
The Significance of Neo-Realism in Explaining the US Indo-Pacific Policy

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Regional Studies
Vol 39, Issue 3
pp.88-107
© Author(s)

<http://irs.org.pk>
P-ISSN: 0254-7988
E-ISSN: 2959-5459
Date of Acceptance: 1 July 2021

Abstract

Many scholars in the past have studied the Indo-Pacific region using realist and liberal perspectives. Liberal theorists present the formation and success of ASEAN as the pinnacle of regional cooperation. On the other hand, the realist theorists seek to explain the competition between China and neighbouring states in the South China Sea (SCS) as the inevitable outcome of international politics in the absence of any authority. However, in the scholarly literature, there is a gap in addressing the significance of the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis the international structure which is now predominantly influenced by the US-China competition. Hence, neo-realism elaborates the functioning of international structure and, thus, the paper explains the US tilt towards the Indo-Pacific and how neorealism can be applied to describe its competition with China at the global level. The paper frames its argument in three parts. First, the basic tenets of neo-realism are defined and compared with the features of classical realism. Second, the neo-realist approach is adopted to analyse the context of US Indo-Pacific policy. Finally, through the case studies of Quad and AUKUS, the validity of neo-realism is discussed.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, China-US competition, neo-realism, international structure, Quad, AUKUS

Introduction

Since the emergence of the nation-state system until the Second World War, the absence of any overarching power or authority alongside the existence of many great powers tangled in ferocious competition, resulted in an international system that functioned on

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anarchic lines. The first attempt to tackle this state of anarchy, initiated in the aftermath of the First World War, was through the League of Nations. The institutionalisation was done to protect the weaker states by granting them equal status in the international structure and prevent the outbreak of war through a rule-based order. However, the German assertion in Europe in the shape of the Second World War led to the failure of the League of Nations. According to EH Carr, the socio-political realities and the conflict of interests between states was the reason for the failure of this ideal venture that was based on democratic peace and borderless societies governed by these institutions.¹ In the post-Second World War period, another attempt was made with the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 to act as a platform for implementing universal values and a rule-based system. However, the structure of the UN was formulated in a way that the core authority rested within its Security Council (UNSC) comprising China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. The very notion of 'first among equals' contradicted the basis of the UN Charter, which declares every state in the international system as equal in status.² Furthermore, the institutional status coupled with the military, economic, and ideological strength of both the US and USSR determined the post-Second World War period as bipolar. The collapse of the bipolar structure in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the unhindered US supremacy for the next 20 years are seen as watershed events that flourished the liberal norms and values in two stages, i.e., institutional liberalism (from 1991 to 2001 through promoting democracy and capitalism) and interventionist liberalism (from 2001 to 2011 by using the military muscle to impose liberal values in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya). Nevertheless, the diffusion of threat from these countries was replaced by the emergence of a power vacuum which invited the regional states to wield their influence, i.e., Iran became more influential inside Iraq while Libya has been experiencing a civil war between the

Government of National Accord (GNA) and Khalifa Haftar's forces. Moreover, the burden of the financial crisis on the US economy also contributed to shrinking the US hegemonic clout across the globe which was filled by China's economic rise. As the Chinese economic presence around the globe increased, its assertion, most notably in the Indo-Pacific region, where the US navy operates to ensure freedom of navigation as well as to consolidate its global power status, has increased. It represents a dilemma for the US global status and stakes in the region. Resultantly, the US is once again confronted by a competitor at the international level which gives prominence to the tenets of realism over liberalism.

Therefore, this article attempts to assess the US policy in the Indo-Pacific by addressing the following two inter-related questions:

1. Why is neo-realism the main theory to explain US policy in the Indo-Pacific?
2. How does competition in the Indo-Pacific impact the international structure?

Theoretical Framework

Neo-realism is also termed structural realism. It is mostly premised around the stable operation of the international system through the causal patterns in the behaviour of states and the idea of 'balance of power'. The main idea behind the development of this theory was to elaborate the shortcomings of classical realism that could not explain the systemic properties of international politics and focused solely upon the state-level analysis to explain the cause(s) of conflicts through the inter-related features of power maximisation, self-interest, and competition.³ However, neorealism moves beyond this theoretical abstraction at the state level and gives a more scientific approach. Neo-realists did not believe in this narrow definition of international relations rather argued that it was much more than human nature, selfishness, and self-interests. Kenneth Waltz, the architect of neo-realism, in his book *Theory of International Politics*

highlighted the role of the international system as the prevalent cause of the states' behaviour.⁴ He pointed out that the international system had an anarchical structure that drove states towards power accumulation and competition to survive and thrive, i.e., every state acts similarly.⁵ Neo-realists say that states, no matter how powerful they are and how much institutional dominance they enjoy at home, are not free of the constraints that the international structure puts on them. Hence, states act under the international political structure and their positioning in the international hierarchy.⁶ Classical realism takes the state as an autonomous actor in the international system, whereas neorealism considers it as an adaptive/passive actor in the international system. Neo-realists contradict the classical realist argument that instead of pursuing absolute gain, states tend to focus on relative gains, i.e., assessing the cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis the competitor.⁷

Within the context of neo-realism, two sub-divisions broadly define the state's behaviour, i.e., defensive and offensive realism. Under defensive realism, states tend to prefer defence over offence through either building up their military arsenal (mostly practised by medium powers) or through extending their security sphere to other territories or states, i.e., through the formation of protégés (practised by the great powers). Through the second approach, great powers tend to ensure the balance of threat in accordance with the perception of threat dependent upon the potential as well as the proximity. However, defensive realism also explains the eruption of war as a *misjudgement*. When a state takes a defensive measure, it could be perceived as offence and aggression and, thus, it is the tragedy of international politics, as Waltz argued, that put the states in a difficult position.⁸ On the other hand, Mearsheimer frames great powers as power maximisers. Owing to the anarchic system, suspicious of rival states' behaviour and being inherently offensive, great powers exploit

the absence of universal authority to provide security guarantees and dominate other states.⁹

Through both these concepts, the application of neo-realism can aptly be applied to the US policy in the Indo-Pacific. Defensive realism can be used to explain the US policy towards China in the Indo-Pacific as an attempt to balance the latter's power to maintain the status quo. Although bilateral conflicts make their relations uncertain, as a whole they can cooperate through balancing power in achieving their respective goals to prevent the conflictual scenario in the region. Nevertheless, by employing the tenets of offensive realism, the two countries challenge the status quo and are seeking to maximise their power to gain utmost influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, there is a competition for hegemony between the two states that has been shaping the region as a conflict zone.

Renewed US Focus on the Indo-Pacific

The Obama administration's policy of 'Pivot to Asia' was simply an extension of George Bush's policy of developing friendly and cordial relations with the Asian region, given the growing realisation of China's emergence as a dominant economic power. The US talked about the military presence in the region, helped in developmental projects and most importantly established alliances with states that shared a similar vision for the area.¹⁰ The most notable efforts in this regard were the 2009 trip and visit by the then Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, to the region and the ASEAN Secretariat. Hilary Clinton signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) which signified the basis of the US role in Southeast Asia.¹¹ Obama also visited Asia in 2010 and the first bilateral strategic dialogue between the US and Philippines was held in 2011.

The Obama administration laid out three objectives in the Indo-Pacific. First, it highlighted the US economic interests in the region owing to the prosperous and growing economies of ASEAN states. Second, considering China's claims over the disputed maritime

territory in the region and the possible hurdles that it could create for the US freedom of navigation, it was important to develop plans to curtail it. Third, the US had an important task to ensure its commitment to the region to maintain good ties with its allies as a by-product of being the policeman state.¹² Nevertheless, the US perception of China as a potential military and political challenge remained the galvanising factor between itself and its regional allies. Although the Obama administration claimed the US tilt towards the region to be for economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural reasons, its politico-military alliances with the regional states cannot be overlooked. The US has increased its military presence in the South China Sea, whereas Beijing has claimed most of this disputed waterway. The US sends routine missions in the South China Sea that evolves China's response. For example, the Carrier Strike Group One (CSG1) units have had military exercises with the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) units such as the Malabar 2021 and the Maritime Partnership Exercise.¹³ The increased military presence of the US is attributed to the expanded role of China in the region while the US was involved in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, once the US had reduced its commitments in the Middle East, under the pretext of the free market, trade, and freedom of navigation, the US focused on the Indo-Pacific and justified its military presence by stating its support for weaker states like Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.¹⁴ The persistence of US naval presence in the region reflected the US policy of dismantling China's claims in the South China Sea, which for China is a backyard for economic and security purposes. The region is home to conflicts and diplomatic standoffs as it is rich in natural oil and gas, fisheries, trade routes, and military bases.¹⁵ The South China Sea is rich in hydrocarbons and therefore has become the bone of contention among China and the neighbouring states and also among the US and China. Furthermore, China has claimed the disputed islands as its territory in the region and hence it rejects the

application of liberal rules. This is to say that in 2016, the Hague Tribunal gave the decision in favour of the Philippines in its case against China on the disputed islands and stated that China had violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines in those waters by disturbing its petroleum exploration and constructing artificial islands. The tribunal also said that China could not make territorial claims as some of the waters were within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Philippines.¹⁶ However, the Chinese rejection of the tribunal decision raised security concerns due to the intensification of maritime disputes. Both the US (along with its allies) and China are contesting each other's claims in the region and have different interpretations of freedom of navigation. Amidst the rift between the US and China, regional states are left with the dilemma of balancing between the two powers. For them, China's rise complements the economic development of regional states while the US military presence ensures their territorial security.

Thus, in the US Indo-Pacific context, neo-realism seems more applicable as it focuses on the structure of the international system and explains states' behaviour under it. From the standpoint of defensive realism, Chinese dominance and political stability depend upon free accessibility to resources and markets which it will try to protect. The Chinese grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) testifies its ambition of emerging as an influential power across regions and in the international structure. However, as per China's official policy, its economic influence is not directed towards challenging US supremacy but to reinstating its position in the international hierarchy. Nevertheless, being tangled in the *Thucydides Trap*, which proposes the vulnerability of an established power by the rising power, the US adopted the policy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific to counter Chinese inroads in the region through the BRI. Accordingly, regard, the latter adopted the strategy of A2/AD, i.e., anti-access/area denial, to safeguard its interests in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the

South China Sea. Both the states have adopted the official position of a defensive strategy against each other, however, as any defensive tactic of one is deemed as an offensive act by the other, the concept of offence and defence, particularly in the South China Sea, becomes indistinguishable.¹⁷ China looks towards settling its affairs in the South China Sea without an external actor and most notably a major power, i.e., the US. It is for this reason that China has called for a settlement among the neighbouring states without any US influence and therefore has promoted the idea of 'Asia for Asians'.¹⁸ Beijing is focused on a much more open and free dialogue with its neighbours and is looking to maintain regional primacy through calculated policies and strategies like anti-access and area denial. These strategies help China in cutting off US strategic proximity to China in the South China Sea region. China's A2/AD strategy intends to halt the enemy's movement on the battlefield, stop the adversary's military movement in the operation area using attack aircraft, warships, and ballistic and cruise missiles to strike the target. In that, air denial is a defensive strategy to deny freedom of action to the enemy using advanced air and sea defence systems.¹⁹ While practising this strategy, China increased its military presence in the South China Sea which led to the inevitable competition with the US. With advanced technology, China is assertively playing its role by using maritime and air defence systems alongside advanced ballistic and cruise missiles to deter the US. China has deployed anti-ship cruise missiles like the Yj-12 and Yj-18 supersonic missiles with an approximate range of 500 kilometres. The Yj-100 is its longest-range Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (ASCM), ranging between 650 and 800 kilometres. China also possesses air and Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM), with a range that is over 1500 kilometres.²⁰

Offensive realism entails that states act in pre-emption during a deterrence dilemma, perceiving the capacity build-up of the rival state as provocative, or in some cases, threatening. Therefore, to

counter this threat, Washington unveiled a 'third offset' strategy which will help it with power projection and in deterring adversaries in the South China Sea region, whilst reassuring its allies. The US under this strategy is seemingly looking to bolster US conventional military power by mobilising innovations, technologies, and new reforms.²¹ Moreover, it is noteworthy that the third offset strategy was developed as a rebuttal to China's strategy of the hybrid conflict and A2/AD. Despite China's insistence that the aforementioned policies were developed for different purposes, the US seemingly perceived them as the former's agenda for power maximisation. Furthermore, keeping this in view, former US President Donald Trump initiated the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which was signed in December 2018. The Act iterated the fact that the US has been giving a lot of significance to East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania and that these regions have become a focal point in the US foreign policy. India was given the status of a 'major defence partner' under the Act—an upgrade from the status of a 'strategic ally' under the Obama Administration. The Act also proposed the continuation of cooperation with its treaty allies like Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. In ARIA, three interrelated aspects of the US policy merged to solidify its relations in the region, i.e., economic, military, and political. In economic terms, China has used predatory economic policies and protectionism, trade tariffs, and modernisation alongside development projects to influence its neighbouring states to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to its advantage. The US in return hardened its China policy when it threatened to apply tariffs on Chinese imports and wanted China to revise its policies on issues like the trade deal, technological theft, and currency manipulation.²² Furthermore, the US investments in the region have renewed as part of counter-balancing the Chinese financial outreach. To contain China's rise under its rebalance approach, the US focused more on the economic and military

elements. Under the Obama administration, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) served as an economic NATO in Asia, assisting in side-lining China and in undermining its influence over the region.²³ In the first phase of the Trump administration, the US withdrew from the TPP although it proved to be an effective tool in containing China and was central to the US's 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. As a direct counter to China's territorial claims, Trump focused on fighting Beijing's assertiveness with unilateralism in his foreign policy and focused on the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act. Trump strengthened defence and security partnerships with its allies in the region to contain China. In 2018, he re-negotiated the South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) to lower the US trade deficit.²⁴ In the political domain, the US has been promoting its values to transform the region into a democracy. Democracy has been in regression in most of the South Asian states, which have witnessed the rise of populist and nationalist leaders, but under the Trump administration, the prospects of democratisation of states in the South China Sea region increased as Trump encouraged these allies to counter China and its presence through a liberal rules-based order. To fight China's revisionist policies in the Indo-Pacific, the US has been asserting itself through the democratisation of regional allies.²⁵ It already considers India as its strongest democratic partner and is now working to incentivise the democratisation of states like the Philippines and Thailand. The promotion of democracy to build a consensus of like-minded states against a common challenge reasserts the US's position as a global leader. Furthermore, the US policy of establishing value-based ties highlights the reconfiguration of ideological politics in the post-Cold War period which presents the potential of bloc politics. Lastly, the US has also pursued the military option through the formation of two organisations, i.e., Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which comprises the US, India, Japan, and Australia and AUKUS which includes Australia, the US, and the UK. In

Biden's presidency, the focus on Indo-Pacific has further deepened which can better be explained through describing the aforementioned organisations.

The Quad

The Quad includes the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, and is an informal group that has intensified its security and economic ties as a measure to counter China. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad in short, first came together in 2007 under the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, it got disbanded due to protests and backlash from China.²⁶ Quad member states are working on handling the security, economic, health, and other issues that they might face being vibrant economies. The focus of this group shifted because of China's assertive behaviour in the region, which they wanted to counter with a more constructive approach. From being an economic alliance, Quad shifted its focus to security issues and the joint naval exercises comprising all four nations started in November 2020 in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).²⁷ In this informal arrangement, India is a strategic partner of the US while Japan and Australia are its treaty allies. A lot of global export and import passes through this region. According to a UN Report, about 42 per cent of the world's exports and 38 per cent of global imports are speculated to pass through this area.²⁸ Being a revisionist state, China is not only challenging the status quo in the region but also poses a challenge to the Western-led democratic and rule-based values that the Quad members are the torch-bearers of. Due to this commonality, there is a consensus between the member states since all Quad countries consider China's politico-economic as well as military activities in the region as a threat. Japan wants to offer the Southeast Asian states alternative sources of assistance and commerce. On the other hand, in addition to the Chinese assertion, India's crucial role for the US in terms of navigation, security, and ensuring the maintenance of rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific is pertinent. Indo-China relations have

already dipped since the border clash between the two states in Galwan Valley in 2020 which resulted in casualties on both sides.²⁹ Furthermore, China also established its first military base in Djibouti which signifies its intent of ensuring its military presence in the IOR.³⁰ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that India does not want any clashes with China and is, therefore, maintaining a safe distance from it. India is well aware of the China-Pakistan strategic and economic collaboration and also the situation in Afghanistan that poses a serious terrorism threat to India. Therefore, it is most likely that India will avoid any active confrontation with China. For Australia, Quad is a way to deal with the non-traditional security threats and also other issues like climate change but most significantly, Australia too, like the other members, aims at countering China's dominance and influence in the region.

The Quad, after being resurrected in 2017, brought all the four states under one umbrella as they had common interests such as maintaining a stable balance of power in the region, freedom of the seas, an open rules-based order to counter the debt-trap diplomacy, and coercive strategies by China to make territorial claims in the South China Sea.³¹ The US is making incremental progress in countering China and containing its rise via its allies in the region. Despite being under pressure from Beijing, the US renewed the Quad with a new purpose in March 2021 that evoked China's response of labelling the US decision as a strategic blunder.³² China views this renewal as an attempt to contain its rise and one of the top Chinese diplomats labelled it as 'the Asian version of NATO'.³³ The four Quad member states converge on geostrategic interests that can be well explained using the neorealist perspective. The pivotal objective of these nations is to maintain a stable balance of power so that a regional state like China could be prevented from disturbing the status quo. As the neorealist assumptions suggest, the international system is anarchical and the states act in power-maximising ways to ensure their survival

like the US as it attempts to counter China's rise, simultaneously building consensus to sustain the status quo. Moreover, the US does not want China's territorial claims to impede international trade or its ability to play the role of a balancer in the region by militarily supporting its alliances in the South China Sea. Hence, Quad's perspective not only revolves around the like-minded states on common ideals but also entails the features of a regional politico-security setting that can ensure the survival of the US-led international order.

AUKUS

AUKUS was envisaged in September 2021 as a trilateral security arrangement between the US, the UK, and Australia. The inception of AUKUS is framed to be more consolidated than that of Quad for certain reasons. First, AUKUS highlights the nuclear-related transfer of arms, i.e., nuclear-submarine promised by the US and the UK to be delivered to Australia.³⁴ Second, the member-states of AUKUS have been close allies for decades. The UK has been the closest partner for the US and has supported the latter in its war against Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, Australia has participated in every US-led war since 1917. Additionally, all three members of this alliance have been sharing their intelligence under the 'Five Eyes' alliance, formed during World War II. Australia shares a similar security arrangement with the UK as both states are members of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA), along with New Zealand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.³⁵ Hence, both the US and the UK are streamlining their positions in the Indo-Pacific by elevating the role of Australia. Given global power competition, the US attempts to join the UK and Australia signifies three features: First, unlike Quad in which the regional participants collaborate under the US patronage, AUKUS explicitly highlights the US ambition of rallying international support for its Indo-Pacific strategy against China. It is evident from the inclusion of the UK and the importance of its defence arrangement

with regional states (i.e., FPDA). Second, the US intends to direct its concentrated efforts against China which could be more focused. In Quad, for example, despite having Japan and India, the framework is less prospective in containing China, owing to economic compulsions and geographical proximity of both these states vis-à-vis China. On the other hand, Australia has been vocal against China by demanding an international investigation into the outbreak of Covid-19 and banning Huawei 5G technology, while the UK is also searching for space in the Indo-Pacific through its 'Global Britain' policy in the post-BREXIT period.³⁶ Hence, Australia's apprehensions and Britain's ambitions can best be implemented under US sponsorship. Third, in sync with the first two arguments, by actively collaborating with the international powers in the Indo-Pacific, having a liberal global outlook, the US revitalises its leadership position which has been damaged during Trump's period.

AUKUS was articulated in a manner that ignored the EU interests. Since World War II, the US and EU have been constituting the 'Western bloc' and the 'liberal world order' that share almost similar views on major global issues like terrorism, democracy, international trade, and the threat from revisionist powers. Nevertheless, the BREXIT issue which European states consider to be influenced by the US and Trump's incessant demands from the European states to increase their contribution to the NATO budget significantly affected the transatlantic relations.³⁷ Although President Biden re-committed himself with the European security, AUKUS presented another issue of divergence between the US and EU. By openly criticising the AUKUS framework, France, despite spearheading the EU Indo-Pacific policy as a regional power, called back its ambassadors from the US and Australia. In the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2021, ASEAN states are given important status and confrontation with China is explicitly overruled.³⁸ This highlights two important features, i.e., Europe's participation in Indo-Pacific as a major actor and its contestation with

the US. Hence, it paves the way for the unravelling of great powers' competition that includes China, the US-led bloc and the EU, which testifies the neorealist claims of power maximisation and mutual mistrust, i.e., a state of anarchy.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the US has been using the South China Sea disputes as a reason for its military advancement to ensure its military presence in the region to contain a rising China. Therefore, the neorealist theory explains the US practices in the Indo-Pacific region. Rather than using realist explanations, this paper has cautiously examined the US pivot towards the region using both offensive and defensive realism. It is noteworthy to witness the global power shift from the West towards the East in terms of both economic rise and military strength while China finds itself at the centre of this shift. The other countries in the region also have incentives to increase their relative power through allying with the global power (i.e., the US) as the neo-realist theory suggests. The US planned to increase its military presence in the region and has worked to elevate its status. In the case of the US military actions, offensive realism seems to be more persuasive because of the establishment of its military footprint in the region which can help the US sustain its hegemony in the region. The Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement was initiated by the US to establish economic hegemony and side-line China's ambitious BRI project in the region. This agreement was based on the models of past US free-trade agreements which highlight the US policy of developing a rule-based order in opposition to China. However, as the US proactively tries to contain China, its efforts in the region contradict that of Europe and some regional allies like India and Japan. Hence, proving the relevance of defensive realism, as Europe seeks cooperation with China. In the case of Sino-Indian economic relations, both states have been witnessing a rise in their bilateral trade. Both defensive and offensive realism is reflected in the US

strengthening of alliances and domination of multilateral regional organisations or mechanisms. The US has supported Japan's provocative actions in the Sino-Japanese island dispute to balance China's influence in the region and secondly to gain the hegemonic position by weakening China. The US does not want the situation to escalate into a war in the region which is a defensive realist approach. In this regard, the US has time and again threatened China with sanctions; an act that explains the prevalent trade war between the two. Trump's 'America First' policy and sanctions alongside trade war are also regarded as offensive realist policies. The transformation of economic confrontation towards the military aspect, i.e., AUKUS, is yet another explanation of neo-realist claims that are based on multi-level engagement. Conclusively, this paper is a preliminary attempt to analyse the international order through US actions in the Indo-Pacific. As the shift from Europe to Asia is happening and China has replaced Russia in competition with the US, the Indo-Pacific region plays a crucial role in determining the overall international structure and, hence, the neo-realist approach comprehensively outlines it.

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