

THE PIVOT TO ASIA POLICY AND CHINA'S RISE: COMPETITION BETWEEN US AND CHINA IN ASIA PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

This research report provides an overview of the competition and challenges arising from the United States' pivot to Asia policy and China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region. The strategic shift of the United States towards Asia and China's remarkable ascent as a global power have transformed the geopolitical landscape. This qualitative study highlights the economic, geopolitical, and ideological dimensions of their competition, as well as the dilemmas faced by smaller states in navigating this complex environment. Effective diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and nuanced approaches are crucial in addressing the evolving dynamics and potential risks in the Asia-Pacific.

Keywords: Asia, China, US, Asia Pacific

INTRODUCTION

Since last decade, the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed drastic changes, shaped by China's peaceful rise in the region and the United States' strategic shift towards Asia-Pacific, known as the Pivot to Asia. China's drastic military modernization and economic growth have boosted the state's influence in the region significantly, challenging the existing political regional order and the United States dominance. Whereas, The US policy aims to rebalance United States' losing edge in the region and foreign policy priorities towards the Asia-Pacific from Middle-East, recognizing the region's growing economic and strategic importance.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-China relationship has progressively worsened in recent decade, with disputes over economic trade, technological advancements, and human rights issues. The two nations are the world's largest economies and are heavily involved in trade, investment, and cultural exchange. One major challenge towards the China and US relationship is the current trade war between the two great powers. The U.S. imposed levies on Chinese goods, in response China imposed its own

taxes on U.S. goods. This trade war is having a major impact on both economies, which further stressed the relations.

U.S. has been varying of China's vast military power and its assertiveness in Asia-Pacific. China's military presence in the disputed islands of South China Sea by building bases for surveillance, resulting in raised concerns among other countries in the region. In response, U.S. has also increased its military presence in the region, leading to tensions between the two countries.

China's strategy towards the region has manifested in its defensive approach, the assertiveness through economic and diplomatic means has become a norm for China which can be highlighted by China's cooperative stance in the most recent ASEAN meetings. The U.S. allied countries has seen it as a threat towards the freedom in the region and have countered it by making partnerships and alliances like AUKUS and QUAD with U.S. in hopes to halt China's diplomatic expansion.

Since 2020, the Asia-Pacific region witnessed unforeseen developments that have further

illuminated the complex dynamics of the region. The COVID-19 pandemic factor has also impacted public health and economies affecting the geopolitical and strategic landscape of the region (ESCAP, 2021). Post-COVID-19, some major events can be seen in the region as China's plays the Long game toward the achievement of its intended goals.

In this context, the Pivot to Asia and China's rise have become a focal point for policymakers and scholars to analyse in the Post-COVID-19 era. Obama's initiated Pivot to Asia policy aims to deepen the U.S. involvement with the region while promoting economic and diplomatic ties with Potential and existing Allies. The policy also serves the purpose of addressing the challenges posed by China's rise all the while containing its growing influence (Zafar, 2022). The progressive Rise of China has raised some major questions about China's strategic objectives, its role in the region, and its impact on the existing regional and global order.

Understanding the complexities of the U.S.-China's Tit-for-tat policies towards the region is crucial for policymakers and scholars to develop a better understanding of the contemporary dynamics of the South East Asia and Asia-Pacific. Ultimately, the future will depend on how the U.S.-China relationship evolves in the coming years. This Research is aimed at identifying the main factors behind China's rise towards a new order and the U.S. response policies towards the implications resulting from the China's assertive aggression in the Asia Pacific.

Breaking "Pivot to Asia" Policy:

The policy was announced by the Obama administration in his first tenure in 2011, highlighting the need for the U.S. to vigorously engage and maintain its leadership role in the rapidly evolving Asia-Pacific (Southgate, 2017). It recognized the rise of China and the need to counter its influence, the economic opportunities, and the security challenges posed by North Korea and territorial disputes as key factors driving the need for a renewed focus on Asia.

Background and formation of the policy:

"Underlying the 'pivot' is a conviction that the center of gravity for US foreign policy, national security, and economic interests is being realigned and shifting towards Asia". It further suggests that the

"US strategy and priorities need to be adjusted accordingly" keeping in view the divergent dynamics of 21st century. This clearly wasn't an instant change in priorities by President Obama; in fact, the "pivot" to Asia was the fulfilment of prior policies made by the previous administrations (Logan, 2013).

Primarily, in International Relations, the core objective of every state is the protection of its national interests, while maintaining a stable balance of power utilizing different approaches to contain and stop the potential rise of any emerging state. Therefore, by this logic the U.S. policy intended for Asia-Pacific is no exception.

In the world of economics and trade, U.S. wishes smooth flow of trade through its trade routes by ensuring Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) threatened by the Chinese growing influence in Asia-Pacific. U.S. considers it as a major factor in maintaining its position against China. It is commonly known fact that, "Whoever controls the Straits of Malacca and the Indian Ocean could threaten China's oil supply route" – this in reality highlights the importance of this area. Controlling this region by military means would significantly decide the relative position of U.S./China in the next decade (Bush, Madan, Solís, Stromseth, & Yeo, 2022). The U.S. will be expanding its current options in order to maintain a new set of priorities towards China, termed as "Engaged-Containment Policy" with intentions to utilize both the "soft and hard" power to deal with the ongoing confrontation.

Key Components of the "Pivot to Asia" Policy:

The main components of the policy were (Bush et al., 2022; Singh, 2023):

Strategic Shift from Middle East to Asia-Pacific

This element highlights a shift in the United States' strategic priorities starting the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific area. It intends to prioritise U.S. interests and resources in accordance with the growing relevance of the Asia-Pacific area in world affairs.

China's rising influence and containment of Chinese Clout

This component tackles the necessity to manage and contain Chinese strength in light of the country's expanding economic and military clout. It includes

tactics to balance China's sway and head off any dangers to American interests or regional stability.

Military Rebalancing and U.S. Military enhancement in Asia-Pacific

The significance of military resources and presence in the Asia-Pacific area is highlighted by this component. To ensure a strong U.S. military presence and the capacity to effectively address regional security problems, it requires reallocating budgets, deploying assets, and strengthening military capabilities.

Economic Engagement with Asia-Pacific Economic cooperation (APEC) & Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)

Economic participation is essential to the policy. Regional integration, trade liberalisation, and economic collaboration are advanced through these partnership. The policy seeks to strengthen American economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region through utilising these venues.

Diplomatic Engagement via East Asia Summit & Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Maintaining relationships and affecting regional dynamics need active diplomacy. The policy places a strong emphasis on participation in the East Asia Summit and active interaction with ASEAN. These venues give the United States the chance to promote conversation, develop alliances, and diplomatically deal with regional issues.

Freedom of navigation & Maritime Security

It's a crucial element given the importance of maritime routes in the Asia-Pacific area. The policy's main objectives are to protect vital sea lanes, stop territorial disputes from turning into wars, and advance the rule of law in maritime affairs.

Multilateral Cooperation and Maintenance of U.S. Influence via Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), U.S.-India Strategic Partnership, G7 and G20

The United States participates in multilateral cooperation through a number of frameworks in order to preserve its influence in the Asia-Pacific area. This includes taking an active part in the G7 and

G20 conferences, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership. These multilateral forums enable the United States to engage with important allies, coordinate policy, and jointly solve regional and international concerns.

Aims and Objectives of the "Pivot to Asia" policy

Under the "pivot to Asia" strategy President Obama highlighted five essential pillars, which will eluminate the strategic interests of the U.S. towards Asia-Pacific (Southgate, 2017).

The provision of security in Indo-Pacific region. Towards this end, U.S. will establish strong military presence in the region and have to align closely with the South-East Asian countries, especially Japan, Taiwan and Republic of South Korea, and will increase resources dedicated to military to deter any potential threat in the Indo-Pacific region.

U.S. will re-engage with regional organizations especially ASEAN.

To utilize the win-win strategy by ensuring the U.S.-Asia prosperity via free trade and joint economic endeavours like APEC and TPP.

The U.S. will establish collaborative relationship with Beijing to dissiminate misunderstandings.

The U.S. will continue efforts for the preservation and provision of basic human rights in the region.

Obama's Era and "Pivot to Asia" Policy

Obama's administration made a number of announcements in the fall of 2011 suggesting that the US would be stepping up and increasing its already considerable involvement in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in the southern half of the area. The main objective of the change is to put greater effort into influencing the formation of norms and rules in the Asia-Pacific, especially as China becomes a more significant regional force.

Additionally, the US strengthened its economic links with the Asia-Pacific area. One type of the United States' economic interactions was successfully negotiated and put into place by the United States, notably the Trans Pacific Partnership. By entering the Asia-Pacific regional cooperation, the United States hoped to improve economic ties, which in turn affects security ties. The United States safeguarded these economic activities due to

its accelerated export and import activities. By actively promoting navigation to sustain trade routes and other economic interests within the Asia-Pacific region, the United States demonstrates this in the area of security. The US likewise has an air-sea battle doctrine that emphasises air and sea power in the area. The Obama administration undertook numerous military and military aid programmes for nations in the Asia-Pacific area, including Singapore and Australia, in relation to the expansion of military and security cooperation (PP & Wicaksana, 2022).

authorised new military and naval deployments to Singapore and Australia, as well as new partnership projects with the Philippines;

issued a new defence blueprint that confirmed the rebalance to Asia and provided justification for it while maintaining a focus on the Middle East;

became part of the East Asia Summit (EAS), a leading international organisation in the region; and achieved progress in the TPP and FTA talks involving nine nations.

Four significant events appear to have led to the Administration's increased focus on the Asia-Pacific region:

the region of the Asia-Pacific, notably China, which was becoming economically more significant for the future of the American economy;

China's expanding military might and assertiveness in staking claims to disputed maritime areas that would have a drastic impact on freedom of navigation and the US's capacity to project force in the area.

Budget cuts by the U.S. federal government, especially in the defence sector, raised concerns in Asia that the country's commitment to the area may be waning.

Indo-Pacific Strategy under Trump Administration: Trump's Unilateralism

President Trump, during his election campaigns mocked President Obama's approach of "Rebalancing to Asia" especially the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative. After assuming office, Trump signed a presidential order regarding departure of the Washington out of "Trans Pacific Partnership" (TPP). Approximately a year later, the first National Security Strategy Report stated that "We welcome India's emergence as a leading global

power and stronger strategic and defence partner. We will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India." Afterwards, The U.S. strategy of Indo-Pacific region has established an updated parameter for upcoming U.S. tactics and strategies in Indo Pacific. Moreover, Under Trump administration, the mishandling of relations b/w U.S. and China generated fears throughout the Indo-Pacific (Asif et al., 2019).

Overall, the results of Trump's trip to Asia seemed to be a triumph for American diplomatic efforts in 2017. Important Asian leaders who had previously met Trump amicably in the United States were familiar with him and listened to his every word as they sought to deepen their relationship. All along, it was clear that the US President was worried about the North Korean menace, US trade imbalances, and other economic issues. While rejecting international economic deals, Trump actively participated in the APEC and US-ASEAN summits. A clear top-level US commitment to ongoing active participation in regional matters was expressed by the President's attention throughout his very lengthy and difficult itinerary in the area. Few issues arose during the trip that administration sceptics in the US or internationally might criticise.

Pivot to Asia and Joe Biden's Regime

The Biden's approach towards China has been more a continuation than a change to Trump's approach. However, the situation is dissimilar in the case of alliances, as Biden administration bestows more commitment to its allies, such as Japan or the Republic of South Korea. Multilateral dimensions have witnessed changes, although limited. Keeping in mind the power politics of the Asia-Pacific region allowing favorable opportunity for the Washington, President Obama concentrated more on other elements of power, including middle powers such as Australia, Republic of Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. Out of these, Pakistan alone has been relocating its loyalty from the U.S. towards the Republic of China in the 21st century. The Pivot to Asia has become obscured during the Trump era, as on one hand, he re-initiated QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialog). On the other hand, he introduced a transactional tactic to alliance relations, triggering skepticism among Washington's allies. Meanwhile, Joe Biden is being viewed as more focused on

building friendly relations with regional allies (Grabowski, 2021).

The idea of continuity rather than change, specifically in U.S. policy towards Beijing, has been rampant, underlining that U.S.-China competition is the major decisive factor in bilateral relations. Meanwhile, bilateral relations with Southeast Asian states should also be elevated to a higher level, given collaboration within QUAD's infrastructure might only be a tool for containment of China. In 2021, we witnessed a new coalition called AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States) presenting a challenge to Beijing and EU (the European Union) (Biden, 2021).

To conclude, we may deduce that Joe Biden's policy towards Indo-Pacific may be traced some-where in between Obama's and Trump's policies, although such assumptions seems surprising. Nonetheless, it is reasonable keeping in mind the U.S. interests, as well as the decisions of Biden's administration (Grabowski, 2021).

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and QUAD-Plus

QUAD is an alliance of India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. which was suggested by Japan's PM Shinzo Abe in 2007. The focal objective was to formulate a group that will monitor control over the straits stretched across Indo-Pacific region. But this idea was rejected due to a protest in Beijing, implying that it was targeted towards the containment of China. In 2017, the officials of QUAD group met in a meeting of the ASEAN and East Asia Summit in Manila unofficially to revive QUAD which was side-lined in 2007. Suggestions were proposed to expand the members of QUAD by including the ASEAN States which is known as "Quad-Plus" mechanism. But it was concluded that Southeast-Asian states have no interest for Quad, if this is just another step in the rivalry of the great powers. The reason is more clarified from the fact that Southeast-Asian region is a centre of attraction in the 21st century because of China's initiated "Belt and Road Initiative 2013" (BRI) (Saha, 2018). To conclude, ASEAN isn't likely pick sides.

China's growing influence has introduced many new factors for Quad to tackle. The increasing Chinese hold via the Belt and Road Initiative has presented itself as a critical issue among the QUAD members.

Few observer states have debated that the Beijing's initiated BRI, under its maritime project, has an overwhelming potential to throw the current balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region (Deb & Wilson, 2021).

The direct meeting held between the QUAD leaders in Washington, DC, in September 2021 one day prior the United Nations General Assembly is of great importance. This meeting emphasises that the Quad is finally picking up its pace by becoming active and moving towards all members harmonising their actions for the supposed betterment of the Indo-Pacific region. Many academics believe that this increased international interaction is an essential step for the region's growth while maintaining its freedom and openness (Deb & Wilson, 2021).

The Quad is even now quite far from a formal alliance and is often labelled as a group of like-minded nations. However, it is a given fact that security issues shape a major portion of its objectives and goals. Moreover, Observer states might also hold Beijing accountable for encouraging more states to think about joining this programme by increasing its assertiveness and aggression. Some have predicted that the Quad will someday transform into a treaty akin to NATO, but such predictions are premature and rash.

China's Rise in Asia Pacific

China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region has been a significant development with far-reaching implications. Its rise has been fuelled by factors such as its large population, rapid industrialization, and export-oriented economic policies. China's economic expansion has enabled it to enhance its regional influence, expand trade relationships, and invest in infrastructure projects through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, China's military modernization has allowed it to strengthen its defence capabilities, leading to concerns among some regional actors regarding its intentions and impact on the regional balance of power. As a major player in the Asia-Pacific, China's rise has shaped the geopolitical dynamics of the region and prompted recalibrations in the strategies of other countries in response to its growing influence.

In a world that has been significantly affected by globalisation and a global political system underpinned by a treaty-based system, China is

announcing itself as a superpower. Huge trade and investment movements among the major economies of the globe are characteristics of modern globalisation, with China acting as the global economy's transitional manufacturing hub despite its continued reliance on imported resources. The dominant behaviour patterns of the world's superpowers, collected in treaties and constantly examined by institutions, best describe the world political order. Beijing is actively involved in a race for status and power in the international order, just as it is in a competition for armaments in the Western Pacific (Jones & Yeo, 2022).

“As China has grown from a weak state to a strong one, it is starting to exploit the stronger powers’ ability to pick and choose when and where to comply with core treaty provisions, as well as to shape the next generation of consequential treaties.”

China’s approaches and Policies

China has utilized numerous tactics, which have progressed over time. Beijing has exercised the following Tactics, or the “six Ps” (Jones & Yeo, 2022).

Profiting gaining advantage of the World order to advance national ambitions. This roughly depicts China’s strategy of relations with international trade and financial institutions. Penetrating is fumbling into an organization to shape its policy in order to gain advantages. This illustrates China's strategy to cooperating with the UN throughout the past ten years. Piggybacking is developing on emerging powers’ bold actions and discontent with the global order (especially those of Russia, India, Brazil, and others). Perverting is utilizing the recognized and official structure of a policy to advance Chinese interests but in a way that is profoundly detrimental. Undoubtedly, this personifies China's recent attitude to joining the WTO, but it may also best describe China's actions towards freedom of navigation. Preventing is utilizing its newly acquired economic sway and its capacities to thwart the advent of limiting arrangements in new dimensions. Here, it repeatedly finds itself escorted by the Washington, which has frequently been unenthusiastic to accept international law in contemporary issue areas. Proposing in some realms, attempting to play the role of a leader by performing the functions of an ordering power.

China’s Strategic Objectives in the Indo-Pacific Region:

Economic, geopolitical, and security factors are just a few of the many ways that one might see China's diverse strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific area. China intends to achieve the following main goals:

Economic Expansion: China seeks to get access to the Indo-Pacific region's markets, resources, and investment opportunities. This include boosting commerce, encouraging infrastructure improvement through programmes like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and forming business alliances with neighbouring nations. China's economic goals also include strengthening its position as a regional economic powerhouse and expanding its influence over global supply networks (Ho, 2020).

Geopolitical Influence: China wants to increase its geopolitical clout and become a significant participant in the Indo-Pacific area. This entails using diplomatic, economic, and military tools to deepen its ties with neighbouring nations while reducing the influence of other regional powers like the United States and Japan. China wants to reshape regional institutions, regulations, and norms in a way that serves its own interests.

Maritime Expansion and Security: China views its maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea to be vital to its core national interests. It tries to establish and strengthen authority over contested areas and maritime resources in the area. China has participated in artificial island construction, the deployment of military hardware, and the assertion of its presence through marine patrols. Additionally, it aims to reduce the influence of foreign countries, especially the United States, in the marine domain (Ho, 2020) (Bush et al., 2022).

Regional Stability: In line with its economic and geopolitical goals, China emphasises the value of preserving peace and stability in the region. It tries to stop issues or dangers from appearing that might affect its trade, trading routes, or regional influence. Some regional parties, however, are concerned about China's actions because they see them as forceful or destabilising, particularly in relation to territorial conflicts and its military buildup.

Controlling Taiwan: China has had a long-standing goal of uniting Taiwan with the mainland. Beijing regards Taiwan as a part of its territory and has not

ruled out using force to bring the two countries back together if diplomatic efforts are unsuccessful. China's policy to exert pressure and influence over the island and discourage other nations from recognising or supporting Taiwan's independence includes measures to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, economically, and politically (Ho, 2020).

Energy Security: China wants to secure enough energy supplies to maintain its economic expansion. The South China Sea and the Indian Ocean both contain significant natural gas and oil deposits, which are located in the Indo-Pacific area. China engages in political and commercial relations with nations in the region in an effort to guarantee access to these resources.

Military Modernization and Power Projection: China aims to create a powerful military force that is both modern and capable of projecting influence outside of its immediate boundaries. China wants to establish a strong naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, improve its power projection capacities, and develop assets including aircraft carriers, cutting-edge submarines, and long-range missiles. This goal is linked to upholding its territorial claims, securing communication sea lanes, and dissuading possible foes (Bush et al., 2022).

Influence over Regional Institutions: China wants to strengthen its position within current regional institutions or create new ones that serve its interests. In order to do this, one must interact with groups like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), support alternative regional economic initiatives, and exert influence over regional forums and international institutions in order to affect norms, regulations, and decision-making procedures.

Public Diplomacy and Soft Power: Through cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, media campaigns, and economic diplomacy, China aims to strengthen its soft power and promote its reputation abroad. To build goodwill and positive attitudes in the Indo-Pacific region and to offset complaints or worries voiced by other nations, China actively promotes its cultural legacy, language, and economic success stories.

Counterbalancing the United States: China sees the Indo-Pacific region as a battleground where it faces off against the United States for influence and dominance. China wants to restrict American influence in the region, undermine its relationships

and alliances, and foster an environment that is more conducive to its own interests as part of its strategic goals. This include fostering business relationships with nations that have historically supported the United States, using diplomacy to lessen American influence, and thwarting American military operations in the area (Ho, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The Graham Allison notion of the Thucydides Trap serves as a shared framework for understanding the US-China power conflict in the larger Asia-Pacific area. This summarised account of intricate regional dynamics is not without its limitations, though. The policymakers in Washington and Beijing would believe that they are tangled up in an impossible situation where only retreat can prevent an outbreak of warfare and that war is subsequently unavoidable if the region were to be explained primarily in terms of security dynamics with the United States and China as major competitors to one another. The deepening of regional security dynamics is further facilitated by this strategy of containment, in which one state seeks ways to undermine the capacities of the others in the region.

Small nations that are caught up in the conflict must thus consider joining one of the two sides, which helps to support the idea of a new Cold War. The security of the area might be dangerously affected by this error in judgement. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the shifting power dynamics in the area from a new angle. States are now forced to search for alternatives and a middle ground that would represent order and stability within the Asia-Pacific region due to the complexity and interconnection of today's globalised globe (Zafar, 2022).

Professor Graham Allison of Harvard first used the term "Thucydides Trap" in 2012. Thucydides' explanation of the idea in his account of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta served as the inspiration for both the name and the guiding principle of the idea. Thucydides said that the conflict between the two sides was unavoidable because of Athens' rising dominance, which had caused terror in Sparta. Allison approaches the US-China power struggle from a similar perspective, believing that the development of Chinese capabilities that represent a danger to the status quo upheld by the US would result in conflict (Zafar,

2022).

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