump's "America First" policy, which created a number of challenges for US foreign policy around the world. Keeping in view the role of geo-economic in the modern world, President Biden launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in 2022 to signal Washington's desire to have closer economic engagement with the regional states. He must have realized that in the said region "economic policy is foreign policy" (Drezner, 2022, *Italic original*). While statistically highlighting economic stakes in this region, the IPEF calls the US as "an Indo-Pacific economic power" (Indo-Pacific Economic

Framework for Prosperity, 2022). It also claims that the expansion of the US economic leadership is good not only for the American, it is equally in the interest of the region (The White House, 2022). With the formation of a new economic group, involving thirteen member states of Asia-Pacific, President Biden has revived President Obama's pivot or rebalancing Asia policy.

Forough (2022) has termed President Biden's IPEF as "America's Pivot to Asia 2.0." He has argued that America's pivot to Asia had both geopolitical (like increase in military presence in region) as well as geoeconomic components (TPP), with an intent to write the rules of global economy. This however has taken longer than expectations. With the initiative of IPEF, the US is hopeful of more economic engagement in Indo-Pacific region to counter China's growing economic and political influence. After the withdrawal of the US from TPP during Trump administration, the forum lost its efficacy as Washington focused more on geopolitical forums, such as Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and AUKUS or what the US Department of Defense called it the "Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, U.K. and U.S. (U.S Department of Defense, 2021). This geopolitical approach of the US gave leverage to China, which, in January 2022, signed a free trade agreement of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with all ASEAN States as well as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. IPEF is expected to fill the geoeconomic gap of US Indo-Pacific policy, thus considered as second attempt by Washington towards pivot to Asia. In current state, IPEF is not a free trade agreement, like RCEP or CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, created in 2018 as a free trade forum by twelve signatories of TPP as an alternate, when U.S withdrew from TPP in January 2017), and, thus, lacks incentives for other members. Two similar attempts namely Blue Dot Network (BDN) initiated in 2019, and Build Back Better World (B3W) launched in



2021 have not yielded desired outcome due to same reasons. Another dimension which creates more complexity for the US in fully operationalizing the idea of Asia Pivot is “geopolitical emergencies,” created by security issues including situation in Middle East, engagement in Afghanistan and now Russian invasion of Ukraine (Forough, 2022). While underlining the lack of economic incentive in IPEF, Ghosh (2023) opines that IPEF is yet to replicate the economic dividends offered by Asia-Pacific, as it lacks firm commitments by the U.S regarding market access.

Forough’s (2022) views regarding “geopolitical emergencies” seem plausible to a large extent especially in light of the way the US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, leaving behind chaos and instability. On this issue, President Biden was of the view that U.S had accomplished the mission in Afghanistan by killing Osama Bin Ladin and degrading the terrorists’ threat to the US. Since beginning, American “goal was never to nation-build,” but somehow got drifted into it (The White House, 2023).

## 5. Asia Pivot and US-India Relations

As noted earlier, India has become a central pillar of America’s Asia pivot policy owing primarily to its booming economy, geostrategic significance and its uneasy relationship with China. At least since the launch of the US-India Strategic Dialogue in July 2009, the US has been keen on strengthening the “U.S.-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership” (U.S Department of Commerce, 2023). The launch of the Strategic Dialogue has been followed by numerous agreements that acknowledge India as a major defense partner of the US in the region. Under the umbrella of this strategic partnership, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed in 2016, allowing both countries to reciprocate in provision of logistic support, supplies and services for their militaries (IDR

News Network, 2016). In September 2018, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was signed, which gives India access to advance military grade communication technology and real time information sharing. In October 2020, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) was signed between the two states, allowing sharing of geospatial data, which would improve accuracy of Indian drones and cruise missiles (Council of Foreign Relations, 2019).

In a recent development, in May 2022, the US and India have agreed on initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), to enhance and expand strategic technology partnership and defense cooperation at government, business and academic levels (The White House, 2023). Main areas of focus include joint ventures in the field of artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and advanced wireless systems to develop robust bilateral ecosystem. Defense and technological collaboration to include launch of “innovative bridge” (The White House, 2023) to connect defense startups, joint production and development of jet engines, munitions and other systems, and cooperation in maritime security and operational use of ISR. They have also included collaboration in space technology and next generation telecommunications.

Besides bilateral strategic accords, India is also part of an important regional forum: the Quadrilateral group (the Quad)—established in 2007, comprising U.S, India, Australia and Japan. According to Mohan and Govella (2022), it is a critical pillar in Indo-Pacific region, especially after raising its status to leadership level forum. Despite expansion of the agenda to economy and non-traditional security, the traditional security remains the main feature of the group.

The space and leverage given to India in the past decade or so, especially in strategic domain, are reflective of the fact that the US is equipping India with enough critical capabilities

to challenge China in medium to long term future. This is also aligned with India's aspiration to assert itself as a major regional power with global outreach. On same issue, Ullah & Hayat (2021) have argued that Indian role in Indo-Pacific region is aligned with its aspirations of exerting influence beyond its shores. It legitimizes Indian role as a regional net security provider as a U.S containment strategy against China as well as serves its own "Look East policy." Indian economic outlook gives it more leverage to engage multilaterally, pursue its foreign policy more aggressively and develop and acquire military capabilities as per its wishes. Access to other sea ports in Indian Ocean region (IOR) and beyond has given India the currency of outreach and influence. They are of the view that increasing Indian footprint in IOR, especially in South China Sea, reflects India's willingness to further American interests in the region, which is likely to cause geopolitical conflicts in this region. Growing Indian influence under Washington's auspicious is likely to impact regional stability as well as Pakistan's maritime and energy interests.

## **6. AUKUS: Strategic Partnership in Asia-Pacific**

Besides engaging, involving and projecting India as a key actor and ally in its Asia pivot project, the US has also enlisted other states in the Asia-Pacific. One prominent example of it is the emergence of AUKUS, the trilateral security alliance between the US, U.K and Australia, in September 2021. Some analysts (Cheng, 2022) are of the view that AUKUS denotes a major US strategy for the containment of China. It is worthy to note here that the middle or smaller regional countries, especially the member states of ASEAN, have greeted the AUKUS with mixed reactions. It is likely to trigger an unwanted arms race in the region between the major powers, which is likely to destabilize the region. As to China, this is an attempt by the US to forge an "Asia-Pacific version of NATO." Besides enhanced military threat, it would also endanger

the strategic balance in the region. Novita (2022) shares similar view and argues that Indo-Pacific, as a new subject, is within the ambit of Obama's Asia Pivot. Now, Biden in the Oval Office, the US appears more committed to this region with renewed dedication. The military disengagement from Afghanistan has provided the US with further impetus for looking at the region where China's activity is seen as threatening to Washington's traditional role in the region. The US announced the AUKUS security pact immediately after the withdrawal of the US-led forces from Afghanistan to showcase its commitment to keep the regional balance of military power in its favor.

## **7. Implications of the Asia Pivot for Indo-Pacific Region and Chinese Response**

As hinted earlier, there are quite clear indications that America's Asia pivot policy is China-centric, with India at the center stage as a regional bulwark against growing Chinese political clout in the region and beyond. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US is so far military-oriented in nature, thus is a source of serious concern for the region in general and China in particular. This region has become a classic case of balance of power game between the US and China, both trying to outwit each other while avoiding direct confrontation of serious nature. For Beijing, the US behavior towards China, revealed both in words and in actions, is a manifestation of an "outdated Cold War mentality and zero-sum mindset" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Rwanda, 2022). To counter this "cold War mentality" (Capie & Davidp, 2002, pp. 45-47) and to prevent the possible swing of the regional balance of power to the US, China, in response, has taken a number of counter measures. In recent development, during a parliamentary session, Chinese President Xi Jinping also openly criticized the US in leading western countries to encircle, contain and suppress China, creating unprecedented challenges for China ([China Accuses U.S. of](#)



### Containment and Warns of Potential Conflict, 2023).

While analyzing American Indo-Pacific strategy, Heer (2022) has maintained that many states in the region see the US strategy being focused on traditional security paradigm, rather than economic issues and climate, and are skeptical of its ability to resource the strategy. Furthermore, many countries are reluctant to take sides in the competition between China and the US for being on one's side may invite the displeasure of the other. American withdrawal from the TPP in 2017 has also called into question its commitment to the region. IPEF is yet to prove its efficacy and is considered to be an inadequate alternative. Despite being implicit about China in diplomatic terms, actual intent of Quad, AUKUS, IPFE and other such initiatives is well understood by all, especially Beijing, as it has been kept out of all such forums. Ullah & Hayat (2021) are of the view that China, as a counter measure and to safeguard its own interests, is already executing the strategy of "String of Pearls" (p.36) in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and regional integration through BRI initiative. Schindler and DiCarlo (2022) have argued that US-China rivalry has changed the shape of political opportunities for smaller states, thus many states have come up with strategies to hedge between the two contesters as well as other regional powers. This has leveraged them to pursue spatial objectives, including transnational infrastructures such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Overall, Chinese response to Asia Pivot has been comprehensive and competitive, that is, increasing its own military capabilities and pursuance of economic initiatives (Cangara, 2022). To protect its interests, China is also expanding its military presence across the World in general and Indo-Pacific in particular. Besides naval base in Djibouti and creation of artificial islands in South China sea, China is in process of establishing second naval base in Cambodia—a first naval base outside its territorial waters in

Indo-Pacific (United States Department of State, 2021).

It is quite evident that China now openly sees Asia Pivot as China Containment policy and is all set to counter it in both military and economic domains. While China's main effort is towards economic interdependence through BRI, RCEP and other regional initiatives, it is also increasing its military capabilities and naval presence in Indo-Pacific region to safeguard its own interests.

### 8. Sino-US Rivalry in Asia-Pacific and its Implications for Pakistan

It is quite evident that the geostrategic competition in Asia-Pacific involving the US, China and India would create economic and strategic challenges for Pakistan. As the realization of different pacts and agreements materialize and take shape by both sides, challenges for Pakistan are likely to increase manifold with complicated dynamics.

Given its geostrategic location and historical relations with both the US and China, Pakistan is vulnerable to the power competition between the two global powers in the Indian Ocean and the broader Asia-Pacific region (Afzaal & Masood, 2023). While China is wary of vulnerability due to Malacca Strait, or what former Chinese president Hu Jintao referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma" (Paszak, 2021), more concerns are arising due to US-India collaboration in the wake of strategic agreements. While US-India partnership under Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's BRI is increasing, it is likely to create serious challenges for Pakistan. Aside from affecting Pakistan's maritime interest, it may complicate the possible future conflict resolution with India, if Islamabad chooses sides in future (Khan, 2021). Through "String of Pearls," involving approximately seventeen ports in twelve countries across three continents, China is collaborating with other states to safeguard its own interests while

counterbalancing that of the US. Gwadar figures out as one of the most important ports, connecting China and Central Asia with the rest of the world through shortest route via CPEC. Afzaal & Masood (2023), have however stressed that the “routes” are topographical as well as tactical ideas, affected by domestic growth of any country. Pakistan must invest in maritime security and naval power to safeguard its own interests in the IOR.

## 9. Discussion and Inferences

The above discussion clearly indicates that American global power status is in no doubt seriously challenged by the rise of China. The focus of the US geo-political strategy, therefore, is Indo-Pacific region. Though symbolic, the shift from Asia-Pacific to “Indo-Pacific” also denotes American commitment to keep its traditional sphere of influence intact as well as its concern for China growing power and influence. It is against this backdrop that the policy of Asia Pivot is not only alive, it is also gaining momentum with time. Being implicit in tone and diplomatic in approach a decade ago, the US now openly claims China to be its biggest competitor and challenger and openly questions the way China conducts business with other states. Asia Pivot is, it appears, a policy of the containment of China.

India, thanks to its geo-strategic location, its upward trajectory of development and growth, human resource, military capability and uneasy relationship with China, has got a favorable place in the geostrategic calculus of Washington as a “counter weight” to Beijing. Special opportunities, agreements and concessions are in place for India, which are unprecedented in the recent history of the bilateral relationship. In “pampering,” so to speak, India for its role as a solid pillar of the Asia pivot, the US has even shut its eyes to serious violations of minority and human rights both in the country and in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJ&K), as well as its economic and military ties with Russia after the latter invaded Ukraine. India seems to drive

maximum benefit from the opportunity offered since its status upgrade from “regional security provider” to “net security provider.”

China, on the other hand, is all out to counter American “Asia Pivot,” mainly through geo-economics, indulging stakes of as much countries as possible. Its mainstay is the realization of BRI and Maritime Silk Road, which is likely to link about 170 countries over three continents. Moreover, RCEP, the world’s largest free trade agreement between fifteen countries, involves major stakeholders of Indo-Pacific region, including ASEAN, Australia, Japan and South Korea. Thus, China is fully engaged with all relevant states of the region, safeguarding its own interest and projecting its soft power.

Having said that, militarization and creating security-oriented blocs is likely to have serious regional implications. It may create an unwanted unrest among the regional states, trigger an arms race between them, while forcing them to pick sides which they may not want. These countries have mutual disputes, but somehow have been able to manage and work around them.

As to Pakistan, the Asia pivot policy of the US has put it in a difficult condition since it is primarily focused on containing China, with whom Pakistan’s friendship is, to quote a popular official chant in Islamabad, “higher than mountains, deeper than the ocean, stronger than steel and sweeter than honey” (Gilani, 2010). Having said that, Pakistan also values its relationship with the US, and there are many areas of mutual interest between the two states. It is, however, also true that there has been instances of mistrust and misunderstanding in the history of the bilateral relationship. The recent hasty exit of the US from Afghanistan is a case in point. The US withdrawal, its unwelcoming attitude towards the CPEC—the flagship project of the BRI—and its support for India to become a regional power have created mistrust in Islamabad vis-à-vis the US. Most importantly perhaps, the Sino-US

rivalry and competition in the Asia-Pacific and beyond has complicated Islamabad's attempts to keep a balanced approach towards the two global powers. Pakistan may be unable to stick to the preferred policy of "having good relations with both" in the face of any future armed conflict. Such a conflict would indeed be a strategic nightmare for Pakistan. In addition, enhanced Indian military capability is also creating an imbalance in South Asian Region. Indo-US defense partnership maybe viewed by many from the prism of China centric net security provision. However, the history of rivalry between Pakistan and India as well as Indian aggressive posture towards Pakistan, especially under the BJP Government, cannot be overlooked. The combined outcome of these developments is likely to adversely affect DIMEFIL (diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence and law enforcement) paradigm of Pakistan.

Having discussed some of the obvious inferences, certain other aspects also warrant due attention with reference to the regional geo-strategic complexities. These include:

- a. Geographical distance, augmented by a wide range of natural buffer zones, between the U.S and China is a key factor which precludes direct military confrontation between the two countries. Though force multipliers, the US military bases in the region, cannot be launch pads for large scale operations against China. Such hostilities if any, may take place along peripheral states or geographical zones as a manifestation of what sometimes is called as the "new cold war" between U.S and China.
- b. China and India are immediate neighbors, having preexisting border disputes. Territorial

disputes have caused a war in 1962 and many border skirmishes thereafter. Could the US exploit this state of affairs and risk a war between the two nuclear states, while sitting on the periphery unaffected? And would China and India go for an all-out war instigated by U.S? This seems to be a farfetched thought, at least for now. The only issue which, according to a vast number of analysts and scholars, may risk a war between China and the US (not India) is Taiwan. Any attempt by China or Taiwan to end the status quo may embroil the US in a conflict that may end up in the outbreak of a war. Such a war, in turn, may decide which power is going to dominate the region for a considerable amount of time.

- c. Washington's pivot to Asia is driven more by geostrategic and security interests, and lacks requisite economic bite. This is probably attributed to the heavy expenditures incurred by US over past two decades on war against terrorism as well as currently supporting Ukraine against Russian invasion or what Moscow calls "special military operation." The economic prong of American strategy lacks the economic punch offered by China, especially involving free trade clauses. The biggest challenge today for the US seems to be the economic muscle of China, which is intelligently used by it to counter the American strategy, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

- d. Despite the Asia pivot policy being mainly aimed at preventing the expansion of China's influence, China is still among the biggest trade partners of the US, with bilateral trade amounting over 690 billion USD in 2022, as against 113 billion USD between the US and India in the same year. The question of whether any other regional country can replace China or whether the US can overlook its economic interests for the sake of geopolitical imperatives remains to be seen.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The contest between the US and China for regional supremacy or hegemony has taken a new shape following the former's announcement of Asia pivot policy. The contest has gained more pace recently, triggering a "new cold war" of a sort. Whether geo-economics or geo-strategy dominates the regional security canvas remains to be seen. This competition, however, is increasingly polarizing the Indo-Pacific region. This situation has put middle and small powers in a difficult position as their interests are tided, in one way or another, with both the great powers. Like others, Pakistan must follow the logic of its own national interests in a very pragmatic way. Any impulsiveness or shortsightedness may harm its international standing as well as its geoeconomic and strategic interests. Few recommendations are being proffered to be considered for the policy makers as well as think tanks of Pakistan for further exploration.

A more proactive and visionary approach, engagement, and lobbying is essential to thwart the threats emanating from DIMEFIL paradigm. The policy makers as well as think tanks should decipher the intents in-between lines, prioritize, and implement what is vital to safeguard national interests. While Pakistan

enjoys deep-rooted relations with China, yet maintaining relations with the US is also very important for multifarious reasons. Despite the current cold breeze in bilateral relations with the US, the engagement through various channels and forums must not diminish. Pakistan's policy towards the two world powers, in a word, should be guided by pragmatism and shaped by the imperatives of its national interest.

As to regional countries of Indo-Pacific, they are at the center of this power contestation and the moment of choosing sides seems to be in the offing. Historically as well as statistically, war between two major powers brings more destruction than peace and stability. War will ultimately benefit no one, especially smaller regional countries of Asia-Pacific. While every country has a right to choose sides as it sees fit for its national interests, they should be clear in their stance about increasing external military presence and offer collective response in this regard. In addition, since most of these countries enjoy cordial relations with both powers, they can play an effective role in mediations between the two powers.

For Beijing and Washington their responsibility as global powers in maintaining and promoting global as well as regional peace and stability through peaceful means is far greater than vying with each other for greater influence and dominance. Their behavior towards each other should, therefore, be informed by patience, restraint, accommodation and flexibility. Both powers should work together and cooperate with each other in areas of common interests such as climate change, poverty, health, education, and lead the world towards collective prosperity instead of collision and conflict.

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