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# Indo-Pacific: A Balancing Mechanism in Mutation?



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## Abstract

*This paper explores the underlying nuances of the Indo-Pacific strategy with special reference to four participant countries, i.e., Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. It uncovers the reasons for the aforementioned countries' involvement in the formulation and implementation of the strategy. In doing so, an added aim of the paper is to highlight the underlying contradictions within the policy. The paper also sheds light on the current status of the policy and the potential that it possesses, given the interests and institutional frameworks for decision-making within the aforesaid states. Additionally, the paper looks into frequent mutations that the policy has undergone, which result in difficulties for the participants considering the economic and political transformations taking place in the world signified by the rise of China. Lastly, the paper argues the impact of Donald Trump's policies and public statements on the overall outlook of the Indo-Pacific as a containment policy; a reflection of elite consensus. This consensus did alter, to some extent, before the 2020 elections in the United States. The paper concludes with a debate on the potential alterations in the policy under the Biden administration.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-Pacific, global transformation, off-shore balancing, Sino-US relations, trade war, China containment, US decline*

## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific seems to raise the Platonic concern of appearance and reality. The fundamental question to answer here is if it is really what it seems to be? Initially, the Indo-Pacific strategy seemed to be the introduction of a long-overdue concept of the Japanese conservative Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. Later, it became enmeshed in the former US President Barack

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Obama's Pivot to Asia Policy, which advanced as the beginning of an important shift towards Asia leaving behind the conflict-ridden Middle East. After Trump came to power, the moves seemed to fall into place as an elaborate containment strategy, as the agreement for the need of a coalition became coherent. One can even think about the evolution of this strategy over time from what appeared to be a balancing mechanism into the foundation of a new cold war. Or, to put it differently, what was called a gentle deterrent fast became a grand containment strategy, intermingled with an American president's re-election campaign. The question arises, 'How should we view it?'

Howsoever we look at it, it appears as if a grand strategy has emerged. This paper examines the Indo-Pacific strategy, delving into the participants' perspectives and some contradictions in the coalition. The main premise of the argument is that the strategy had elements that could be used by the Trump administration to start a cold war-like conflict with China. While seemingly, the Trump administration appears to be behind all the sudden and unforeseen economic, diplomatic, and military moves, it is argued that the strategy has been a product of elite consensus that has evolved over a long time and Trump's image has been deployed to promote it. The Indo-Pacific strategy seems to be constantly changing and the election of Joe Biden is expected to further mutate it. When a plan like this requires frequent adjustments, analysts tend to perceive it as a weakness, i.e., weakness within the plan itself, inherent weakness in the coalition, or weakness in the hegemonic power. Changes also point towards the need for adjustments to the rapidly changing global atmosphere.

## **The Emergence of the Concept**

The concept appeared as an academic construct in the writings of the German geopolitical thinker Karl Haushofer in 1920.<sup>1</sup> With the establishment of the East Asian Summit (EAS) in 2005, the linkage between the two oceans began to acquire prominence. Rory Medcalf wrote, "But from birth, the summit was misnamed. It was, in fact, an Indo-Pacific institution, an early reflection of the changes in the regional system of economic and strategic links."<sup>2</sup> The idea of a link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean became an important reality at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's formulation of the concept of Indo-Pacific as a partnership in his speech at the Indian parliament in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Hemmings asserts, "It is fascinating because we have seen a concept move from a foreign policy speech by a Japanese politician develop to an approach towards regional dynamics adopted by a number of different states." <sup>4</sup> President Obama, in similitude, adopted the idea to formalise his vision of 'Pivot to Asia', which later became 'Rebalance to Asia'. Glosserman mentions that Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton used the concept in her famous article *America's Pacific Century*. Obama emphasised the importance of linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans in his speech at the Australian Parliament. "Clinton's frenetic Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, Kurt Campbell, was an evangelist for the notion as well," is how Glosserman likes to put it.<sup>5</sup>

In no time, the idea of the Indo-Pacific became popular in policy, academic, and media circles in Asia, Australia and the United States. Likewise, Indian Prime Minister Modi and the Australian government embraced the term. The Indian side stresses that the two oceans had always been linked before the US started treating them as two different theatres following World War II.<sup>6</sup> Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson used the term in his October 2017 speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 19 times, demonstrating the US acceptance of the strategy. Following President Trump's Asia tour in November 2017, the US government officials and government documents frequently began using the term.<sup>7</sup> Most analysts believe that the Obama administration's rebalance strategy has continued in the Trump administration with just a different name. Some Indian analysts call it Shinzo Abe's "strategic pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific" as does Basu.<sup>8</sup> Japanese observers refer to it as an effort by Japan at tactical hedging against China.<sup>9</sup> China, of course, considers it as a concerted attempt to contain its growing influence.

## The US Perspective

The Asia Pacific region has long been important to the US, especially since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Open Door Policy was articulated. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the region rose to prominence. So much so that Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton compared Asia-Pacific to post World War II Europe contending:

Just as our post-World War II commitment to building a comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions and relationships has paid off many times over....The time has come for the United States to make similar investments as a Pacific power...<sup>10</sup>

She believed that it was necessary to harness Asia's growth and dynamism to American economic and strategic interests. According to the *Global Trends 2025* Report by the US National Intelligence Council, "the unprecedented shift in relative wealth and economic power" from the West to the East will continue.<sup>11</sup>

President George HW Bush Sr believed that his experience and knowledge of China would enable him to arrive at an agreement with the rising power on the issue of global governance.<sup>12</sup> However, his assumption did not work out as planned because of the Tiananmen incident. On a similar note, President Obama came to power with a predisposition that viewed China as a strategic rival of the US. Soon after coming to power, Obama declared his policy of Pivot to Asia. During the Trump administration, China came to be viewed as a more serious rival whose rise and behaviour seemingly challenged the post-World War II liberal international order that was established under the leadership of the United States.<sup>13</sup> Obama's Pivot to Asia policy intermingled with the Japanese Indo-Pacific idea to evolve into the manifest Indo-Pacific construct. It is needless to say that the construct is still evolving.

Many in the US policymaking and expert circles view Chinese President Xi Jinping's rise to power and growing Chinese assertiveness in the South and the East China Sea and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as the major underlying determinants behind the formulation of US Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the contents of this paper are limited to understanding the US rationale with regards to policies to counter China, if necessary, stretching back to George W Bush Sr and even Richard Nixon.

Above in view, the Indo-Pacific policy evolved slowly and steadily over time although it may seem that Japan has actively pulled the reluctant United States into supporting a vision that Japan and India have been working on since the 1990s. Narendra Modi and Shinzo Abe developed cordial relations in the early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> It may seem that these two leaders were taking forward the Indo-Pacific strategy and Trump joined later.<sup>15</sup> Some Japanese experts—for instance, Koga—think that Japan's role in developing this policy has been crucial. But the way it has been evolving makes it clear that despite varying appearances, the US was involved in (re)writing geography as Tuathail would put it.<sup>16</sup> It has been quite long that the United States has been thinking about India as a counterweight to China.<sup>17</sup>

Certain discourses have surfaced from the views of American policymakers and experts and are found in speeches, interviews, seminars and, of course, writing. These discourses indicate why and how the United States articulated the Indo-Pacific policy. This paper puts forth six different strains but briefly discusses the relatively more important three;

1. Response to the Chinese challenge to the liberal international order
2. Balancing mechanism against an emerging major power
3. Conflict in the power transition

The aforementioned can be viewed as well-articulated and disseminated discourses.

### **Response to the Chinese Challenge to the Liberal International Order**

After the Second World War, the US was crucial in building a liberal international order (LIO) in which countries (outside the Soviet orbit) gradually became more open to trade and developed capitalist national economies. The European Union (EU) developed and remained secure under its security umbrella and East Asia blossomed. China's rise to power challenges this liberal system because China's rapid growth seemingly violates the prevalent norms of this system by trying to encircle India. It also engages in predatory economic practices like extending huge amounts of loans to corrupt governments and non-compliance with transparent rules of lending or bilateral economic relations developed over time by the Western countries and the Bretton Woods institutions, i.e., the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The United States, as the hegemon in the world order, tends to view its role as that of a guardian power overseeing the functioning of the LIO as well as identifying problems and finding solutions. It has contributed to globalisation, the process which, many in the US believe, has led to its decline.<sup>18</sup> It upholds the values and norms of the existing order and imposes sanctions when infractions of norms take place. By rejecting the international tribunal's ruling in July 2016 and by upholding the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, China ostensibly keeps violating the norms of this order. It is asserted that, in addition, China has continued its military build-up in the South China Sea, which violates the rules-based maritime order. It is implied that China's behaviour threatens freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as well as in the wider Indian and Pacific Ocean areas.

Under Xi Jinping, China has been ignoring Deng Xiao Ping's rule of thumb that China should 'hide its power and bide its time'.

China wariness has been a long-term trend in American foreign policy. Starting from Nixon, there has always been an effort to manage relations with China to have control over the growth of its power and wealth. The Asia-Pacific security architecture under the US leadership carried an undeclared goal of containing China. American military presence in the Asia-Pacific, as Stuart puts it, "...has also made it possible for the United States to sustain a strong neo-containment posture toward China without having to admit it publicly."<sup>19</sup> Glosserman too attests to this view. The US created a security system in East Asia based on the Hub and Spokes model. The spokes are South Korea, the Philippines, Japan and New Zealand. That is how Japan came to have more than 80 American bases.<sup>20</sup>

### **Understanding the Balancing Mechanism**

The Obama administration's renaming of the 'Pivot' as 'Rebalancing to Asia' marks the Indo-Pacific strategy as a balancing policy and not an aggressive containment policy. Obama wanted to engage China and managed to do so to some extent. The Indians at first viewed the policy more like a gentle balancing signal to China.<sup>21</sup> The Indo-Pacific seems tied with the emerging 'balancing' literature which contains suggestions about how the US can make a coalition that will be a balancing act.

The literature emphasises that the classic concept of balance of power needs to be refined and updated so the changes taking place in the international system and hitherto neglected phenomena of regional and small state balancing acts can be taken into consideration. Klieman believes that some modifications are necessary and those are: attention should be paid to balancing rather than balances; the mechanism for balancing not measurement of balances should be the focus of attention; regional and local balancing not only systemic or global balancing also demand analytical attention.<sup>22</sup> In addition, balance is not confined to only 'Politics among Nations' but is linked to internal-external linkages (for instance, level of development,

ethnic division, the composition of the population, technological sophistication etc.). This flourishing literature draws attention to the ability to intervene in ethnic relations or actual functioning of the economy and so on.

Balancing can be viewed as "...constant striving, the instinctive: the competitiveness, the instinctive or felt need to offset. Not so much the endgame as skill at playing the game."<sup>23</sup> The literature on balancing suggests multipolarity as a state where all states, big or small, qualify as 'aspiring powers'.<sup>24</sup> Because of this multifaceted power competition, geography has gained renewed salience. According to this literature, Sino-US rivalry, competition in East Asia, and the Iran-Saudi-Pakistan triangle can be considered as balancing mechanisms at work. Terms like bandwagoning, buck-passing, hedging, off-shore balancing are all part of the evolving discourse on balancing. Along with these can be added the destabilisation of an opponent through support for opposition groups inside the country. Klieman refers to this US Rebalancing to Asia that involves other countries like Japan as an example of the kind of balancing that the contemporary literature draws attention to.

Considering that the times are perplexing for the United States since the American unipolar moment seems to be dissolving and the features of the emerging system, though not evident as yet, do reflect a multipolar trend. Above in view, the existing body of literature also offers some recommendations for the United States. There is an agreement among some experts over the fact that the US is declining economically and not militarily. While the true basis of the aforementioned remains debatable, some commentators like to believe that the decline of the US hegemony is inevitable sooner or later. At this time of hegemonic decline, one policy suggestion offered in this literature looks very much like the Indo-Pacific coalition strategy. Thus, Rubinovitz suggests, "The preferred strategy is one of off-shore balancing that would have the United States rely heavily on



select regional allies with the ability to dominate their regions under an American umbrella of military, political and economic support.”<sup>25</sup> This option is suggested at a time when China’s goals and true intentions are supposedly not clear to the American policymakers.<sup>26</sup> It is also believed that the United States—if committed to maintaining its presence in East Asia—will have maritime supremacy and can manage China’s rise at a reasonable cost and while keeping the East Asian balance of power stable.

India does have apprehensions but it seems to have taken the Indo-Pacific as a balancing mechanism. Khurana refers to this as a gentle deterrence to communicate to China that it is crossing its limits. Japan also sees it as a rather soft balancing measure; that’s why Koga calls it ‘tactical hedging’.<sup>27</sup> Australia also emphasises balance as Hemmings points out that it “...orients Australia around an ideologically-driven economic strategy of building up India to balance Chinese dominance in the region.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Conflict in Power Transition**

China’s growth during the past three decades has been rather remarkable. Henry Kissinger who shaped Nixon’s engagement policy with China in the 1970s commented that he had never thought that China’s growth trajectory would be as fast-paced as it was. The 2019 US National Strategy Paper refers to China as a strategic rival. The idea that there has to be a power transition from the status quo hegemon to the rising power has become a prominent theme in the United States. Among the American scholars on power politics, Graham Allison and John Mearsheimer are vocal about the power transition. In the last 500 years, according to Allison, there have been sixteen transitions where one rising power replaced a declining power. And not so surprisingly, twelve of the said transitions came through armed conflicts.

The security architecture that was selected in East Asia after the Second World War was aimed at preventing the rise of any hegemon. A Pentagon Strategy Paper stated, "Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival ... that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union."<sup>29</sup> Mearsheimer himself contends that the US wants "... to be the hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and have no rival in either Europe or Northeast Asia."<sup>30</sup> Realists like Mearsheimer refute the constructivist argument that international relations are shaped discursively and point out that realism has held strong over the past seven centuries because it reflects how the international system is anarchic.<sup>31</sup> This is why, from the realist perspective, conflict is inevitable and one of the states is bound to lose. The zero-sum game logic is starkly clear in this argument.

Mearsheimer's views remained unchanged. In a recent debate with Australia's Hugh White, he commented that the aim of the US had remained the same. The US has crushed such rising powers before, for example, Germany, and other great powers like the USSR and it would do the same to China.<sup>32</sup> Believing in the dichotomy of one power defeating the other, nothing in between, he seemingly tried to persuade Australia to go all the way with the US-led alliance to contain China because if it chooses to do otherwise, the US could be quite difficult to deal with. In an alternative situation, if the US loses, the Chinese could similarly become a challenge to deal with and might work towards curtailing Australia's sovereignty. That is how great powers behave. It is needless to stress Mearsheimer's argument reflects reiteration of the realists' claims that designate China's dominance as a threat. Additionally, this also points towards what kind of pressures an ally like Australia faces and could further face from the involved experts who very likely have had close links with policy circles. Graham Allison has written a full-length book, titled

*Thucydides' Trap*, on how war becomes inevitable when power transitions occur.

It should, however, be mentioned that other experts view the rise of China through the prism of the concept of power transition and system change but have different views. Stuart has categorised them as adapters and game-changers.<sup>33</sup> Those who like Mearsheimer and Allison are called containers believing in the containment of China. The adapters, like Brzezinski and Hugh White, advise caution because of China's nuclear capability and point at the military power disparity to show that a conflict between China and the United States is not likely. Brzezinski sees China as a cautious power that does not aim to challenge the United States. He writes that the Chinese have "serious grievances regarding external issues, notably Taiwan. But conflict is not inevitable or even likely.... its focus remains on economic development and winning acceptance as a great power."<sup>34</sup> China's determination, he goes on to stress, to sustain economic growth demands a cautious foreign policy. "A confrontational foreign policy could disrupt that growth... and threaten the Chinese Communist Party's hold on power." The adapters also think that these two states will be able to find common grounds to tackle international problems.

Game changers believe China will eventually evolve into a democratic society. China faces economic, political, and environmental problems and the United States can help it so it can achieve a soft landing. Stuart himself suggests some policies that are close to the policies of the Obama administration. These combine balancing efforts with allies in the region in a manner that does not alarm the Chinese. That was how the Indo-Pacific was evolving when containment thinkers like Mearsheimer began talking loudly and impatiently about containment plus rollback.

### **The Indian Perspective**

India feels that China's rise is taking place at the expense of its influence.<sup>35</sup> From the Indian perspective, as from the perspective of the

US, China is challenging the prevalent international order. It wants to (re)shape it so it becomes conducive to its interests. The new order will seriously affect India's strategic and related interests.

India has noticed that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involves different kinds of connectivity infrastructures like roads, ports, airports, and pipelines. In addition, the BRI also includes ICT infrastructures such as optical cables across borders and submarine optical cables. India also noticed what Chinese leaders had been thinking and saying. Xi Jinping commented that the BRI is "...for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems and uphold the security for Asia."<sup>36</sup> There is a sense among Indian observers that China is financially stable and that it wants to invest abroad.<sup>37</sup> Additionally echoed are the Chinese narratives of wanting to change the international system, the lack of international best practices in Chinese aid and projects, and the debt burdens of the recipient countries. These narratives are shared by Australia, Japan, and the US. Some like Mohan point at India's sluggishness in letting China grab infrastructure building opportunities with characteristic efficacy; "This includes road links and gas and oil pipelines from southern China through Myanmar, and possibly high-speed rail links to Thailand. These are being built while India talks".<sup>38</sup>

Indo-Pacific, as articulated, reflects how important the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become. The concept of Asia-Pacific did not include the IOR. Indo-Pacific is thus a more inclusive concept. The idea of Asia-Pacific was promoted, Khurana believes, to draw Australia and Japan closer to the US in the 1970-80s.<sup>39</sup> India was thought to be geographically at a distance and so it remained uninvolved politically, economically, and strategically.<sup>40</sup> India's desire to support the Indo-Pacific strategy is mainly driven by its geo-economic objectives. It wants a conducive maritime environment for its economic growth. Along with this, it wants to participate in the 'strategic deterrence' against China.

The military aspects of the relationship are a critical component of this debate. The US considers India crucial in the Indo-Pacific construct. Former Director of the CIA, General David Petraeus, in his speech at the Raisina Dialogue hosted in India, said that the US shift in its lexicon from 'Asia-Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' was an explicit recognition of the importance of India.<sup>41</sup> It has been a long time that the US has been trying to bring India closer.<sup>42</sup> Indo-Pacific brings the two closer and India is now considered to be as important as a NATO ally.<sup>43</sup>

India aims to dominate the Indian Ocean. It is paying attention to the choke points: Malacca, Lombok, and Ombai and Wetar Straits. These straits link the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Malacca Straits is a very important choke point. Annually 70,000 ships transit through Malacca. Lombok is an alternative strait for larger ship movement. Whereas, Ombai and Wetar are submarine routes. If India manages to have a strong presence in these areas as a member of the Indo-Pacific coalition, it serves its strategic interests. Panda cites four factors for India's turn to the Pacific Ocean and each of the four have security/military implications.<sup>44</sup>

1. Security of Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs)
2. Increasing Chinese intrusion into the Indian Ocean
3. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US
4. India's growing ambition in the Indian Ocean.

The fourth factor seems extremely important for Indian neighbours in terms of understanding its foreign policy; primarily, how its importance overshadows the first two factors. In India's calculation, the Pacific Ocean is vital in protecting the Indian Ocean security.

India seeks to build a connection with South East Asian countries from its northeast and considers Southeast Asia as its extended neighbourhood.<sup>45</sup> India's extended neighbourhood is the

same as the Indo-Pacific. As Panda puts it "This concept of 'extended neighbourhood' suggests a classic mixture of soft power as well as hard power projection with continuous political, economic, and ideational engagements that India steadily employs in different regions of the world".<sup>46</sup> The Indo-Pacific construct, by linking the two oceans, has drawn India's attention to the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and India now strives to develop military linkages with them. For India, the two oceans are interlinked now and this proximity can expand its security outreach to the Pacific Ocean. Prime Minister Modi in his speech at the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation Summit commented, "... we also look forward to goodwill visits by Indian Navy to Pacific Islands."<sup>47</sup> This shows Indian inclination toward the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea as the gateway for shipping to East Asia and linkage between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

India's participation in the Indo-Pacific has made it militarily closer to the US. Beginning from the Bush administration, the US has been actively wooing India. Traditionally, India purchased arms from Russia (previously USSR). But US arms sales to India have been steadily going up since 2008 when US-India defence trade was close to being non-existent. From then onwards, it has become \$20 billion.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, India was made a Major Defense Partner in 2016 and was given Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier 1 status (STA1) in 2018. The STA1 status enables India to enjoy license-free access to a large group of military and dual-use technologies under the ambit of the Department of Commerce.

India purchased MH-60 Seahawk helicopters (worth \$2.6 billion), Apache helicopters (worth \$2.3 billion), P-81 maritime patrol aircraft (\$3 billion), and M777 howitzers (\$737 million) from the US. It also bought the Sea Guardian, a Missile Technology Control Regime Category 1 unmanned aerial system which is manufactured by General Atomics.<sup>49</sup> The Department of State is pushing the sale of F-21s (by Lockheed Martin) and F/A-18 (by Boeing), the most advanced models

of fighter aircraft. The State Department believes that all these weapons systems will enhance the Indian ability to safeguard shared security interests in the Indo-Pacific. The emerging Indo-Pacific strategy has opened the Indian arms market for the US military-industrial complex and India, it has created opportunities to purchase state of the art military equipment. As an Indian member of the foreign policy establishment wryly notes, "Under Trump, therefore, we will have to deal with a transactional administration supportive of strengthening India as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, but also counting gains for itself."<sup>50</sup> During Trump's visit to India in February 2020, the two sides reached an agreement that allowed India to purchase arms worth \$3 billion.

The economic factors that have drawn India into the Indo-Pacific coalition can and must not be neglected. An alliance with the US facilitates the inflow of investments from Japan and Australia in addition to increased trade with the US itself. Japan has already initiated new investment projects in India. India hopes to develop its underdeveloped north-eastern states by leveraging Japanese investments and technical cooperation.<sup>51</sup> Japan is already engaged in building the Delhi-Ahmedabad bullet train railway system. The US trade war with China created hopes that other leading companies would shift their businesses to India as well. India's prominent role in the Indo-Pacific will also upgrade its status in the region. The onset of the Covid-19 crisis has been seen by many to be a factor in India's ability to draw more Western investments because multinational companies now want to reduce their over-dependence on China as a supplier of components. Modi has already expressed hopes that India following the Covid-19 crisis, India is now perfectly in a position to become the main global supplier. The US expects more cooperation from the Modi government with some multilateral trade arrangements where differences between the US and India persisted and led to a "certain amount of 'scratchiness' and lack of progress."<sup>52</sup> The Modi

government, with its policy of coming very close to the US and its ally Israel along with getting India into the Indo-Pacific coalition, seems to be ready to further open up the Indian economy to American investments in response to the US demands.

Modi wants more reforms in India to speed up economic growth and he has US support for it. The American government and business elites agree with Thomas Pickering:

In fact doing business in India for the United States opens up new opportunities that can be very significant. Having worked for the Boeing Company for a number of years... I find that is a good example of how a large American firm can work in the vast Indian market. On a high-tech front, Boeing enjoys the benefits of increased sales, particularly of commercial aircraft but also of military equipment and at the same time works with Indian suppliers on everything from software to aircraft parts. This produces a mutually beneficial relationship as well, not only in pure business terms but also in opening up opportunities for future cooperation and mutual confidence.

Over the years, the Americans, have not only specified problems in India—such as patent and copyright issues—but have also indicated that they were very interested in building partnerships with Indian businesses. They want to be partners in everything, "... from the IT sector to the construction sector." Hence, the US desire to build a partnership not only inside India but globally is not just a sudden policy change. The Obama administration worked hard to build a strategic partnership with India.<sup>53</sup> India was already considered a linchpin in Obama's Rebalance to Asia strategy. Economically, India wanted the US and the US wanted India. US policy circles were abuzz with notions of 'two great democracies coming together' for quite some time.



It must be noted that never before this point in time has India been this close to the United States. Its tradition of non-alignment and cordial relations with the USSR (and then Russia) and for some time with China in the 1950s (Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai) made it appropriate to be close to these countries for Indian intellectuals, policymakers, and bureaucrats. Narasimha Rao, A.B. Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and various others tried to build a close relationship with the US but faced strong internal opposition.<sup>54</sup> India's good relations with Russia or China were viewed as progressive whereas good relations with the United States were viewed as regressive. However, Modi has apparently succeeded in overturning the historic preferences of the previous ruling governments in India. Modi represents the rise of worldwide conservatism which is manifest in the US in the forms of Trump's white supremacy and economic conservatism, in France as Macron's populist conservatism, in Britain as conservatism becoming captive to Trump administration, and in Japan as Abe's nationalism and conservatism. Some like Raja Mohan believe that Modi substantially aided Trump's re-election bid. He states, "Unlike many of America's friends, the Modi government was willing to take some political risks in appearing to endorse Trump's re-election at the 'Howdy Modi' rally last September in Houston."<sup>55</sup> Trump came to Delhi in February 2020—with the US elections looming in November and the Corona crisis deepening—to clinch a \$3 billion arms deal about which he had this to say, "... tomorrow our representatives will sign deals to sell over \$3 billion in the absolute finest, state of the art military helicopters and other equipment to the Indian armed forces .... Together, we will defend our sovereignty, security, and protect a free and open Indo-Pacific region for our children and for many, many generations to come".<sup>56</sup> The two sides, however, were not able to agree to sign even a limited trade package even after two years of negotiations. Trump imposed tariffs on aluminium and steel products from India and withdrew GSP benefits from some labour-intensive products, consequently removing

India from the US list of developing countries. All this, says Singh, “flies in the face of citing strategic partnership and convergence in Indo-Pacific Strategy.”<sup>57</sup>

## Japanese Perspective

Japan has claimed that it has formulated the Indo-Pacific Vision that was expressed through Prime Minister Abe’s speech at the Indian parliament in 2007. For Abe, joining the two oceans brought the dynamic coupling of two seas of freedom and prosperity. Many Japanese policymakers and experts like to emphasise that the Indo-Pacific vision is a global policy initiative formulated by Japan; they call it Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Tadashi Maeda, Governor of Japan Bank of International Cooperation, said that Shinzo Abe proposed the policy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific to Trump in 2017.<sup>58</sup> Maeda added that it could be called a counter-proposal to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It has three elements, i.e., rule of law, open and free trade, and navigation. The Japanese Prime Minister and his national security advisor visited India, the UK, and the US, trying to put together and then solidify a coalition that would balance the rising China. Kentaro Sonoura, the national security advisor to Abe, said in his presentation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Japan is an island nation and maritime security is its security. At a time when the rules-based international order is being challenged (by China), the two oceans which form the global growth centre together must be open and free as a global commons and this will ensure global peace, prosperity, and stability because half the global population is touched by the two oceans.<sup>59</sup>

According to Sonoura, the Indo-Pacific region faces the following challenges: piracy, terrorism, the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), illegal fishing, natural disasters, and unilateral attempts to change the status quo. For him, the purpose of the Indo-Pacific vision is to ensure stability and prosperity, not only for this region but for the entire world. Sonoura meticulously describes the three pillars on which the Japanese government claims that its Indo-Pacific vision stands as following:

1. Rule of law and rule-based order. This requires compliance to the United Nations Convention on Law of Sea (UNCLOS) and concrete actions to ensure freedom of navigation.

2. Economic prosperity through connectivity via quality infrastructures that conform to international standards. Infrastructure needs are enormous in the region. For many years Japan has helped Asian countries with policy-making including help with building physical connectivity, i.e., roads, ports, railroads, etc. It helped with the improvement of people to people connectivity through human resource development and the development of institutional connectivity through facilitating customs and procedures. In developing infrastructures, Sonoura believes, "...we have to conform to certain international standards such as openness; transparency, economy of lifecycle, financial viability of recipient countries, job creation and capacity building, social and environmental costs and so forth."<sup>60</sup> It is implied that Chinese projects do not have these qualities.
3. The third pillar is sustaining peace and stability. This includes assistance for capacity building for maritime law enforcement. Cooperation is needed on anti-piracy, anti-terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Japan thinks it is important to enhance the enforcement capabilities of the coastal states by providing patrol vessels and materials related to maritime security, holding joint exercises are equally essential. Sonoura mentions that Japan and the US are cooperating on enhancing the maritime law, which enhances the capacity of the Southeast Asian countries. In November 2017, the Japanese coast guard and the US coast guard held joint exercises with the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Japan believes it is important to work on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. Japanese policymakers like to stress that FOIP is open to all countries who support this vision. It by no means targets specific countries. Japan, Sonoura emphasises, aims at building cooperation with European nations which have strong political, historical and economic ties and experiences with Indo-Pacific nations. With regards to countries that can be included in this ambit, Japan intends to cooperate with the US, India, Australia, Saudi Arabia and other countries in South Asia. Japan was open

to more countries being included beyond the four core countries, i.e., Australia, India, Japan, and the US. Such a large coalition would certainly look very aggressive to any observer since the underlying reasons for its conceptions were, to balance, however gently, a rising China. He emphasised that Japan is with the Indo-Pacific strategy because it needs to be linked with other areas with bearing potential for growth like Africa, Asia, and India.

The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which originated in 2004 and consists of the four Indo-Pacific coalition countries – Australia remaining away for a ten years interregnum—deals with the security aspect and military operations. Sonoura contends further that Japan does not envisage the evolution of the Quad into an organised institution like an eastern NATO. Japan, he believes, wants to see it as a very flexible network of security cooperation. There should be synergy between the strategies of the four countries but each country must have its own strategy. Simply put, the member states must not be under any pressure to adopt a particular strategy. Japan even does not want a stronger Quad. Considering China's behaviour in the South China Sea, Sonoura does not seem to blame China for any of its actions. Commenting on the observation with regards to Japan losing an enormous opportunity because the Philippines did not pursue the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, he carefully contends that Japan's current focus is on providing equipment to ASEAN countries that do not have long-range vessels to prevent illegal fishing. Japan would provide them with petrol vessels, air planes, and radars so that they could take care of their problems themselves. As he put it, "We are not going to press them; and that is the Japanese way."<sup>61</sup>

Japanese experts have tried to explain how and why the Indo-Pacific strategy has emerged and why Japan is in it along with its partners. Tsuruoka thinks since Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions have become quite interconnected and what happens in one region eventually affects the other.<sup>62</sup> It is, for him, quite closely related to maritime security, which refers to the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and other areas, so that SLOCs remain protected, as does Japan's trade. He stresses that there are some elements of competition alongside some elements of cooperation. His views come close to Sonoura's assertion that in

the Indo-Pacific strategy Japan and the US stand on different positions as Japan is more focused on economic cooperation whereas the US on its own security and primacy. Koga expresses similar views but emphasises some additional factors like ASEAN not being able to reach a consensus to endorse the 2016 UNCLOS Arbitral Commission verdict when China was rejecting it. China has been strengthening its influence in Asia and beyond, not only through trade and investment but also through its BRI projects. As Koga puts it, "Despite the Obama administration's 'pivot/rebalancing' policy towards Asia, US effectiveness and commitment continues to remain uncertain, particularly since President Donald Trump took the office in January 2017."<sup>63</sup> Japan declared its FOIP strategy in such an uncertain atmosphere. This strategy, Koga believes, aimed at "maintaining the existing regional order based on US preponderance by readjusting the regional strategic balance."<sup>64</sup> Koga supports the view that Japan initiated the Indo-Pacific but also dedicates due attention to maintaining US preponderance. This is not the first time that the US has threatened Japan with abandonment.<sup>65</sup> It is what critical geographers like Tuiathail would call writing/ scripting/rewriting the world. Something the imperial/hegemonic powers do as did Mackinder when he discovered/conquered mount Kenya in 1904 when the British empire was trying to stall its decline.<sup>66</sup>

### **Australian Perspective**

Australia's identity as the 'European Outpost' has been shaken by the rise of Asia, especially that of China. Australia fell into a 'US or Asia' binary dilemma after the end of the cold war and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific strategy seemed to resolve the dilemma.<sup>67</sup> Hemmings notes, "Australia has been an essential component of the concept from the very beginning."<sup>68</sup> But even Hemmings whose initial impression leads one to believe that Australia entered the Indo-Pacific with the hope of solving its identity-related problems further adds that "One of the challenging aspects of the Indo-Pacific concept is that while it seems to answer the 1990s binary of 'US or Asia'... it may well replace that with another, that of 'US or China.'"<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, identity-based issues and structural economic dependencies are not separable pieces for Australia. Australia is substantially dependent on the US for its security and on China for its economy. It entered this coalition with hesitation and sometimes tried to pull away towards a more balanced position. Personal rapport was indeed built among Tony Abbot, Shinzo Abe, and Narendra Modi, and the strategic and security interests of the three countries seemed to be merging. However, when Akitaka Saiki, the Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, referred to China's aggressive attitudes and the three countries coming closer in New Delhi in June 2015 after a trilateral meeting, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary, Peter Varghese, hastened to dilute the impression that the trilateral meeting could be thought to be an 'anti-China front'.<sup>70</sup> Some Australian observers, like Lang, thought that being in the trilateral could provide Australia with autonomous decision power from both China and the United States. As the noise about a military conflict between the US and China became louder the Australian government emphasised more and more that it did not want to be involved in an ideological confrontation with China and Australia and would decide its course of action, keeping its national interests in mind. India and Australia might have been a bit naïve in believing that the Indo-Pacific was going to be a gentle balancing mechanism against China. Covid-19 helped unleash strident attacks against China in addition to facilitating a call for delinking from China while accelerating cold war-like tensions. This strengthened the realisation that the Indo-Pacific coalition considerably reinforced United States' position in the strategic rivalry between China and the US. The Indo-Pacific is a coalition of the world's democracies and supports liberal Western values such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and human rights. Needless to say that when such a coalition calls itself a group of democracies, China is certain to feel that it is being a target of a

democratisation attempt, overt and covert, as Deng Xiao Ping believed happened during the Tiananmen turmoil in 1989.<sup>71</sup>

Barack Obama's Rebalance to Asia strategy was milder than the Indo-Pacific in the sense that the Obama administration was trying to engage China. Even that strategy brought forth what Brendon Taylor called "a marked disjuncture between official Australian pronouncements on the US pivot and the sometimes quite heated public debate that has emerged."<sup>72</sup> Taylor found criticism and suspicions among Australian policy and opinion makers about the US ability to work with regional allies to manage China's rise. Malcolm Fraser, former Australian Prime Minister, criticised the pivot as "American militarisation of the Western Pacific" and "containment" of China.<sup>73</sup> Very recently, on October 28, 2020, Kurt Campbell, former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific during the Obama administration, said that generally, Australians felt that the United States was being hard on China.<sup>74</sup> In Australia, the intellectual division on how to deal with China is symbolised by Rory Medcalf and Hugh White with Medcalf strongly supporting the Indo-Pacific construct and White advocating realistic and more flexible management of the rise of China that can be done through US sharing power in Asia with China. Medcalf was concerned about China's rise and thought that a balancing alliance was needed in the Indo-Pacific region. However, his pronouncements became increasingly strident as the tension between China and the US accelerated under Trump.

Medcalf believes that Indo-Pacific has long been here.<sup>75</sup> Historically the theme of maritime connectivity has been important. But he emphasises that this was an Asian theme not Chinese and that's how BRI centres around a myth that China wants to recreate its maritime connections. He calls China's economic aid to poorer developing countries as 'China's accelerated imperial expansion'. For Medcalf, BRI is a benign form of expansion. He draws a parallel between European colonialism and China's mental map of the region

for designing BRI. It is indicated that it is possible for Australia, India, Southeast Asian countries, and the US to potentially constrain China's path. He believes that the entire idea needs to be considered beyond binary terms, i.e., China and the US as the only central players of the game. Middle power coalitions have several options to pursue and this evidently reflects in the way Japan has managed to push against China. The term middle power diplomacy has been used by analysts who support the Indo-Pacific idea; it seems like an attempt to legitimise the US-led strategy to different constituencies in the participating countries.

Hugh White made the famous suggestion that the US should share power with China in Asia in his book, *The China Choice* (2012).<sup>76</sup> He asserts that the rate at which China has grown in the past decades was a major event of the century since the Europeans settled in Australia or probably in human history.<sup>77</sup> This growth shall inadvertently result in shifts within the global power distribution. China's quest to alter the order prevailing in Asia is quite natural a motive, as per Hugh White. Its desire to change the US plan to preserve the order could lead to a strategic rivalry. Australia intended to grow on China's wealth based on US power.

However, with the rising risk of conflict between China and the US, Australia faces two challenges, i.e., How can it help avert a conflict and how can it deal with a bitter rivalry? The Australian government, in his opinion, has failed to address both challenges. "Every nation wants US presence in Asia and every country values its relations with China. They want the US to balance China, not dominate Asia but the US wants to dominate Asia."<sup>78</sup> By 8 August 2019, he began sounding pessimistic and worried. He felt the US had moved into a China containment strategy. As the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense talked about a new cold war, he began to see little reason for incurring the cost of a confrontation with China.



Australia is aware of its geographic destiny and feels that its economic destiny is intermingled with its geographic destiny as the rise of China has indicated. As an Australian analyst puts it "The onrush of China has been so central to this decade that it's difficult to summon up the hysterical response eight years ago to Hugh White's heresy; the proposition that America should cede some power to negotiate a new regional order, retaining a lesser but still substantial American strategic role in Asia to balance China's power".<sup>79</sup> But as the Indo-Pacific Strategy started gaining momentum after Trump assumed power, Australia began feeling pressure from both directions. Added to this was the fact that 1.2 million Australians are of Chinese origin and 600,000 of them were born in China. Australians have the impression that the US felt a close ally like Australia would be 'Finlandised' and would slowly slide into China's orbit. An influential official from the Obama administration expressed his frustration over this by saying, "We hate it when you guys keep saying, 'we don't have to choose between America and China!' Dammit, you do have to choose, and it is time you chose us."<sup>80</sup> Many Australian analysts feel that Australia should adopt an independent foreign policy cutting its own suits and not riding on someone else's coat-tails.

### **Contradictions and Uncertainty: Inherent and Emerging**

The Indo-Pacific strategy embodied certain contradictions. This paper discusses only the most relevant of the said contradictions. The first contradiction lies in Japan's role and understanding of the strategy. It is normal for scholars to point at Japan as a significant factor in the origin and development of this strategy because Japanese leaders felt that the United States was withdrawing from the Asia-Pacific. This impression was created under the Trump administration through its withdrawal from the TPP and other agreements. But the United States has always emphasised the importance of the Asia-Pacific and as noted earlier, Hillary Clinton

viewed the Asia-Pacific to be as important for the US as Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Hugh White's (2012) entire book revolves around the idea that the US does not want to lose primacy in the Asia-Pacific. The credit goes to the Trump administration policy of using the Indo-Pacific strategy as the foundation for the escalation of the Sino-American conflict to the level of the initiation of a new cold war and the carefully crafted image of President Trump as a whimsical, erratic, rough leader of the populist type. This is not the first time that the United States created the fear of abandonment in Japan.<sup>81</sup> This pressure on Japan pushed it to buy more weapons from the United States.

The states in the Indo-Pacific coalition emphasised different goals and their definitions of the Indo-Pacific geographical area are different. As Gyngell puts it, there is "no such thing as the Indo-Pacific." He thinks that it is "simply a way for governments to frame the international environment to suit their policy objectives in particular circumstances."<sup>82</sup> The United States defined it as the area from its west coast to Aden across the Western border of India. Australia defined Indo-Pacific in its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper excluding eastern Africa and as "ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States."<sup>83</sup> Australia's definition is much more restricted than both that of India and Japan. Its definition reflects its policy decision to focus on the Eastern Indian Ocean. Japan also has a different definition of the Indo-Pacific with emphasis on Southeast Asia and it is, to some extent, interested in having a share in contribution to African development. For the Japanese, both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are important but it is more focused on the Pacific Ocean. India also sees the Indo-Pacific area as extending to Africa but it tends to see the Indian Ocean as a space where India should have dominance. As David Brewster stresses, many Indian elites see the domination of the Indian Ocean as India's destiny.<sup>84</sup> India faces some constraints which

are both internal (its capability) and external. The United States has control over the oceans. The US is willing to cede some control to India under the Indo-Pacific strategy but the extent of that control-sharing depends on whether India acts according to US interests.<sup>85</sup> India participates in the Indo-Pacific strategy but for it, the Indian Ocean is of primary importance and the Pacific Ocean bears secondary importance.<sup>86</sup>

It appears that the lesser powers were playing a much more important role while the US was thinking about withdrawing from the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, Japan and Australia seemed more eager to take this forward. The chemistry or *apparent* chemistry among the four leaders, Abe, Abbot, Modi, and Trump tried to convey that there was a unity of purpose among the global conservative forces. But a closer look peels away the appearance showing how different these countries were with regards to their divergent interests. India is not as allied to the United States as the other two countries are. Economic development levels are different as India lags behind the other two. India wants to preserve its strategic autonomy and does not want interoperability of forces. India has long land borders with China and the latter's close ally Pakistan.

## **2020 US Elections and Changes**

Under the Trump administration, especially after the onset of the Sino-American trade war in 2018, the rhetoric surrounding the Indo-Pacific became tough. Trump seemed poised to lead an aggressive right-wing conservative containment—with important conservative allies like Boris Johnson, Narendra Modi, Emmanuel Macron, Scott Morrison—using the Indo-Pacific as the pillars of that containment. Some like John Mearsheimer believed that the United States would even 'rollback' China. There were talks about an imminent cold war. As the Malabar exercise started to become more regular in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladeshi experts began referring to the Bay as a theatre of conflict. Many saw the trade war as an attempt

by the US to decouple the Western economies and especially the US, from the Chinese economy. This talk of and efforts towards decoupling intensified after the Covid-19 crisis burst into the scene. Rather than trying to manage the Covid crisis together with other major powers including China, the United States started blaming China for its origin. The intellectual supporters of the Indo-Pacific were not far behind with Medcalf stressing that the Covid crisis would force countries (outside the Indo-Pacific coalition) to think twice and make their own calculations as to on which side they would be.<sup>87</sup> Covid and the accompanying lockdowns all over the world brought with them concerns about supply chain vulnerabilities. There were talks about companies rushing out of China. Japan offered an incentive package to Japanese companies to shift businesses from China.

Japan was lukewarm from the very beginning. As time passed it had more misgivings and it moved away from the United States. India and Japan also felt pressured to buy more US arms. As Koga pointed out, Japan's FOIP policy would not be very meaningful without ASEAN participation. ASEAN did not sign on to it, rather it came out with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) which emphasises everyone's participation including China and ASEAN centrality. As the Covid crisis intensified, Japanese scholars expressed doubts about the Indo-Pacific. Sato, for instance, indicated that Japanese companies were not interested in leaving China, incentives notwithstanding.<sup>88</sup> He expressed doubts about whether Japan would be as interested in this strategy once Prime Minister Abe left office. This is not surprising given Japan's history of relations with China. Some Japanese governments distance the country from China whereas others prefer to have warm relations with it. Welfield clarifies that no matter how eagerly American governments may want Japanese governments to go along with their wishes, they may see their "...hopes turn to ashes in the face of resistance, both overt and concealed, on the part of Japanese Prime Ministers, powerful

conservative faction leaders, the Diet, the bureaucracy, the media, and the general public.”<sup>89</sup>

Over time, the Trump administration began connecting the strategy with its re-election campaign, which required a hardening in its posture. The other three members probably did not want to see the Indo-Pacific buttressing a full-blown cold war against China with whom they had good relations and subtle Japanese dissent became more and more evident. As the Japanese economy felt the blow of Covid, the dissenting voices became louder. Japanese experts began talking about how an unprepared Japanese foreign policy establishment was hesitant about the Strategy and how they had not even had a clearly defined map of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, in the Japanese government maps, the area of the Indo-Pacific kept shifting because of pressure and counter pressures. This is being publicised despite Japan being crucial in proposing the Indo-Pacific idea. It becomes clearer when Jimbo says in his presentation that Japan had to adjust the concepts it used in the Indo-Pacific. It had to delete the word democracy and it no longer calls it a strategy; now it calls it a vision. Japan is now one of the fifteen countries in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) along with China.

Covid-19 lay bare the potential impacts of the sudden decoupling on the world economy. Some punitive steps taken by China were considered rather harsh by Australian businesses. As the 2020 US elections approached, it became clear that both Australia and India were shifting their positions. In a webinar, the Indian experts made it clear that India wanted to guard its strategic autonomy and the Indian foreign policy establishment was uncomfortable about tilting towards the US.<sup>91</sup> The Australian expert emphasised the necessity for Australia, India, and Japan to work together on economic measures. They also discussed how the two could, in future, discuss things among themselves as a trilateral coalition and then present their consolidated position in meetings with the United States during

a Quad meeting or Indo-Pacific strategy sessions. This hints at their discomfort about the Trump administration's steady pull to a Cold War posture.

As the 2020 elections approached, the confrontation, combined with the trade war, began to look like a traditional cold war with an added factor of 'race' when the Chinese ambassador to the United States commented that the US could not accept China as a major power because it was not ready to accept an 'Asian country' as such. Signs of the onset of a cold war became clearly manifest via several events such as the closing of consulates and intensifying pressure to choose sides. The Indo-Pacific was at the centre of Trump's foreign policy although it may seem to be a collective policy initiative proposed by Japan. It did not remain a gentle deterrent as soon as Donald Trump became well ensconced. Isolationist attitudes and pressures exerted on US allies notwithstanding, the image-making and centring of Chinese containment became a prominent feature in the Trump administration policy framework. The Indo-Pacific became the foundation of a win or lose attempted cold-war type containment that had bipartisan support. Trump's audacious, even reckless, "Bull in the politico-economic China Shop" image is a well-crafted product created to instil apprehensions equally among friends and foes.

The American foreign, military, and business elites began to rhetorically step somewhat away from the aggressive, anti-China phase of the Indo-Pacific. This strategy mutated again. This time around, moving closer to the Obama administration's policy with a more mature understanding of the nature of the global transformation. Lectures, conversations, and interviews with the US political elites before and after the 2020 US elections including those with Kurt Campbell, Michele Flournoy, Henry Paulson, to name a few, revealed that they were keenly interested in the Trump administration's policy towards the Asia-Pacific. They were basically in agreement that it would be wrong to articulate a China policy with a

cold war mindset. They believed that things had to change and could not continue as in the Trump administration.

Campbell and Flournoy, both former important Obama administration officials—Flournoy was under consideration for Biden's Defense Secretary—stressed that the US needed to focus more on domestic rejuvenation. The Biden administration needs to see that Research and Development (R&D) get enough attention and the competition between China and the US takes place in the economic field and not the military arena although the military has to be in the background, indicates Campbell.<sup>92</sup> Indeed Democrats and Republicans (Henry Paulson, for instance) are emphasising almost the same policy themes. Their themes are

- i) The US should listen more carefully to allies and be more receptive to allies' input;
- ii) Modernisation efforts need to be directed to the US domestic economy;
- iii) Diplomatic capacity building must be emphasised;
- iv) The United States cannot afford to disengage from the Indo-Pacific;
- v) A better understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by China's rise is necessary.

But the theme that eclipses all others is:

- v) The United States is falling behind and the old methods that the Trump administration was using are not working and may even have been counterproductive.

Flournoy thinks that there exists bipartisan consensus on the Indo-Pacific strategy and the rise of China poses challenges. The US-China competition is in all fields: political, economic, and military. Hence, it is the issue of which model is better.<sup>93</sup> Americans need to invest in science, education, and research as well as technology development. In addition, a smart immigration policy is necessary so that talented people find a home in the US. The infrastructures have to

be modernised to the level of the twenty-first century. There has to be long-term strategic planning, for a 5-10 year vision in mind. There should be a proper division of labour among allies. American military aid can be leveraged and the smaller states should know what is expected of them. Engagement with China is crucial. "How do you address climate change without China?" asks Flournoy. She believes that the new Pacific Initiative modelled after the European Initiative is a good start by the US Congress although funding for it is only \$300 million whereas the price tag for the European Initiative was \$4.5 billion.

Paulson believes that the competition between the US and China is structural because one is a predominant power and the other is a challenger with a different economic system and ideology.<sup>94</sup> US decision-makers have serious concerns about China's rise and it is bipartisan as Campbell and Flournoy affirm. There should exist competition but it should not spin out of control into conflict. He hopes that the Biden administration will be more predictable. He articulates a concept of 'targeted reciprocity'. For him, the Trump administration used blanket reciprocity of payback to the Chinese. Retaliation, he emphasises, has to be very specific on particular sectors and not all out. Total decoupling and all-out retaliation end up hurting all parties: China, the US, and the rest of the world. He believes that if there is total decoupling, the US would be knocking out its own major companies from being suppliers in the supply chains for the fastest-growing markets and not participate in global research and global standard-setting. Paulson's inclination as reflected from the above points towards his focus on business concerns.

From what three important members of the Democratic and Republican political elite Campbell, Flournoy, and Paulson, stress, it seems that there has emerged a consensus that the cold war-like retaliatory policies followed by the Trump administration could no longer continue. But 'China represents a strong challenge' part of the



consensus is going to remain. Cooperation and competition must go hand-in-hand whilst bearing in mind that the United States businesses will benefit and have benefitted from selling to the growing market. The Chinese policymakers have been stressing the themes of cooperation and competition from the very beginning. Paulson specifically stresses that the United States will do well in China, selling financial services as well as green services and products to China. None of them advocates disengagement, as a matter of fact, Campbell even talks about the resurgence of engagement that Orville Schell declared was dead. This comes close to an elite consensus to veer away from the aggressive retaliatory posture of the Trump administration while keeping the Indo-Pacific intact.

## **Conclusion**

The Indo-Pacific strategy has been a fast-morphing effort since its conception under the Obama administration. The policy was pulled towards a cold war that many warned, both in the US and China, was no longer possible because of several factors. Two of the most important factors in this regard were China's economic growth and its close relations with the US. It is hard to believe that this was a sudden pull to the extreme, led by an erratic businessman. Ever since there has been a bipartisan consensus on the policy and Trump's image has been a facilitating factor. However, the economy of the United States has taken a hit as many state governors who advocate sub-national level relations have emphasised. Many US policy elites now are advocating a more specific focus for the strategy instead of its complete dismantling. They also advocate dedicating more attention to domestic development, i.e., education, R&D, and infrastructure modernisation. Frequent and louder calls for the need to listen to allies are probably a sign that a move toward a milder balancing mechanism is the goal the US allies had been advocating for long, notwithstanding Australian Prime Minister Turnbull's cold war speech.

Taking the world economy on a downward spiral while trying to hold and strengthen a coalition is difficult even for a country like the United States. Covid-19 has paradoxically shown what decoupling from China can mean for Japan, the United States, India, and certainly for Australia. Meanwhile, foreign policy conduct in each of the aforesaid states has been rather glaringly different. India seems to be nostalgic about its strategic autonomy before it entered the Indo-Pacific. Japan swings away and towards China in its foreign policy. Abe's period can be seen as a period of swinging away from China. US business interests have been hurt. China is willing to rebuild relations.

The United States is shifting gears in the sense that it is perhaps not going to dismantle the strategy because that will mean political pressure from hawkish elements from both parties. It can be argued that things will now be soberer, that is, fewer surprises and sudden pulls to the extremes. Trump administration's dramatics will be missing to the relief of the Germans and even the Indo-Pacific allies. The Biden administration might accommodate the emerging consensus from both the Democratic and Republican parties that it is important to focus on domestic necessities like education, technology both civil and military, social harmony and inclusion of minorities, and a more liberal immigration policy. Externally, it would respond more positively towards the Chinese position that cooperation and competition can coexist and foreign relations do not always have to be a zero-sum game. But it should be kept in mind that the two governing parties in the United States are not very different. Yet, global reality has changed and Biden's milder style with the same policy is a reflection of that. However, this does not yet mean a change of heart. Smaller countries may find themselves under more and focused pressure by the US under Biden.

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