

QUAD TO AUKUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION AND BEYOND

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Abstract

China's growing status as an economic hegemon and United States' recent withdrawal from Afghanistan has caused it to be keener in its offshore balancing strategy than ever before. Since the Continent of Asia has remained the most contentious theatre for global power politics in recent past, major powers are not willing to lag behind economically or militarily. Besides Indo-US strategic partnership, US has recently ignited another concern of arms race and the weakening norm of nuclear non-proliferation regime by introducing the AUKUS alliance in parallel to the resurgence of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Inception of such regional strategic arrangements is directly posing grave threats to regional peace and broader strategic stability. The Indo-US strategic partnership and US leverage has encouraged India to be more aggressive in its hegemonic designs in the region and would likely continue to do so. Consequently, the region and particularly Pakistan, is likely to face all enhanced security challenge which would need to be countered. This paper aims at evaluating the global and regional implications of Quad and the AUKUS, suggesting possible response options for Pakistan to counter the growing Indian aggression in the region.

Keywords: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS, Asia-Pacific Strategy, Offshore balancing.

Introduction

The beginning of 21st century is marked with the People's Republic of China becoming the world's second largest economy with gradual increase in its military spending.¹ Since then, the United States realized that the competing power is right on track to take the place of the US as the largest economy soon in a period of a decade or two, as predicted by Goldman Sachs Chief economist Jim

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O'Neill.² Soon, the then US administration (Obama's) shifted its focus towards the Asian region while terming it as the 'Pivot to Asia'. This strategy³ mainly focused on bolstering the bilateral security alliances, strengthening ties with emerging powers like China, investing and participating in regional multilateral arrangements and retaining stronger military presence. With variability in trade relations, both the US and China, continued to make on-and-off agreements on major common interests and challenges including climate change.

In 2014, South China Sea emerged as a major dispute between China and regional allies of the US.⁴ The US opposed China's military buildup and expansion on the disputed Islands, as well as creation of new islands on atolls littering the South China Sea. China maintained that the buildup was purely for civilian purposes. While continuing the freedom-of-navigation-operations by its Navy, the US kept airing her concerns over China's growing maritime presence. With arrival of Trump's administration, trade war between the US and China intensified. The US increased tariffs and called China 'a currency manipulator'.⁵ The already tense environment got worse with the outbreak of pandemic in 2020 when the US blamed China to be the originator of COVID-19. With the closure of consulates on both sides, the US-China relations kept deteriorating during the Trump's era.⁶

Arrival of Biden's administration in January 2021 resulted the decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan, which had otherwise become an impossible foreign policy maneuver. It was apprehended that the US would re-shift its focus in line with Pivot to Asia policy with an emphasis on limiting China's freedom of using open and free Asia-Pacific Ocean while enhancing her global power status. The US clearly undermined her fears of losing power in Asia-Pacific with its unwise policies towards emerging powers and her allies. The Asia-Pacific strategy, thus emerged, which did not surprise many. President Joe Biden stated in Quad Leaders' Summit 2021, "The future of each of our nations and indeed the world, depends on a free and open Asia-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead."⁷ The message is loud and clear. After getting its hands off Afghanistan, US is coming to Asia-Pacific with full force and attention. The back-to-back minilateral⁸ agreements with regional allies are the evidence that Biden administration is planning at least half a century-long strategic presence in Asia-Pacific. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Australia-UK and US trilateral security partnership (AUKUS) and the Sydney Dialogue, both in 2021, are three recent arrangements which are understood to have decades long impact and strategic implications for the region.

The aforementioned recent geostrategic developments are showing the US' reconsideration of offshore balancing policy. It is revamping its grand strategy and strengthening its regional alliances via shifting the balance of power through militarization and use of emerging critical technologies. While doing so, the US is inviting another arms race, and a new Cold War in the region with graver consequences on the region and beyond. The US has started calling the Asia-Pacific region as the Asia-Pacific region, clearly aimed at projecting India's status and link with the region. This will have repercussions for South Asia where India, now being the closest ally of the US, has serious territorial disputes with China, with respective armies facing each other in the Himalayas, besides having been the traditional competitor of China. The territorial disputes between India and Pakistan are also not likely to be settled anytime soon due to India's enhanced hubris while the militaries of the two nuclear-armed countries are facing each other since Independence in 1947. India's aggressive posture against Pakistan is likely to be enhanced due to her strategic alliance with the US. This study is aimed at examining the US policy of offshore balancing to counter the risen China and the implications that Quad and AUKUS would have globally, on South Asia and particularly on Pakistan.

Assessing the Current US Strategy in Asia-Pacific

The US-China bilateral relation is often defined as neither friends nor foes, a simple but effective definition of the two major powers' bilateral relations. This inter-state relation is a perfect example of a pendulum between competition and cooperation. This co-existence of competition and cooperation makes it difficult for the global foreign policy observers to accurately predict the future dynamics. Even though there have been incessant frictions between the US and China over arms sales to Taiwan, territorial and maritime disputes involving South China Sea, civil liberties, trade imbalance, and nuclear proliferation related concerns, issues of global governance and forums; balanced dynamism remains vital between the two since the end of the Cold War. Although the US attention was apparently directed towards Afghanistan for the past two decades, but in essence it was an unannounced strategic containment of China and Russia. After the withdrawal from the war-torn Afghanistan, the US is clearly continuing to do the same – containment of China by re-orienting its grand strategy.

Part of this grand strategy includes the offshore balancing in Asia-Pacific region and part is countering the already grown influence of China in the region.⁹ Offshore balancing -which is explained later here-may appear to be a radical

concept today, yet it suits the US well for decades to come as the governing rationale of American foreign policy. Earlier, the US concentrated on expanding throughout the North America, building a successful state and attaining hegemony in the Western Hemisphere during the 19th century. The US undertook the task of maintaining the balance of power in Europe and Northeast Asia at the end of the century. But it permitted the powers in those regions to keep a check on one another -with the military only intervening when necessary- when the balance of power was tipped, as it happened during both the world wars.¹⁰

In an emerging multipolar world order, because the US cannot prevent the rise of other great powers, offshore balancing is an attempt where the US could pursue a burden-shifting policy in which other states assume the responsibility for preserving regional power balances and influences. The two major threats to US national interests, based on which US attempts to revitalize its offshore balancing in the Asia region are; one, China is gradually replacing the US as the primary power in Asia, using its economic fist while weakening US alliances and undermining the reliability and trust of its allies. Second, China would attempt to strengthen its military power as much as to transform its strategic posture from defensive-restraint to offensive thus challenging and undermining the US military power. The offshore balancing would act as a shield for the US against future great-power wars while maximizing its relative power potential in the global arena. The approach would make the most of military-technology advantages while still allowing for strategic flexibility.¹¹

After a long gap of drifting away from offshore balancing and adopted hegemonic strategy i.e., ambitious strategy of creating new hegemons regionally which could ultimately challenge or counterbalance the US' position, it is reconsidering and applying the offshore balancing to strengthen its alliances and allies once again in Asia. A renowned neo-realist, Christopher Layne explains that the hegemonic strategy has been more costly and less effective for the US in the recent past.¹² The two strategies differ in a sense that offshore balancing takes multipolarity as an opportunity rather than a threat whereas hegemonic strategies focus on greater unipolarity agenda. While uplifting India, providing it with the leverage on multiple platforms and indirectly encouraging its aggressive posture, the US has already invited much regional backlash and opprobrium. It has gained very little out of it against China provided China's gradual rise as economic and military power and its role in regional as well as global issues. With the arrival of relatively decisive and deviating new US administration, Biden is re-applying the

offshore balancing strategy in Asia to reinforce its Asia-Pacific or pivot to Asia policy. With this revival of offshore balancing policy, the US has initiated two major regional agreements in a single year 2021; Quad and AUKUS, re-building the blocs and strengthening alliances to contain China while using India, Australia and other regional countries as balancer states.

While analyzing the detailed accounts on AUKUS and Quad, it would become evident that both these agreements are posing grave threats of arms race and intensifying strategic competition between Washington and Beijing, but also upsetting many regional parties.¹³ Although Pakistan does not geographically lie in the pacific center of gravity, yet being the significant regional state with traditional rivalry of India, is under indirect impact of such strategic developments with already deteriorating Pak-US relations over time and India's mis-adventurism. It warrants exploring the purpose, scope and implications of the Quad and AUKUS to draw policy options and recommendations for Pakistan.

Resurgence of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

With the slogan of 'free and open Asia-Pacific', the US along with Australia, India and Japan convened to re-emphasize the dormant Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Japan was the first country to initiate the partnership in 2007 as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue¹⁴ to basically counter the Chinese economic and military rise with an apparent cause of mitigating the common emerging challenges of climate change, cyber space, critical technologies and infrastructure, maritime security, disaster-management and more recently COVID-19's impact on the economy. All four countries share common interest of maintaining a maritime order, based on the free trade of goods and services across the region.

In the past, with China's official protest and critiques over Quad being the 'Asian NATO', it was in July 2007 when the Australian Defense Minister visited China to discuss bilateral military ties. He assured the Chinese counterparts that the so-called quadrilateral dialogue with India is not something that they were pursuing.¹⁵ Aside from the concerns of China, the democratic process also contributed to the dissolution of this quadrilateral agreement. Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe, the key initiator of the agreement, resigned in September 2007.¹⁶ In India, Manmohan Singh had to deal with political turmoil and opposition towards his maritime manifesto and nuclear deal between Indian and the US. Given its quest for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG), India was particularly sensitive towards China's reaction at the time.¹⁷ Last but not

the least, the quadrilateral debate died in November 2007, when Australia's prime quadrilateral dialogue's critic Kevin Rudd became the Prime Minister.¹⁸

With a second life, Quad 2.0 emerged after a decade when the strategic environment got relatively tenser with worsened concerns over China's maritime expansion. Quad 2.0 appears to have won bipartisan approval within Australia.¹⁹ Canberra's strong commitment to trilateral discussions with the US and Japan, as well as with India and Japan, was reaffirmed in the government's 2017 foreign policy white paper where it is clearly mentioned that 'Australia is open to cooperating with its Asia-Pacific allies in different plurilateral arrangements.'²⁰ The continual breaks in achieving Quad's objectives remained the divergences in the interests of its member states. Whereas Japan and India have direct territorial disputes with China, Australia has no territorial conflict with China or any other neighboring state and wanted to retain neutrality in its foreign policy. With Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and its funding to Pacific Island nations, Australia got keener in its friendly ties in the region.

In March 2021, on the invitation of US President Joe Biden, all the four leaders met virtually under the banner of 'The Spirit of the Quad'.²¹ Despite regular diverging interests, all four states aim to pursue a stable balance of power in the region with free-to-move waters and a rules-based economic system. This has been the recent mutual driving force behind revival of the Quad. Later on, after a six months gap, the leaders of all four states met in person to strengthen the commitment towards the aims and objectives of Quad in the Quad Leaders' Summit.²² Beginning with the COVID-19 response and relief mechanism, all four leaders pledged to deepen their cooperation in the realms of Science & Technology,²³ climate crisis, critical and emerging technologies, security and stability of shared future in the Asia-Pacific and commitment towards complete denuclearization of North Korea.

The cooperation within the framework of Quad is an irritant for China and other regional states having conflicting relations with either of these four member states. Yet, Quad still does not bother China's economic and military interests as much as the recent parallel trilateral security partnership does.

Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States - AUKUS

With the resurgence of Quad, the leaders of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced the creation of an enhanced trilateral

security partnership called 'AUKUS'- representing Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US.²⁴ The agreement has the aim of strengthening the ability of each of the three partners to ensure the security and defense interests in particular, with deeper information and technology sharing and integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains. The agreement began with the initiative of assisting Australia in acquiring a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. Additionally, the trilateral collaboration aims at enhancing the joint capabilities and interoperability in terms of cyber capability, Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, emerging critical technologies, and undersea capabilities other than submarines.²⁵

The first and long-term round of the agreement, assistance in building nuclear-propelled submarines, is although years long process yet the US and UK would shortly begin establishing nuclear-submarine building capabilities and infrastructure including crew, engineers and maintenance personnel. Yet, getting a country prepared for such a sophisticated and sensitive technology should not be taken as an ordinary task. Concerns have been raised even from within Australia that how a country with no prior civil nuclear energy program could suddenly start managing the nuclear-powered submarine operations?²⁶ Indeed a country must first know the controlled and responsible handling of radioactive material like Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU).

The second round related to emerging critical technologies, AI and undersea capabilities under the AUKUS partnership would enable the states to get a firmer coordinated grip over regional security and defense mechanisms. The emerging military technologies and their consequential dynamics are still debatable and yet to be explored. The increased focus on these under AUKUS would provide technological leverage to the countries with advanced and shared technologies; yet would bring the risk of triggering accidental and erroneous conflicts under and over sea and maritime routes, which needs to be critically looked into.

While adding up to the momentum of Quad, AUKUS is comparatively more precise in its scope and objectives. It has also invited immediate reaction. Firstly, Australia cancelled a multibillion-dollar contract of diesel-electric submarines with France.²⁷ France condemned and called it a stab in the back and President Emmanuel Macron recalled the French ambassadors from Washington and Canberra immediately. Despite taking a bold step of discarding one of the

largest contracts, Australia confidently objected France's claim by highlighting that it already had concerns over the agreement with France related to the delays, cost overruns and suitability which had been aired officially and publicly for years.²⁸ Secondly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has a disunified response to AUKUS with genuine concerns regarding regional peace and stability. Third, China's response could not be underestimated when it calls these developments 'a return of Cold War mentality'²⁹ and says it will not care for its bilateral relations with any of the state menacing with China's core interests.³⁰

Implications of Quad and AUKUS

The two parallel approaches of Biden administration towards the Asia-Pacific i.e., resurgence of Quad and inception of AUKUS provide US with the sense of satisfaction that criticism taken over its ill-handled withdrawal from Afghanistan was worth a pain when it is gaining military balance in the Asia-Pacific with the help of its allies. Additionally, Sydney Dialogue which is another nascent annual forum referred as 'minilateral group' which brings prosperous tech firms and governments together to work for the emerging technologies is also significant parallel to Quad and AUKUS, in order to promote cooperation in security and technological advancements.³¹ In short, the US is re-strengthening its commitments towards its allies along with its own presence through AUKUS and the Quad to counter China's growing military, economic and technological hold on the region. While the US and Indian claims are not to mix these quadrilateral and trilateral agreements, AUKUS is complementing the aim of Quad as it contributes to allow the Asia-Pacific for free and open trade by shifting the military balance away from China. Thus, many regional states, prominently Japan feeling threatened by China's military presence and naval expansion, have welcomed AUKUS equally as they welcomed the Quad. Although the US seems to be strengthening its position in the region, the considered measures have serious implications for the days to come which do not seem to be thoroughly thought over consequences. Therefore, it is necessary to mention the probable consequences of emerging regional agreements.

Regional Unrest

The US is aggressively maneuvering in Asia-Pacific to an irreversible politico-military contestation which increases the risk of war by encouraging its allies to advance their offensive military capabilities. This is also disrupting the regional stability and harmony. By demonstrating China as equivalent threat to

the region as North Korea³², Washington is projecting Beijing being 'offensive' in its economic and military policies and is deepening the rivalry. Yet, by only focusing on militarization, Washington overlooks China's already gained economic hegemon status which remains undeniable for the world and unavoidable for the region. This is the one primary concern raised by the ASEAN member states on AUKUS. Indonesia and Malaysia have raised their rational concerns of geopolitical turmoil over Australia acquiring a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines while Singapore being closest ally of Australia has shown concerns while being less pressing upon.³³ Vietnam and the Philippines seem to be welcoming the step and calling it to be ensuring strategic balance in the region.³⁴ It is likely that the agreement would create deeper disunity within ASEAN in the longer run and would urge the member states to take sides with US or China while damaging its efficacy. The other less likely incident could be the unpredictability of how Australia would use this military power maximization in dealing with the regional states, particularly ASEAN.

China's Response

The rapid developments under the Asia-Pacific strategy of the US stand as a direct challenge to China. Undoubtedly, the rivalry between China and the US is here to stay as greatest geopolitical challenge of the 21st century for decades dragging the regional allies along with maritime conflict and arms race. China's response is loud and clear. It has called Quad mechanism, a sinister-gang against China. It has called the US, the UK and Australia of setting up a new military bloc by establishing AUKUS, exacerbating geopolitical tensions.³⁵ The agreement would accelerate the regional countries to develop their military capabilities and even cross the nuclear threshold. "China maintains that, pending a proper formula worked out by Member States of the Agency through consensus, the US, the United Kingdom and Australia should not go ahead with their nuclear submarine cooperation under AUKUS, whereas the secretariat of the IAEA, for its part, should not proceed on its own to negotiate the relevant safeguards arrangement with the three countries." stated the Chinese Ambassador Wang Qun.³⁶

While China would not let the US and allies alter its planned course of ascendancy in the economic and military terms, it is evident that China would disregard its relations with the US, UK or Australia and would respond assertively by increasing its naval military activities and joint ventures possibly with Russia. It has already demanded that all three states need to adhere to the international laws and norms, abandon the obsolete "Cold War" mentality and narrow

geopolitical concepts by revoking the wrong decision and re-committing towards nuclear non-proliferation obligations under the spectrum of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).³⁷

Maritime Disputes

Theses minilateral agreements have surely begun a new era of maritime confrontations possibly leading to naval warfare. With the Asia-Pacific strategy, the disputes are shifting from on-land territories to open seas. The military presence and joint military exercises have already been increased lately in and around the South China Sea. While the direct war is still unlikely to occur, the predicted and evident increase in military naval exercises of China-Russia and US-Australia-India along with the announced trilateral agenda of undersea capabilities of surveillance would certainly increase the frequency of conflicts in waters with constant naval military modernization on both sides. Resultantly, this will turn the open and free waters into disputed zones. Where would the 'spirit of Quad' stand then?

In the wake of current developments, international community must take up the maritime risk assessment agenda more seriously. While assessing possible scenarios of maritime conflicts, risk assessment matrix³⁸ should be generated for Asia-Pacific region and its actors. Introducing the critical technologies like AI and cyber in maritime environment would intensify the probability of clashes, accidental and intentional intrusions. Thus, the aspects of AUKUS need to be critically evaluated on international forum, in the presence of regional stakeholders to prevent any mishap turning into naval conflict or war.

Preferred Allies?

Although the two agreements seem to strengthen the US alliances yet their implementation revealed that the US is preferring its one ally over the other. Giving the reason of nuclear non-proliferation regime, the Trump administration declined South Korea's request to transfer technology and HEU for its nuclear-powered submarines,³⁹ while the Biden administration made an exception for Australia, blowing away the same non-proliferation commitment. Second, while the Biden administration has emphasized the strengthening of American alliance system, the development of AUKUS shows that the UK and Australia must be more significant allies for US, than France. Preferring certain allies over the other is not a concern unless one alliance becomes the cause for other to deteriorate.

Looking at the history, it is evident that the US continued shifting its preference from one ally to another based on her national interests. This priority-based alliance might jeopardize the stability of the alliance impacting the region indirectly.

For now, Australia perceives itself to be fortunate enough to get US attention, becoming the significant ally and a chosen one to be the integral partner in the US' Asia-Pacific strategy. Yet, consequently, Australia is likely to lose its neutrality in foreign policy while inviting tension and conflicts with regional states, particularly China and possibly Russia later on.

A Blow to Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime

AUKUS partnership with essential deal of providing nuclear-propelled submarines to Australia, is sabotaging the nuclear non-proliferation agenda. Since the joint statement on AUKUS, there is a staunch debate triggering for the imperative whether the nuclear-powered submarines are hurting the spirit of the NPT or it is just another criticism. Making Australia the first ever non-nuclear weapon state to receive HEU for building up nuclear-powered submarines, certainly sets a negative precedent. It has weakened the non-transference obligation under the article of the NPT, globally. The advocates of AUKUS give the excuse that the naval reactor technology and related materials used to power nuclear submarines are not covered by the IAEA safeguards. In other words, enriched uranium used to fuel nuclear submarines is exempted from the IAEA inspections required under the treaty.⁴⁰ This itself reveals another loophole in the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.⁴¹

Even then, sharing the HEU for powering submarines is still a violation of nuclear non-proliferation regime by the biggest advocate of this regime i.e., the US. It leaves the world concerned although Australia is assuring not to go for nuclear weapons yet who would guarantee that Australia could not change its mind later and start the stockpiling of weapon-grade Uranium for other purposes? How could the other countries be prevented from acquiring/making HEU, using the same excuse of powering their nuclear submarines? How would the strategic dynamics shape up if Japan and South Korea decide to follow the suit? International community needs to explore answers to these very serious questions while debating the issue at the related global forums. One option to cater for the rising proliferation concerns is that the US and UK ensure that the Australian

nuclear-powered submarines be fueled by low enriched uranium (LEU) instead of HEU, which cannot be used directly as weapon grade material.⁴²

Implications for South Asia: Indo-Pak Dynamics

The South Asian region remains a volatile theatre due to the presence of nuclear weapon states in close proximity of each other with unresolved territorial disputes and continuing border skirmishes. Uplifting of India by the US, Pak-China close ties and Pakistan's assistance to China's BRI under the banner of CPEC, India's growing and unquestioned aggression are some evident reasons of consistent regional tensions. US-China rivalry would most likely have a domino effect on Indo-Pak relations. The Asia-Pacific strategy of the US and its growing defense and economic cooperation with India, particularly in terms of maritime operations and surveillance, are likely to be a troubling factor for Pakistan. The accelerated militarization of India under the mandate of Quad and the AUKUS, would pose another challenge to Pakistan. Quad would provide India to take help on its naval front and explore more strategic options in the Asia-Pacific region with increased regional access. Being a part of Quad, India is likely to project its propaganda against China and Pakistan to other alliance-states within the framework, resultantly, maligning Pakistan's image.

Given the nuclear-powered submarines debate, it is likely to provide India with a free-hand in its existing irresponsible behavior in the realm of nuclear material handling with a theft record of fissile material incidents and recent BrahMos missile misadventures. Between 1994 and 2021, at least 20 instances of nuclear material theft and loss were documented in India. This suggests that the illegal trade in N-technology and related materials has become increasingly popular in India.⁴³ More recently, On June 3, 2021, police in the eastern state of Jharkhand's Bokaro district detained seven persons and confiscated 6.4 kg of uranium from their possession. Eight people were detained on February 15, 2022, in Kathmandu for carrying uranium-like chemicals that were transported from India to be sold illegally in Nepal. Two of those apprehended were Indian citizens.⁴⁴ India, emboldened by the protocols with the US may overestimate its relative military and nuclear strength against Pakistan and initiate the often-repeated war to capture the Azad Kashmir. This would threaten the fragile strategic stability of South Asia, basically being maintained by Pakistan against the imbalance being created by India every now and then. This, perhaps, is the most dangerous possible outcome of the Quad and AUKUS for Pakistan. The AUKUS will enable India to get more hold over the Indian Ocean region and to extend its

naval military activities which would be of concern to Pakistan. Given the enhanced role of multiple actors in the Asia-Pacific, it could turn India more aggressive in its maritime endeavors while disregarding the international laws over maritime affairs. This would pose threat of conflict with Pakistan in waters.

Thus, Pakistan is likely to face the four predominant challenges with the inception of the US Asia-Pacific Strategy and India's enhanced role in Quad. First, the negative portrayal of Pakistan by India and her alliance partners and witch hunting. Pakistan is certainly going to face full force of the Indian-propaganda with some or all of her partners supporting it. Pakistan needs to develop a counter-propaganda strategy. Second, the threat to strategic stability, India's incessant militarization and advancement of technology will make her more aggressive in her posture towards her neighbors, especially Pakistan. Third, being China's ally, Pakistan is likely to face the possible economic and trade constraints from member states of these two pacts, especially India and the US. Fourth, Pakistan is likely to be faced with enhanced maritime tensions, and threats to Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCS). Based on these, Pakistan needs to preemptively develop a strategy to simultaneously enhance its naval power to protect its SLOCS, try to form sturdier relations with the regional powers and pursue an aggressive counter-propaganda campaign against India and the member states of Quad and AUKUS.

Policy Options for Pakistan - Recommendations

Considering the emerging regional dynamics, shifting of the balance of power and emerging blocs, Pakistan needs to adopt a multi-dimensional strategy to strengthen its position in changing geopolitics. First, Pakistan needs to simultaneously focus on its economic uplift. Second, it needs to enhance and update its defense capability paying particular attention to its naval and air power. Third, Pakistan should particularly focus on strengthening its bilateral ties in Asia-Pacific region. Fourth, Pakistan needs to devise effective counter propaganda policy against India and its allies' propaganda to malign Pakistan's reputation.

With China, Pakistan needs to enhance and speed up its economic development under the mandate of CPEC and overall pace up in its pursuit of economic uplift. Focusing on the risk of maritime conflict, Pakistan needs to enhance its submarine program, air/naval maritime patrolling and joint naval military exercises involving Pakistan Air Force with integration of the state-of-the-art technology. Realizing the necessity of critical, enabling technologies and

emerging technological vulnerabilities namely cyber domain, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and integration Artificial Intelligence (AI); Pakistan needs to strengthen its surveillance and intelligence capabilities in respective domains. The most significant and necessary policy recommendation remains the strengthening of its bilateral relations with the regional countries. Pakistan needs to maintain its neutral foreign policy yet it needs to bolster its socio-economic collaboration with majority of the regional states. In this regard, collaborative forums and dimensions could be explored in socio-economic, industrial and education sector. Additionally, Pakistan needs to keep its doors open for favorable regional alliance of cooperation in the realm of economy and security. Besides the abovementioned measures, state could devise a counter propaganda policy within the ambit of national security policy. To keep check on the perception building at regional and international levels and to counter the false propaganda carried out by India (e.g., the recent EU Disinfo Lab uncovering Indian massive operation against Pakistan)⁴⁵, Pakistan needs to maintain a dedicated state-level monitoring team to regularly monitor as well as counter the rising misperceptions and propaganda.

Conclusion

The Asia-Pacific strategy with the evident momentum is a clear sign of the US shifting its total focus and resources in the region for at least next three to four decades. It also depicts how threatened the US feels due to China's exponential economic growth, military expansion and growing regional influence. The recent minilateral agreements i.e., the Quad, the AUKUS and the Sydney Dialogue, are all the instruments of its greater Asia-Pacific strategy crafted on the terms of its historically pursued offshore balancing strategy. Examining these quadrilateral and trilateral agreements, it is quite evident that these would decisively impact the inter-state relations of great powers in coming decades while posing serious implications for the region and beyond. The risk of escalation and arms race attempting to shift the balance of power in Asia Pacific cannot be ignored.

China has clearly opposed the AUKUS and has issued threats of responding forcefully if its core national interests are affected. The ASEAN states, with a mix of welcoming and rejecting the trilateral partnership, are all mutually concerned over the regional consequences of such developments in future. Ultimately, they are bound to choose sides. Maritime conflicts are likely to rise under current dynamics. The nuclear element of the AUKUS is a matter of concern for all regional countries and needs to be debated and managed both

regionally and internationally. In addition, the obvious effect of these broader regional dynamics would alter the strategic stability and military balance in South Asia. Pakistan, along with international advocates of peace and stability, needs to closely monitor the situation while keeping a neutral and unbiased approach towards the affairs of the regional states. Pakistan needs to guard against India's likely aggression in adjoining seas. Pakistan must try to engage with the likeminded states to develop the economic and military collaboration. It also needs to enhance and advance its naval defense capabilities, SLOCs as much as land and air-based vital security interest. The current politico-military dynamics in Asia-Pacific call upon the new arms race and increased tensions. However, the response for smaller countries such as Pakistan should be a smart approach involving multi-dimensional instruments of policy and strategy.

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