

# THE US INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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## **Abstract**

*The fast-changing geostrategic dynamics are reverberating the exiting global security environment, necessitating readjustments and realignments. China has been perceived as a revisionist power challenging the US global hegemony in all spheres. The US desire to maintain its dominance has given birth to the oceanic configuration and building new partnerships in the shape of Indo-Pacific Strategy. This strategy is studded with the formation of QUAD, AUKUS, I2U2 and IPEF, where India is being given the leading role to checkmate China. The US Strategy has far-reaching implications for Pakistan in exacerbating Indo-Pakistan rivalry, pressurizing Sino-Pak strategic cooperation, putting strains on US-Pakistan relations and jeopardizing Pakistan's energy security from the Middle East and its oceanic resources.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Oceanic Strategy, Regional Partnerships, China, India.

## **Introduction**

**T**he fast-changing security dynamics at the regional and global levels generate new ideas and new perspectives. States view the change with respect to their own national security prism and endeavor to make other states to follow their perspective. The theoretical debate initiated by Hans Morgenthau<sup>1</sup> through 'dominant-dependent' state relationship depicts the global structure and system of international order in which 'dominant' states override the 'dependent' states to control the global/regional security order; notwithstanding the ability of the

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'dependent' states to undo the order such as Cuba, North Korea and Iran. Barry Buzan<sup>2</sup> brought another perspective by equating power and regions to constitute regional and global security complexes in which the 'geopolitical construct' is essential. Importantly, believing in the dictum of International Relations, 'no permanent friends/enemies and only permanent interests' states have been vying to expand their sphere of influence, forming new alliances, and building time-bound strategic understandings. The changing global order from multi-polarity to bi-polarity and uni-polarity to lose multi-polarity have depicted the shifting security interests of global/major powers.

The strategic competition of triad forces over-emphasizing the importance of land, air and sea greatly affect the policy orientation of all states. The geopolitical proponents such as Halford Mackinder,<sup>3</sup> Alfred Mahan<sup>4</sup> and Giulio Douhet<sup>5</sup> have projected the preponderance of land, sea and air respectively to influence the global security environment. Though air power is comparatively a new phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but intense competition between land and sea has continued since ages. The policy perspective of a particular state is depicted in its scope and intended sphere of influence as manifested in the hierarchy of states in the global political order. States deploy troops in specific regions, establish air bases across the globe and utilize sea for power maximization. Contemporary global security environment is relying more on sea power to show and enhance the sphere of influence; examples are South China Sea, controversies over the nomenclature of some sea regions, and mixing different sea regions into one 'security complex.' In this context new 'theoretical/academic constructs' are being initiated to open alternate dimensions and viewpoints.

The configuration of shifting alliances and the tectonic shifts in the regional/global balance of power have given birth to new security challenges to the exiting power structure. China has emerged as a revisionist power challenging the global hegemony of the US in many parts of the world stretching from Australia to Korean peninsula and in the South China Sea. The formation of QUAD, AUKUS, IPEF, and I2U2 are directed to meet new challenges and potential threats. The US has also announced a new oceanic configuration namely the Indo-Pacific Strategy that is directed to create new strategic understandings with diverse states around the world giving primacy to India. Given the Indo-Pakistan intense rivalry, Indo-China competition and Sino-Pakistan strategic cooperation, the US strategy has serious implications for Pakistan. Therefore, this paper

endeavors to discuss the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and its implications for Pakistan through analyzing academic debate over the 'new construct' and salient features of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

## **The Indo-Pacific Construct**

The shifting balance of power from Europe to Asia, and then expanding as Indo-Pacific has certain connotations and strategic interests involved.<sup>6</sup> The construct of 'Indo-Pacific' has long been debated in the official and academic parlance since 1990s;<sup>7</sup> it was necessitated with the disintegration of Soviet Union and the emergence of China with unprecedented economic prowess. The US being the sole super-power in the unilateral global system felt to maintain its unchallenged control over emerging 'revisionist' powers.<sup>8</sup> Hence entire 2000s was devoted to draft different nomenclatures; 'rebalancing' 'pivot to Asia' and 'Asia-pacific' etc.<sup>9</sup> Also, the Chinese alternate global economic/financial system through Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>10</sup> led to the 'Silk-Route Initiative' Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (QUAD: US-India-Australia-Japan),<sup>11</sup> and I2U2 (Israel, India, UAE and United States)<sup>12</sup> etc. Ultimately, the United States officially launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the Indo-Pacific is not just an academic construct but a full-fledged strategy of the United States with specific objectives to maintain its control.

Altering Barry Buzan's 'security complexes'<sup>14</sup> a bit to expand it from purely military security to economic spheres, an objective look at the 'Asia-Pacific' would highlight distinct but conflicting features. It stretches from South Africa to Australia having part of Africa, Middle East, Southern Asia, South-East Asia, and Korean Peninsula; all have different 'security complexes.' Africa is grappling with poverty and terrorism, Middle East is suffering from an instable regional order and Non-State Actors, Southern Asia is dominated by India-Pakistan rivalry and nuclear threat, South-East Asia has economic priorities, the Korean Peninsula is challenged by North Korean nuclear ambitions, and Australasia has no apparent threats. Therefore, in the entire 'Asia-Pacific' there is no common threat, no common issue and hence no common security complex. Superfluously, blue economy, environment, and free navigation are fashionable buzzwords, but these carry little weight in the realist's perspective of international relations.

China seems to be the only actor/factor instrumental in building the new construct; China is important player in the Korean Peninsula, Japan feels threatened by the Chinese economic progression and outreach at the cost of

Japanese influence, Chinese growing involvement in ASEAN, its BRI passing through South-West Asia into Middle East and Africa, its balancing strategy with three arch-rivals in the Middle East (Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran), 25-year trade and investment agreement with Iran,<sup>15</sup> and Chinese inroads into Africa. According to the declassified documents released by the US National Security Agency (2021), China constitutes the major national security threat to its interests globally; hence building regional alliances is the paramount objective of the United States.<sup>16</sup> The US clearly states that “This intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power.”<sup>17</sup>

Pakistan, being a medium power but having pivotal geopolitical position has tried to carve out its own perspective of the regional/global issues imbedded in its national security interests.<sup>18</sup> For Pakistan, its immediate strategic concerns are attached to India, Afghanistan and Middle East. Given the past/present US shifting priorities in South Asia, Pakistan does not feel comfortable with the US friendship; hence the conscious strategic shift towards China is obvious. Pakistan is not unifocal in its security policy, but Indian moves are detrimental to Pakistan’s strategic calculations. Moreover, Pakistan has been propagating Indian Ocean as ‘Afro-Asian’ region and prior to its nuclearization in 1988, has all along been forwarding the idea to declare Indian Ocean as a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone.<sup>19</sup> However, under the guise of US strategy, India is being emboldened with cooperation in defence, space and technology to promote it as a pre-eminent power in the region,<sup>20</sup> which has grave strategic connotation for Pakistan directly impacting its national security. Pakistan had a very bad experience of 1960s, when in the wake of Indo-China war (1962), all western states provided weapon and equipment to India to fight against China despite Pakistan’s severe reservations that this would be used against it. Ultimately, it did happen during the India Pakistan war (1965), when Pakistan was imposed arms embargo despite it being the member of Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Pakistan views the Indo-Pacific strategy severely determinantal to its national security interests in the regional context.

## **The US Indo-Pacific Strategy**

The US President, Joe Biden announced the Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022, stating that “the future of each of our nations, and indeed the

world, depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead.” The official document claims that the Indo-Pacific region covers half of the world population, with 58% youth, 60% of the global GDP, and 65% of the oceans with 25% of its land.<sup>22</sup> The US strategy underlines various objectives to achieve its goals; “The United States will pursue five objectives in the Indo-Pacific—each in concert with our allies and partners, as well as with regional institutions. We will 1) Advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, 2) Build Connections with and beyond the region, 3) Drive Regional Prosperity, 4) Bolster Indo-Pacific Security, and 5) Build Regional Resilience to Transnational Threats.”<sup>23</sup>

The US has conceived an action plan for the implementation of its Indo-Pacific Strategy in the next two years, which lays emphasis on Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, strengthened ASEAN, support India’s rise and leadership role, deliver on the Quad, and build partnerships in the Pacific Islands.<sup>24</sup> The US strategy is focused more on Asia and Sea to build strong navies. The US has launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022, which comprises of USA, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, India, Fiji, Bruni, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The IPEF is destined to build cooperation, stability, prosperity, development, and peace within the region through trade, supply chains, clean energy and anti-corruption.<sup>25</sup> Also, the US has an intelligence alliance called Five Eyes (FVEY), comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States is a cooperative intelligence network that monitors the electronic communications of citizens and foreign governments<sup>26</sup> across the regions from North America to Europe into Australia, which actually is the area of operation for the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Through the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (QUAD), comprising of US, India, Australia and Japan, the US wants to embolden India through defence/security, technology transfer and trade/commerce agreements to raise its expanded regional stature and to counter China. Added with massive force modernization, especially with a ‘Blue Water’ navy/aircraft carrier, India is becoming the pre-eminence power in the entire Asia-Pacific. The US is also jeopardizing its own national security objective of non-proliferation by proliferating in the uncharted waters of Australia, and endorsing Indian membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Therefore, the entire Indo-Pacific Strategy is designed to build multiple alliances and strategic partnerships, primarily India, in the oceanic spheres to dominate an expanded regional security complex to meet the emerging threats, especially from ever-rising China. This has severe implications for many regions covered by this strategy, including Pakistan.

## **Implications for Pakistan**

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy has far-reaching security implications for Pakistan. Indian predominance in the regional order would further intensify the Indo-Pakistan rivalry, it would put severe pressure on the Sino-Pak strategic cooperation, including the opposition to CPEC, the US engagement with Pakistan would be severely curtailed, it would challenge Pakistan's EEZ of oceanic resources, and would pose threat to trade/energy supplies from the Middle East.

Pakistan and India have age old adversarial relations and any benefit to India in domains of politics, economy and military is detrimental to Pakistan's national security interests. The Indo-Pacific strategy provides leverage to India in elevating its global stature for partnering with world's leading nations especially the US.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan is already going through a rough patch as it is being confronted with myriad of problems at the hands of international financial institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) etc. The US-India alliance also brings tangible economic dividends for India, such as mutual trade benefits and loans, while the US military hardware and agreements can afford a viable edge to India vis-à-vis its two arch-rivals, Pakistan, and China<sup>28</sup>.

During the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US in June 2023 comprehensive and far-reaching agreements were signed between the two countries in defence/security, technology, trade/commerce and new technologies. The 58-point joint statement 'affirms that this document, in its breadth and depth, represents the most expansive and comprehensive vision for progress in the history of our bilateral relationship.'<sup>29</sup> The US also wants to give the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) membership to India, thus elevating its status further. There is strong asymmetry between the Indian and Pakistani navies, and Pakistan cannot match the Indian military/naval modernization of a 'Blue Water' navy with aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. India also uses Afghanistan/Taliban and Iran/Chahbahar exploiting Pakistan's ethno-nationalist fault-lines. Therefore,

elevating India and readying it to counter China under the Indo-Pacific Strategy has serious negativities for Pakistan.

Chinese unprecedented rise has given birth to many threat perceptions, especially by the US. Now China is not only challenging the US global hegemony but also building regional partnerships to negate the dominance of US dollar. China is predicted to surpass the US as the top most global economic power in the near future. While the US was entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan to squander its military and economic power, China was cashing on its soft power to promote the trans-regional geopolitical and geo-economic connectivity through Built and Road Initiative (BRI) from Asia to Europe and into Africa. China believes in 'building bright future through cooperation.'<sup>30</sup> Though China believes that a NATO like alliance cannot be created in the given expanded regional security environment but it has termed the QUAD as an 'Asian NATO' that would have security and military functions.<sup>31</sup>

Since their inception, Pak-China relations have become strategically important for the mutual benefit of both the countries and the region at large. China has proved an all-weather/reliable friend and partner in defence, security, trade, investment and diplomatic support. Pakistan shares around 600km long border with China through Khunjarab Pass. They have jointly built the strategic Karakorum Highway connecting both the countries. Since 2015, China has launched its BRI flagship project of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with an investment of \$52 billion to build rail/road infrastructure, generate energy/electricity, enhance trade/commerce and to serve as a regional connectivity. With the implementation of Indo-Pacific Strategy, the pressure is being felt by Pakistan vis-à-vis its relations with China and curtailment of CPEC. However, for Pakistan, China is a strategic asset and CPEC a game-changer. So far Pakistan has withstood all kinds of pressures from various actors, and it would continue to do so in the future. Therefore, in the prevailing geo-strategic global/regional security environment, Pakistan cannot afford to lose China.

The US has been an alliance partner and one of the largest trading states for Pakistan. The Pak-US relations have witnessed many ups and downs, from defence cooperation to a strategic ally, from an estranged friend to the most sanctioned ally, from a non-NATO ally to a partner in the War on Terror' and from a trouble-shooter to a trouble-maker. Since 1980, Pakistan's contribution and cooperation was crucial in the US military campaign in Afghanistan. Despite

Salala Check post attack, OBL Operation and Raymond Davis case, Pakistan has tried to maintain its smooth relations with the US. On the other hand, the US has been demanding to 'do more' in the entire decade since 2010, building strategic relationship with India and drawing its own strategy in Afghanistan. Since the US abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Pak-US relations have remained estranged. With the announcement of Indo-Pacific Strategy to counter Chinese geopolitical inroads and upgrade Indian status at the altar of Pakistan, the US engagements with Pakistan is likely to suffer.

Pakistan's coastline is over 1000km and its continental shelf is around 290,000 sq. kms, which is right into the proposed Indo-Pacific area.<sup>32</sup> Given the hostile Indo-Pakistan relations, there is a dispute over the Sir Creek area and Pakistan Navy has detected the intrusion of Indian submarines into Pakistani waters several times.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, defending vast coastline from Karachi to Jiwani requires efficient force and modern/state of the art weaponry. Also, Pakistan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its continental shelf have abundance of mineral, carbon, and marine resources, which would be under threat from the major navies. Pakistan is also working on its 'Blue Economy' policy to harness the maritime resources for the benefit of the country and enhance revenue generation to the tunes of billions of dollars.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Pakistan's maritime security would be jeopardised with the heavy involvement of major naval powers in its vicinity.

Pakistan has strategic reliance on the energy supplies from the Persian Gulf, a major source of its trade, and generates billions of dollars through expats income. 90% of Pakistan's energy supplies are coming from the Middle Est and over \$10 billion annual revenues are being generated by 4 million Pakistani work force in the Gulf. The area has wide potential for its trade and energy supplies to the rest of the world. The Chinese inroads into the region through BRI and trade/investment agreements would open tremendous dividends for Pakistan. The multi-billion-dollar trade agreement between Iran and China, and Chinese brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabi and Iran have bright prospects for Pakistan. Therefore, the Persian Gulf has important place in Pakistan's national security policy; hence the fears of its curtailment would always generate concerns and apprehensions in the Pakistani decision-making circles.

## Conclusion

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy is an oceanic configuration to dominate the sea around the world and to maintain its global hegemony, which is being



challenged by an ever-rising Chinese power. The Strategy is designed to build regional alliances and partnerships with key states around the world through multiple spheres, emboldening India, strengthening ASEAN, nuclearizing Australia, and establishing economic framework. The primary focus of these arrangements is to meet the security challenges from Chinese global outreach across the world from North America to Europe into Asia and Australia. The Strategy is being operationalized on fast-track to achieve its stated objectives.

For Pakistan, the Indo-Pacific Strategy has far-reaching negative implications, which would intensify the Indo-Pak rivalry, pressure on Pak-China relations, particularly CPEC, reduced US engagement with Pakistan, possible danger to its EEZ and oceanic resources, and jeopardizing the smooth supplies of energy resources from the Middle East. To meet these ever-growing challenges with new threats and maintaining existing relations with strategic partners, Pakistani decision makers require innovative and proactive approach'

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