

The Changing World Order and US-China Maritime Power Contestation in the Indo Pacific

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Abstract

The U.S has effectively dominated the grand chessboard of world geopolitics for many decades; however, the economic rise of China and resultant maritime power contestation with the US is rapidly changing the status quo within the Indo-Pacific Region. The announcement of “Pivot to Asia” followed by “Asia Rebalance” strategies by US President Obama and labelling of Asia Pacific to a more focused “Indo-Pacific” by the President Trump clearly reflects U.S. strategic shift to the region. To counter U.S. presence in Southeast Asia and address strategic maritime vulnerability of her Sea Lines of Communications (particularly in South China Sea), China has embarked upon an ambitious military modernization plan coupled with initiation of mega economic projects in Asia. This research is focused on developing an understanding regarding the evolving and rapidly changing maritime power contestation milieu between US and China, studied through the Realist lens. It is an in-depth study of Chinese maritime vulnerability and adopted strategy to overcome it. The research employs theoretical lens of Offensive Realism for studying the U.S national strategy to retain stature of hegemon and Defensive Realist lens to study the adopted Chinese strategy to ensure her steady rise and safeguarding its strategic maritime vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Defence Strategies, Indo-Pacific, maritime vulnerabilities, China, US

Article history: Submitted: 18-12-2023, Accepted: 10-10-2024, Published: 30-12-2024

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51732/njssh.v10i2.221>

Journal homepage: www.njssh.nust.edu.pk



1. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has effectively dominated the global chessboard of world geopolitics for many decades; however, its journey towards gaining the status of a hegemon (the sole power) in the world has been a tumultuous one (Brzezinski, 1997). In the Post WW-II world, US fought a long, tiring and costly war in Vietnam (Hastings, 2018). The confrontation with erstwhile USSR over conflicting interests led to the initiation of the Cold War between the two, and the world saw the rise of a Bipolar world (Westad, 2017).

The decade of 1990s saw the rise of U.S. as the sole superpower albeit disintegration of U.S.S.R (Monteiro, 2014). However, the dawn of 21st Century saw the unprecedented economic rise of China which has started threatening the U.S status of a hegemon in the world politics (Rabena, 2017). This changing

world order and rise of multi-polarity has posed great challenges for the U.S. policy makers, and correspondingly, National Security Strategies, Defence Strategies, and national policies for Asia-Pacific (Campbell & Andrews, 2013) have been announced by the U.S. government in the last decade or so.

Within the Indo-Pacific Region, the competing interests of the US and China over multifaceted regional maritime resources, driven by power prestige syndrome, are rapidly changing the status quo. The military and economic rise of China (Zhang, 2013) and its contiguity to Western Pacific (with rich maritime resources) has brought this region under enhanced focus of U.S. policy makers, particularly in the Post 9/11 scenario. The resultant maritime power contestation between the US and China has been seen manifesting itself in many national policies of the US for the Free and Open Indo Pacific Region over the last decade or so. The announcement of “Pivot to Asia” followed by “Asia Rebalance” strategies by President Barack Obama and labelling of Asia Pacific to a more focused “Indo-Pacific” by President Trump were steps in the same direction. To protect Chinese maritime trade, counter U.S. presence in the broader Indo-Pacific region and address strategic vulnerability of her Sea Lines of Communications (particularly in South China Sea), China has embarked upon an ambitious military modernization plan coupled with initiation of mega economic projects involving majority of Asian nations. The evolving and rapidly changing maritime power contestation milieu, owing to divergent national interests of the U.S. and China, coupled with ongoing trade wars, poses serious challenges to world peace (Rourke, 2019).

The last decade or so has seen Indo-Pacific coming into the limelight and getting added attention amongst the world powers. This region remained under focus during post-World War – II era once infamous Imperial powers abandoned the region in 1945-55 and this was the time once US was making efforts to overtake Vietnam: albeit cold war seeing its brutal manifestation in this region (Elliott, 2010). It is now being said with certain that 21st Century’s Superpower structure will get unfolded in broader Asia Pacific and more specifically the Indo-Pacific. The leading world powers have always shown keen interest in this region, and, notwithstanding, owing to the great geo-strategic importance it carries for all. The presence of the world's busiest maritime Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), the rich hydro resources, and the huge swath of land/ maritime mass, all add to the enhanced significance of this region. The significance further gets accentuated owing to the presence of China and India; the two countries with the biggest human resource of the world. Besides this, the presence of Southeast Asian nation and Australia within and along its borders further highlights the strategic importance this region carries. There is no denying

the fact that world has traditionally been looking towards U.S and EU after the mid of 20th Century, yet the world is seeing a great shift (attributable to many factors) of economic boom/ activity towards East since start of 21st Century. Hence, it can be said that this change of focus towards East is likely to play a pivotal role towards shaping up the world order in the current millennia.

The U.S. has always remained the only power (the sole security guarantor) in this region and has exerted strong influence since long, however with the economic rise of China the pages of history are seeing a dramatic and significant shift in maritime geo-politics of this area (Rourke, 2019). It was in this backdrop of regional contestation that U.S. started paying enhanced focus to this region and adopting national policies of Pivot to Asia and Rebalance to Asia are a clear indication of the same. U.S. adopted policy contours of enhanced engagement with the region, yet the contestation with China in the maritime domain has been very significant. U.S. aerial flights in South China Sea over the Spratly Islands (being converted into military bases by China) and resultant Chinese aggressive response (challenging the U.S. presence) is a clear indication of serious maritime power contestation the world is going to witness in near future (Jennings, 2018). There is no fact denying that U.S. aerial missions are aimed at conveying a strong message to the Chinese counterpart over the forced conversion of these pieces of island into airstrips/ military bases. The maritime patrolling by U.S. ships in the disputed waters under the garb of freedom of navigation operations is raising the ante in this region. This evolving geo-strategic environment, shaped by conflicting national interests/ strategic goals, is leading to a maritime power contestation between the US and China, which is setting the stage for a future fraught with possibilities of unwelcoming and unpleasant circumstances, unless the leadership of both powerhouses mutually decides to avert the looming threat. Only time will tell whether U.S and China will be able to avoid falling into Thucydides Trap (Allison, 2017).

In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss in detail the ongoing maritime power contestation between two global powerhouses, the U.S. (the established power) and China (the rising power). The paper makes an attempt to answer the intellectual question regarding the future of US-China maritime power contestation, albeit the most discussed topic amongst intellectuals and strategists alike, yet still unresolved. This paper first highlights the strategic significance of the broader Indo-Pacific Region and specifically the South China Sea, where maritime power contestation is manifesting in tangible terms. The paper also briefly covers different national strategies adopted by U.S. administration in the 21st Century, focused on containment of China in the broader Indo-Pacific Region. The paper then discusses Chinese maritime strategic vulnerabilities and

the adopted strategy to counter the U.S.'s enhanced focus on the Indo-Pacific Region. The dispute over the South China Sea has been discussed in detail, duly incorporating claims on these waters by the regional countries. The key findings of the paper are elaborated below, and pertinent conclusions are presented at the end of the paper.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Using a mixed methods approach, this study explores the Changing World Order in the Current Century through the lens of a realist theory, while observing the maritime power contest between U.S. and China through the perspective of a hybrid conflict mapping model. The Changing World Order and the resulting power contest between different powerhouses of the world are best described by realist thinking. A brief description of Thucydides' (Thucydides, 2009) contribution to realist philosophy is presented first, followed by a review of Hans Morgenthau's work (Morgenthau, 1978). To fully understand the Realist Paradigm, we must study the works of established contemporary scholars John J. Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer, 2011) and Kenneth N. Waltz (Waltz, 1979); who both advocate offensive and defensive realism. Based on the intellectual ideas of these renowned scholars, the research data has been analysed through the application of selected realism theories.

Using the Hybrid Conflict Mapping Model, the rise of a New Power with divergent economic and security interests has been explained leading to a fierce maritime power contestation between existing and emerging powers. In the current era, maritime power contestations must be studied from different aspects of national policymaking, especially in the realms of security and economics.

This research has been conducted through a Realist theoretical lens, whereby the Change in the World Order in Current Century has been studied focusing on maritime power contestation between US-China in the Indo-Pacific.

2.1 US Employing Offensive Realism

The famous book written by Mearsheimer "Tragedy of Great Power Politics" house his masterpiece work on infamous theoretical framework of Aggressive Realism. The term Offensive Realism has also been used at other places, carrying the same meaning. The US is following the offensive realism approach in conducting its global policies. This literary work of Mearsheimer draws a relationship as to how Superpower conduct their state affairs in the international arena based on five essential assumptions (Mearsheimer, 2011). The State in an international system is best described as Anarchic in nature and there is no singular power that controls all the states (Mearsheimer, 2017).

Second assumption highlights that a state with an offensive military ability can attack another state in the international system. Thirdly, there is a lack of trust between states, as one state can use force against another at any given point in time and any such prediction beforehand is difficult to make. Fourth assumption is regarding every state fundamental right to protection of territorial integrity, and this is a genuine concern. Fifthly, the states in international system tend to behave in a rational manner and the adopted strategy indicates the desire of survival in the international arena (Mearsheimer, 2011). Thus, these essential assumptions lead to formulation of a structure, wherein states feeling insecure takes actions/ steps for their ultimate survival in this anarchic international system. This leads to evolution of an anarchic environment in the international system, where the powerful states ensure their own survival at the cost of undermining other states. Thus, the military and economically strong state can coerce the behaviour of weaker states by applying different state sponsored pressures. In such an anarchic system, threatened states always are trying to improve upon their international standing amongst the comity of nations to ensure their long-term survival (Taliaferro, 2000).

2.2 China Employing Structural Realism

The structural realism (also known as Defensive realism) is a realist lens given away by Kenneth Waltz in his infamous book “Theory of International Politics”. As compared to offensive realism, the concept of Defensive Realism is different wherein it is considered an unwise strategy for a state to dominate any other state (Waltz, 1979). The writer has disregarded the concept of hegemony of one country in the international politics, as this could potentially lead to increased friction and tensions between two states. Waltz has given a considered opinion opposite to offensive realism, wherein the states in international system has almost same distribution of power resulting into much better stability amongst states, thereby making the states less prone to conflicts between them (Slaughter, 2011). That does not mean that states in Defensive realism have to stay where they are, and no upward trajectory can be achieved. The states can follow an agenda where it aims at increasing her power, but state must be mindful that such an elevation is not being achieved by undermining other states. In offensive realism, a state pursues her agenda at the cost of other state. A state may be putting another state in a fear by making certain selection of arms and the other state is doing the same, thereby creating a security dilemma between the two. The existing Security Dilemma between US and China best describes the ongoing power struggle. It can be argued that Defensive realism is better than offensive realism, as in such an international system the weaker states feel less insecure

from a much stronger state (Taliaferro, 2000).

2.3 Realist Lens Explaining Inter-State Power Contestation

The inter-state power contestation compels the states in international arena to adopt different coercive and non-coercive tools and techniques to ensure their supremacy against another state. There is no denying the fact that in such an anarchic world system, the state which has more power would always use the same to further the interest of country and in the process undermines national interests of other states. The theoretical lens of realism and more specifically offensive realism best explains the ongoing maritime power contestation between U.S. and China in Indo-Pacific. In the maritime power contestation of rising power (China) and established power (US), the US is appearing to be a powerful state which is protecting her national maritime interest in the Indo-Pacific, but at the cost of undermining national interest of China (Ellsworth et al., 2000). Thus, the offensive realist lens as propagated by Mearsheimer can be seen as explaining the maritime power contestation between the two power houses of anarchic international system.

On the other hand, China is trying to safeguard against her energy needs passing through the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) running close to mainland China, thus acting within the sphere of his perimeter of security, not undermining any other state's national maritime interest. Hence, it can be said that China's strategy is in line with the Waltz Defensive realist lens. China, in the process, is trying to survive by maximizing her security near her maritime borders/ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Waltz, 1979). Though, China is also seeking power in the international system, yet the same is not being attempted at the cost of another state. China is extending perimeter of security at a very slow pace including construction/ conversion of artificial islands, thus fitting into definition of defensive realist lens, as spelled out by Waltz. There are maritime challenges in shape of Malacca Dilemma and others, yet China is applying elements of national power in a thoughtful and strategically considered manner, thus accruing an extended perimeter of security in line with maritime national interests (Zhang, 2011) amidst ongoing maritime power conflict with the US.

2.4 The Hybrid Conflict Mapping Model

Based on the Hybrid Conflict Mapping Model, the rise of a new power, who's economic and maritime security interests differ from those of an established power, would lead to fierce power maritime competition between the two. Conflict would result from divergent viewpoints over protection of national maritime interests, resulting in a fierce power contest and further escalation to

full-scale conflict. The prospects for mutual accommodation would also increase if the two contesting nations find common ground in areas of economic and security cooperation; both embedded in the maritime cooperation and not power contestation between the US and China. This research work has attempted to do the same, which will enable policymakers to predict the future more accurately and help avoid a full-scale conflict. In the 21st century Changing Global Order, mutual cooperation and accommodation in maritime domain have been projected based on the national interests of the countries.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach has been employed for conduction of the research work (Kumar, 2013). Research objectives have been achieved using grounded theory study designs (Charmaz, 2007). During qualitative research, the researcher focuses on a qualitative phenomenon, which is determined by the quality and reasons for human behaviour, as well as observation of existing documents. Due to the subjective nature of research work, this methodology was selected. The problem is investigated through exploratory research, thereby attempting to clarify concepts (changing global order and domains of power contestation) under consideration. A primary data set was collected by interviewing three categories of respondents (academics, practitioners, and politicians), while a secondary data set was collected by studying books, articles, magazines, newspapers, research journals, and current internet data.

Research design, while contemplating philosophical considerations, which inform the selected research methodology for conducting research, has been discussed first. The Michael Crotty Model encompassing epistemology, theoretical perspective and methodology examined at length and formulated a suitable model (based on the four elements of research) and thereby research strictly follows it (Crotty, 1998). In line with the Crotty's model, the epistemological ground of research turns out to be subjectivism, owing to nature of research work being subjective in nature. The theoretical base of research work has been selected as interpretivism, as interpretivism seeks to balance subjectivity with a more systematic and rigorous approach, recognizing that multiple interpretations are possible, and that context and meaning are crucial. Grounded theory explains the methodology selected for conduction of research work. The rationale for selection of grounded theory explains that it aims to understand the meanings and experiences of participants in a particular context, aligning with interpretivism's emphasis on understanding social phenomena through interpretation (Birks & Mills., 2015). As different themes would be coming out after open ended questionnaire/ semi-structured interviews of the respondents

from varied background, thus identified method for data identification/ analysis turns out to be Thematic Identification/ Analysis (Crotty, 1998). Open-ended questions have been formulated, as they allow participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in detail, providing rich and nuanced data. Semi-structured interviews (involving primary data collection from 18 x respondents) were conducted, enabling researcher to explore specific topics while still allowing for emergent themes to arise. Thematic analysis is a method that identifies, codes, and categorizes themes within the data, and open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews provide the ideal data for this type of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A graphical representation of the four elements of research that leads to selection of a correct method is as under: -

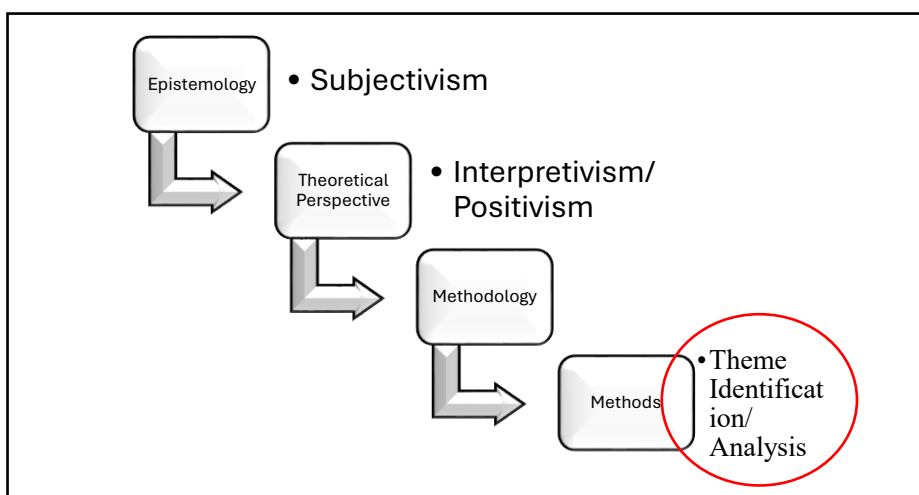


Figure 1.1 – Adopted Model for Research with Selected Method for Analysis

3.1 Strategic Significance of Indo Pacific

The region of Indo Pacific did not gain much traction in the post-cold war era and was given a considerably low priority by the Communists and the Capitalists power blocks. The region came into added limelight with the US's announcement of Pivot to Asia and Rebalancing to Asia national strategies, then shift from Asia Pacific to more specific Indo Pacific and finally Free and Open Indo Pacific policy in last decade or so. The economic potential of the region and the fast pace steady economic rise of China has further enhanced the strategic significance of this region. Besides, vital SLOCs housing major chunk of world maritime trade coupled with presence of different Choke points further adds to overall significance of this region for both US and China.

It can be argued that final chapter of changing world order in 21st Century will be written in broader Asia-Pacific in general and Southeast Asia (housing

South China Sea waters) in specific. An elaboration of factors which contribute towards overall significance of Indo Pacific are discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.2 Geographical Significance of Indo-Pacific Region

The geographical layout of the region by virtue of connectivity it affords to Pacific and Indian Oceans gives it a distinctive strategic importance. The infamous Malacca Strait (posing a strategic dilemma to Chinese maritime shipment), considered as a SLOC which houses heavy maritime traffic/ trade throughout the year, is present in this region. Besides, water body of South China Sea which is another vital global trade SLOC is in this region, thus further adding prominence to this region for competing power houses of the world. The presence of China and India (the two rising economic powers) with tremendous human resource further adds to its geographical importance. The contiguity of this region to emerging/ economically vibrant market of Southeast Asia and East Asia is a big attraction for the foreign investors, who are drawn to a region of 665 million people (Gungwu, 2017).



Figure 1.2: Straits of Southeast Asia

Source: <http://www.geocurrents.info/>

3.3 Trade Routes

The region houses Sea Line of Communications (SLOCs) which are undoubtedly the most important maritime trade lanes in the world. The Malacca Strait is considered as the Second largest Oil trade route (Strait of Hormuz being the 1st one). It is worth mentioning that approximately 16 million barrels of oil passes through Malacca Strait in a single year (Villar & Hamilton, 2017). Besides Malacca, other trade routes are also available in the region namely Straits of Sunda and Lombok, though these routes have less capacity than the Malacca.

South China Sea in the region houses almost 25% of total global shipment in a year (trade worth approximately \$5.3 Trillion)

3.4 Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)

These Western Indo-Pacific waters (Southeast Asian region) houses three SLOCs. The major one is Malacca, however the other two Sunda and Lombok are not very spacious owing to limitation of trade containers specifications. The Malacca Strait is an important choke point, owing to strategic vulnerability it carries for Chinese shipments in case of any blockage. This makes it further valuable in the backdrop of ongoing maritime power contestation between the US and China. Any traffic which has to enter/ exit both Western Pacific and Indian Ocean is per force required to pass through the narrow yet strategic Malacca Strait. It is the world's 2nd largest trade SLOC, only after the Strait of Hormuz (Villar & Hamilton, 2017).

It is pertinent to mention that in case of any future blockade of this important SLOC, there are two other straits available in the region namely Sunda and Lombok, but both are not suitable for all kinds of sea trade container traffic, owing to the limitation of their size and depth etc. South China Sea is another global SLOC passing through the maritime region of Southeast Asia. South China Sea not only has untapped reservoirs of natural oil and gas, but this water body also sees huge volume of annual maritime trade from Western Pacific specifically ASEAN to other parts of the world.

4. US NATIONAL STRATEGY TO RETAIN STATUE OF HEGEMON

4.1. US Pivot to Asia

It was in the Presidency of Barack Obama in year 2009, that US started showing clear signs of a strategic shift in foreign policy with enhanced focus on Asia, relegating Middle East down the priority. The less importance of Middle East was reflected in the big decision of priority withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq and a cut down in Afghanistan. Having made tangible progress in these laid out objectives of force reduction, President Obama started looking towards a more fruitful relationship with the broader Asia Pacific region (Parker & Anderson, 2016). From here the national policy documents started pouring in; Pivot to Asia being the first one announced by the Obama administration (Parker & Anderson, 2016). It is argued that this paradigm foreign policy shift by the US was seen by world as realizing and accepting the Strategic value of Asia Pacific by the established superpower of the world. It also became clearer that future of the World Order will be written in the Asian region, rather than in the western world.

Pivot to Asia policy, as the name indicate, was focused on establishing reinvigorated relationship with the regional countries of Asia Pacific in four key areas. These included facilitation/ tapping of economic potential of the region by purposeful economic ties, reinforcing and re-establishing the US as the net security provider for the region, planned infrastructural projects and also valuing human resource of the region by establishing population centric contacts/ exchanges. Hilary Clinton, then US Secretary of the state saw “The Pivot” as US showing forward leaning posture towards the Asian region. The US seriousness towards the successful accomplishment of laid out objectives of economic prosperity and promised security for the region, was also stressed upon by the Secretary of the State.

The Pivot term started gaining attention in the academic, political and diplomatic circles after being mentioned in article “America’s Pacific Century”. The next after the Secretary of State was President Obama who further endorsed the term during an address to Parliament of Australia (Parker & Anderson, 2016). Pivot’s announcement was seen as US strategy to tackle economic rise of China and hinted towards US initiating policy measures for Containment of China (Castro, 2013).

It is now much clearer that U.S foreign policy for different parts of the world is driven purely by the dictates of national interest and policy evolution to mitigate any growing/ potential threat in synchronization with the pre-designated strategic objectives. The implementation of policy would always be at the cost of other states, and this reflects adoption of offensive realist mindset, as spelled out by Mearsheimer. The economic rise of China and talk of the Asian Century is what pushed the strategic decision of US towards announcement of Pivot to Asia (Sultan, 2013).

4.2. Rebalancing to Asia

The journey of enhanced focus of US foreign policy towards Asia Pacific as stated by The Pivot Strategy went under continuous monitoring at home and changes in set objectives were made as per evolving strategic environment of the region. The next policy, having incorporated required changes, announced was Rebalancing to Asia. It is argued that this US policy maker gave added attention to Asia Pacific owing to two major factors i.e. Military and economic ones. As was being followed in the pre- and post-cold war era, the US started regional engagement only in the military domain, with economic factor relegated down the priority ladder. However, the Chinese response came both in military domain (by building artificial islands in South China Sea) and in the economic domain (by initiating Belt and Road initiative related economic projects) to counter US

led TPP. This led US government to re-evaluate the Pivot and quickly prioritized economic engagement with the region over the previous only military ones. Thus “Rebalance to Asia” is labelled as the US readjustment with the region from military to economic engagement. The hard power went in background and the soft power took the lead (Sutter et al., 2013).

The main goals of rebalance strategy include policy steps to augment the US led world order, access/ tapping of economic potential of Asian trade markets, refreshing and reassuring the US security promises for the regional allies and encouraging to take responsibility for their share of the same (Channer, 2014). This seemingly more focused and well thought out approach toward the broader Asian Pacific region received appreciation and recognition in the region and other parts of the world (Katagiri, 2019).

There is no denying the fact that Rebalance strategy gained prominence owing to China’s economic rise at the global stage. China’s emergence not only threatened essential national interest of the US in the Asia Pacific, but also successfully demonstrated its presence as a rising superpower in the changing global order of 21st Century (Tellis, 2013).

It is argued that Rebalance Strategy played pivotal role towards a fresh and purposeful engagement of US not only with the Southeast Asian countries, but also with the broader Pacific region. Besides the major goals of rebalance, few other avenues of regional cooperation included fighting the cyber-crimes, collaboration towards fighting challenge of Climatic Change and assistance for capacity building against chronic health diseases with high mortality rates. The implementation of economic goals of Rebalancing came in the forms of highly praised and imaginative economic initiative of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). TPP aimed at successful opening of entry doors into Asian trade markets with reduced tariffs (Kuo, 2017).

4.3. National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017 and Indo Pacific

President Trump era saw the announcement of NSS 2017, yet a careful look at the document highlights US administration’s comparatively lesser focus on relationship with the Southeast Asian region (housing South China Sea and ASEAN countries) contrary to previous administrations. NSS 2017 do have mentioning of two ASEAN countries i.e. Thailand and Philippines, as important allies of US, whereas economic partnership with Singapore and Vietnam have been acknowledged (Weaver, 2018). The infamous Asia Pacific term (highlighted in Pivot and Rebalance to Asia) was done away with and a new term “Indo Pacific” coined by the Trump administration, reflecting departure from erstwhile broader concept to a more specific one now (Orchard, 2017).

The NSS 2017 seemingly has shown a clear departure from previous era NSS in many ways. Firstly, the much-vowed economic cooperation with the ASEAN countries did not find any place in NSS 2017. Secondly, the promise of net security provider to the allies in the region have also not been given much importance. A meagre announcement of Bilateral trade with the region can be seen as a direct result of pressure on the Trump administration, after abrupt decision of getting out from TPP (Sheng, 2017). Thirdly, NSS 2017 has a new term of “Indo Pacific” which have been used intensively across the globe in various diplomatic conversations. Though China sees it as Containment of China, yet the term seems less China centric. The lack of focus towards the ASEAN countries, specifically the US allies, have raised alarm bells in the region regarding US promises of economic prosperity and security needs (Sheng, 2017).

In a nutshell, this can be argued that US policy for the region has not changed much, but US seems reluctant towards playing military role for resolution of regional disputes. The NSS 2017 reflects a careful approach being adopted by the US government, yet the strategy seems fully aligned towards accomplishment of national policy goals in the region.

4.4. Fate of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in Asia Pacific

The eight years effort of Obama administration in terms of economic engagement with the Asian Pacific region being a signatory to TPP, was thrown away by President Trump on his first day in office (Solís, 2019). Though Mr. Trump did show US economic commitment towards the region, however the damage had already been done. Those who worked towards conceptualization and implementation of TPP felt tattered away by the action of President Trump, as through such economic initiatives not only the economy at US soil could have benefitted but this would have contributed towards enhanced influence/ economic leverages in the region against Chinese onslaught of Belt and Road initiatives. There is no denying the fact that the regional leadership saw US decision as a hard one and this also made them suspicious regarding the seriousness of US economic and security promises/ commitments for the region. The planned visit of US President to Philippines and Vietnam only further alienated the other countries in the ASEAN region and they assessed these diplomatic signs as a US effort to secure own national interests only, with nothing for the region (Solís, 2019).

4.5. US Policy of Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP)

After shifting from Asia Pacific to a more focused Indo Pacific in Trumps era, President in September 22 during the Quad leaders' Summit gave out the cardinals of Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP). Through FOIP, US again showed its commitment towards a region that is free and open, a region that is interconnected and has bright chances of economic prosperity afforded by this mutual connectivity and a region which is secure and resilient. The new strategy outlines that US would be taking along regional countries towards a journey of success in the rule-based world and noting alone can be accomplished without cooperation of all stake holders. US urged all the regional countries jo join hands in this shared vision, as this would require understanding historical perspectives and unprecedented security challenges ahead in the future (Free and Open Indo Pacific Policy, White House, 2022).

Besides economic and military aspects, a third pillar of governance has also been added in the final document of FOIP released in February 2022 by the US government. The vision ensued in FOIP included key areas of ensuring free and open seas in the region, promoting economic trade, addressing security concerns of the regional nations and supporting good governances through adoption of good practices. In drafting the vision, a peep into historical insight of the region was considered necessary to visualize and introduce those values and policies which would be paving the way for regional growth and prosperity, off course while ensuring security of the region (Hang & Thuy, 2018).

The FOIP further augments the strategic economic and military significance of the Indo Pacific region, with its span from West Cost of India to West Cost of US. The centre point of FOIP policy turns out to be cooperative engagement with the regional countries and institutions like ASEAN. It is argued that this concept of Indo Pacific is not new, as the same is historically shared by so many countries of the world. In a nutshell, FOIP visions is a way forward towards ensuring regional economic prosperity and security, while remaining in the ambit of the rule-based world (Hang & Thuy, 2018).

4.6. Chinese Maritime/ Energy Security Vulnerabilities

The Chinese economy has seen sustained economic growth in the past decades; however, this growth is critically dependent upon the uninterrupted supply of energy resources for meeting demands of her domestic requirement and resultant consumption. Here comes the Achilles Heel of the Chinese economy, the required energy cargo must travel a long maritime distance (Zhang, 2008) and has to pass through critical SLOC which passes through the South China Sea (having maritime boundaries/ contiguity with many ASEAN countries). Besides

this security vulnerability near home waters, the energy shipment is also susceptible to interruption enroute from Mediterranean, Red Sea to Persian Gulf and to West Coast of Pacific Ocean. The Chinese dependence on the shipment far away from home gets further complex, owing to availability of 4th largest Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) deposits in mentioned maritime regions.

The engine of Chinese economic growth is dependent upon the supply of energy resource and this shipment which must travel a long way further faces a critical maritime choke pint of Malacca Strait. China is very sensitive to this maritime vulnerability and would see any attempt towards blocking of this critical choke point as detrimental to her national interest and corresponding military response to ease up the same may be a leading option for the Chinese leadership (Zhang, 2008).

The SLOC which are available to China for transportation of her maritime energy cargo include Malacca Strait (move of cargo from Middle East to Western Pacific Coast), the Sunda Trait (which could serve as an alternative to Malacca), Gaspar and Lombok Straits. Though all these straits can accommodate varied categories of energy cargos, yet Malacca alone house 80% of the Chinese energy shipments, thus turning out to be of strategic importance. It is argued that Chinese security vulnerabilities are a direct result of competitive strategies at play in these maritime waters. The anarchic nature of international politics, the changing world order in the 21st Century and the resultant power struggle for occupying the top seat in the future global order has brought maritime competition to new heights in the Indo Pacific waters, thus further exacerbating the Chinese maritime concerns (Zhang, 2008).

4.7. Malacca Strait Dilemma – Chinese Major Strategic Maritime Vulnerability

It is an established fact that maritime trade of China has Malacca Strait, as its lifeline owing to passage of major chunk of energy cargo passing through the strait. Fast economic growth requires energy cargos at home and these cargos which travel long distances, finally must go through the Malacca strait (Zhang, 2011). The infamous Malacca Strait Dilemma is a situation where China has great economic and strategic stakes in the Strait yet being away from home China has little influence in this area and this is what causes a maritime security vulnerability for China (Shaofeng, 2010).

Owing to ongoing maritime power contestation, there is a likelihood of blockade of Malacca Strait and as China is heavily dependent upon this critical maritime artery, thus it adds to delicate security situation of China in the maritime domain. A wise enemy of China would like to exploit this strategic maritime

vulnerability of China in any future conflict. The Chinese top leadership acknowledges this fact, as highlighted in the statement of Hu Jintao's in 2003, whereby the Premier highlighted that Malacca has strategic value/ implications for China and the country must take necessary steps to avoid such a situation in future and not only this, but all efforts must also be made to drive the enemies out of Southeast Asian waters (Storey, 2006).

The AESEAN countries of Malaysia and Indonesia are separated by the narrow water channel of Malacca Strait. The southern tip of strait has the presence of Singapore. It is important to note that this maritime water way accommodate almost 25 percent of world maritime trade every year, and around 60,000 trade container of varied types passes through the strait. The strait of Lombok which is present in the Indonesian maritime waters could be seen as an alternative to Malacca. The problem with this alternative is that it can only accommodate very large crude containers (VLCC), however a major portion of Oil cargos of China are accommodated by this very important strait. Being fully cognizant of the maritime security vulnerabilities while navigating through these critical straits, China is making earnest endeavours to find out long term solution to decrease her dependence, however it is also a fact that announcing No Use of Malacca Strait may not be possible in near future, as building a bypassing maritime/ overland route would take some time (Storey, 2006).

China has adopted varied security measures to counter the threat of blockage of Malacca Strait. The modernization of Chinese Navy to a Blue Water Navy is one such strategic measure. The presence of such a large navy is surely going to address the concern of security of Chinese energy shipments and will also help in conducting naval operations (out of area contingency tasks) away from Chinese mainland. China is also focusing upon security of her maritime energy cargos in the Middle East; steps include availing of transit facility as well as construction of new ports at required places along the maritime route of energy cargos. Such imaginative and well thought out measures are surely going to address the problems to great extent, as this would enable controlled yet fluent flow of required cargos through the Malacca Strait. The maritime security concerns also include the threat of piracy and resultantly the importance of Anti-piracy missions cannot be ruled out. The formulation of joint task force with the regional countries for ensuring safety of the maritime cargo is a good step. The threat of maritime terrorism in the Malacca strait waters is a live one, especially with the presence of US troops in these waters. Undoubtedly, these are many security concerns for the Chinese in this water, yet adoption of an all-encompassing maritime approach is going to be a long-term solution (Shaofeng, 2010).

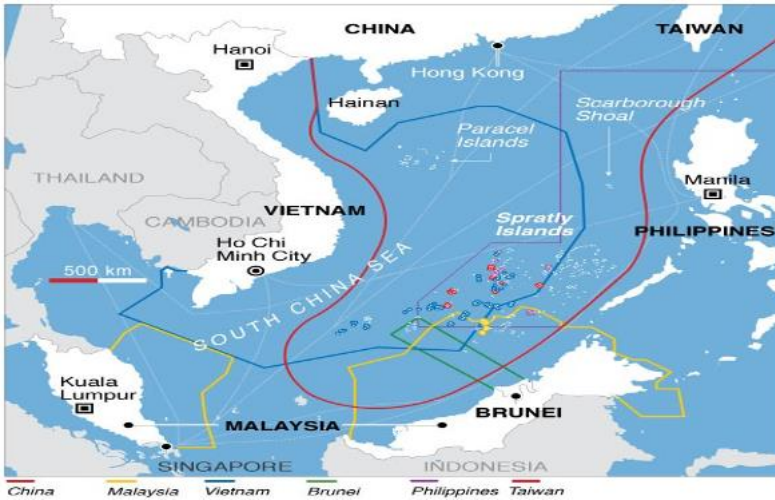


Figure 1.3: South China Sea Dispute

Source: <http://www.geocurrents.info/>

An overview of Chinese domestic consumption of energy indicates that Chinese oil demand increased from 2.3 million barrels per day (mb/d) in 1990 to 4.4 mb/d in 2000. The situation is further compounded in 2009, where the oil demand had jumped to 8.1 mb/d. Such a huge domestic consumption pattern highlights that by 2035, the country's oil demand will be soaring high to 15.3 mb/d. Correspondingly, US which at present is the leading oil consumer with 14.9mb/d, would be behind China in their energy consumption. It is pertinent to remember that Chinese sustained growth is directly proportional to availability of required energy cargo for domestic consumption (Shaofeng, 2010). The Chinese Communist Party sees country's economic growth as a top agenda, and this would require smooth supply of large quantities of energy cargos at home. China has embarked upon a journey of Energy Diplomacy, yet it is pertinent to highlight that this has further increased the energy consumption at home, as the requirement for fast growth is pushing local consumers towards increased demand. It is argued that Chinese growth is related to provision of uninterrupted supply of energy cargos, which must traverse thousands of miles in the maritime waters from Mediterranean to Chinese mainland, thus further compounding to China's energy security problems. Besides the maritime alternative routes, there is also a possible alternative in shape of energy pipelines for land-based import. China must adopt energy alternatives as well, whereby means of alternative energy could be employed for supporting and decreasing the dependence upon oil based domestic consumption (Siklos, 2016).

4.8. Territorial Dispute of South China Sea

The Chinese mainland has contiguity to South China Sea which is one of the strategically known SLOC in the global maritime trade route, thus adding to added importance of this water body. The presence of underwater maritime natural resources including natural oil, gas and the rich fisheries waters further have made many ASEAN countries to raise their right of ownership. South China Sea waters have contiguity to many regional countries, yet China by virtue of military and economic might enjoys almost naval supremacy in the region. There are states which could choose allies (e.g. US) and this contestation over under water resources of South China Sea may move into a serious conflict in the region, may be at some point in time in near future. Besides other islands, e Paracel and Spratly Islands emerges out to be of more importance and have become an area of maritime contestation. It is important to mention here that it is not only the untapped under water resources only, but the overall presence of these islands in the global SLOC is what makes them under enhanced focus. Around 5.3 trillion USD is the volume of trade in a calendar year that passes through the South China sea, which very much explains the reason of added importance (Choi, 2005).

The country which controls this important SLOC would also be able to influence the regional countries, thus military control of South China Sea is very important for any regional power to make others comply with the terms. China is making feel its military presence in South China Sea at snail's pace by constructing artificial islands and converting them into military bases/ airstrips/ naval facilities. The regional countries and the major stake holders including U.S have viewed this with great concern, yet China is increasing her perimeter of security to ensure protection of its energy cargos at a slow yet steady pace. Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia and Philippines are among those ASEAN countries which have laid their claim to South China Sea waters near their costal lines. Figure 4.4 indicates the claim made by different countries. There are places where more than one country has made claim to the same water body (Choi, 2005).

It is only Philippines and Vietnam which have challenged Chinese control over the contested waters of South China Sea. Vietnam and China are in a contest since 1974 and 1988, over the water of South China Sea. Vietnam had to yield and give away control of Paracel and Spratly's islands to China, after the later launched successful naval operations. There were many casualties because of these skirmishes between the two countries. Philippines also raised the matter in an international court and got the court opinion in their favour, however China still owns the maritime territory (Choi, 2005).

China has adopted a delaying tactics strategy in the South China Sea contested waters and has avoided the implementation of court decision (Fravel, 2011). There has been increase in Chinese military/ naval presence in this important SLOC and at places China has also deployed ground/ aerial platforms to cater for any development in future. It can be argued that China is buying time to cement her military/ naval presence in the waters of South China Sea and not giving any space to the regional countries to challenge her naval supremacy. The dawn of 21st century has seen a further increase in Chinese presence in the South China Sea waters. This can be attributed towards the military and economic might of China at regional level and now China has started dictating terms where required to protect her national interests. The US presence has further worsened the ongoing maritime power contestation in the region and so far, China is the winner, owing to the proximity/ contiguity of Chinese mainland to these waters (Fravel, 2011).

There is no denying the fact that modernization which is under progress for Peoples Liberation Army and Navy (PLAN) is not only aimed at settling down the territorial claims of South China Sea waters, but the country is looking towards the strategic objective of securing the SLOC to address her strategic vulnerability of maritime trade passing through this artery. The Chinese presence and adopted strategy have further enhanced the trade competition in the region. It is not only the regional countries but other international stakeholders including US as well, who want their share of the pie in this region (Morton, 2016). China is making headway in the region and in the process making her presence felt at the international chessboard of global geo-politics. US has felt the structural stresses the most, owing to rise of China and correspondingly has labelled China as revisionist power. US has also blamed China for employing coercive economic and military tactics to further her gains in the region. On the other hand, Chinese Grand strategic design is reflective of her desire to be acknowledged as a rising power, which is well capable of protecting her national interest so close to her coastal region (Morton, 2016).

4.9. US and Maritime Dispute of South China Sea

The Chinese mainland has contiguity with two water bodies its South and Eastern borders namely South China Sea and East China Sea respectively. But China does not enjoy free control over both, owing to claims laid by various countries. South China Sea is strategically more important. But this maritime contestation not only includes the regional countries, but there are extra regional forces i.e. US and Japan as well which are interested in maintaining their influence in these waters (Stashwick, 2017).

There are one hundred and eighty (180) different features (above the surface) including reefs, shoals, rocks and sandbanks in South China Sea. There are under water features also present which are geographically located at four different locations in the sea water. There are many countries which lay their claim to water of South China Sea including Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei. Taiwan is one country, interestingly, which has made claims to both features (above surface and under surface) of South China Sea. As per maps held with China highlighting nine-dash line in South China Sea, 80% of the sea is possessed by China. This topographical map is not accepted to the countries which have laid claims to these waters and resultantly, this issue is a permanent source of concern between China and the ASEAN countries (McDevitt, 2014).

There are different types of claims which are made by the countries over rocks in the sea and at places conflict is regarding the fisheries rights in particular waters. The presence of hydrocarbon reserves at the seabed is also a source of contention. The security of strategic SLOC passing through the South China Sea also brings into play the factor of outside forces (especially US), which likes to maintain its influence in these waters. As per United Nations Convention on Law of Sea (UNCLOS), any country can claim the surface and underwater resources of a particular water body which is contiguous to its mainland; Chinese claims is understandable in this context (McDevitt, 2014). However, there are other ASEAN countries which lay claim to these resources in the light of same UNCLOS, however China is not ready to entertain their claims and this a continuous contestation between China and the claiming countries is a writing on the wall. US being a global power and linkages of trade and alliances in the region is also interested in maintaining its presence, thus freedom of navigation operations are being conducted in South China Sea. China, however, sees these navigation operations as hostile provocation by the US; a continuous maritime power contestation is thus in progress (Stashwick, 2017).

The leveraging of military power/ presence in the South China Sea could be used a possible scenario towards potential resolution of this dispute. Both countries can work out a solution, whereby Chinese new status may be accepted, and US is also able to exert its influence in the region in terms of maritime security of trade/ energy cargos. Such an accommodation may force the Chinese to stop the deployment of ground and air assets at the newly constructed bases in the Spratly Islands. The Chinese force projection is so far defensive in nature, as none of air to air and gr to air missiles, fighter jets and air defence assets have been deployed in these islands. There is a presence of gr to air missiles and other ground assets (mainly US allies), and these can be used in future towards naval blockade of South China and East China Seas. It is pertinent to mention that these

force projection capabilities of US are not yet fully operational, and these can be playing important role in negotiations, as Chinese counterparts can be asked to refrain from the same and vice versa (Stashwick, 2017).

The Chinese government has chosen to maximize its perimeter of security, which is in line with the Defensive Realism. The Chinese encroachment in South China Sea is peacefully coercive, as it is progressing ahead very slowly as per the international environment and space available. By adopting such wiser course of action, China is not only keeping things calm but the land mass (surface and submerged) in South China Sea is also improving in favour of China (McDevitt, 2014). US is conducting freedom of navigation operations under the UNCLOS, which is seen as highly proactive and offensive by the Chinese and see these actions by US as something which is hurting the peace in the region. There have been difficult circumstances for political and diplomatic leadership of both countries, whereby naval ship and air assets have come eyeball to eyeball and may contribute towards enhanced escalation in future (McDevitt, 2014).

It is evident that US desires to project its naval presence in South China Sea, but this is non-coherent approach is not yielding the desired results and chances of further escalation does exist in the region (Hastings, 2011). An analysis of US military assets in the Indo Pacific region does highlight that a proper command structure is absent which could be seen as overall responsible for the region. Though there are assets available in the region but their suitability for the task is a serious source of concern. It seems that US do not desire to project force in this region and the effectiveness of these assets under a unified command is not very given due attention. Such an approach in long term is going to pose serious implications to the concept of Net Security provider in the region (Hastings, 2011).

4.10. Chinese Response to U.S. Strategy of China's Containment

Though there have been number of U.S. National Strategies to counter the Chinese rise, however Chinese response follow suit. The Chinese adopted strategy have two main prongs namely the Economic prong and the Military one. The succeeding paragraphs would discuss these one by one.

4.10.1 China's Re-invigorated Economic Ties with ASEAN Countries

After the regional financial crunch, China was able to capitalize upon the economic opportunities which were offered by the post crunch period. China made serious diplomatic efforts to strengthen economic ties with the ASEAN states. China realizing the economic potential of the region took a bold step towards signing the agreement of "ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA)"

(Tongzon, 2005). This initiative coupled with cooperative Chinese posture started a period of economic cooperation with the regional countries and trade volume increased to \$24 billion in 1998. The economic dividends for the region saw new heights with outstanding rise in trade figures of US\$78 billion in 2003 to US\$444 billion in 2013. It can argue that the region also rose with economic rise of China and got fully benefitted in the process. The future of Chinese economic ties with the regional countries is very bright and a trust-based relationship would take this economic cooperation to even new heights in times to come (Ba, 2003).

4.10.2 Chinese One Road (OBOR Economic Initiative)

The status of Chinese global economic power can be attributed to its sustained economic growth and also the visionary leadership of the country enabling free trade environment. The resultant economic strength has put the country on a path, whereby it can use its economic viability to push forward new economic projects for the ASEAN countries (The Economic Times, 2017).

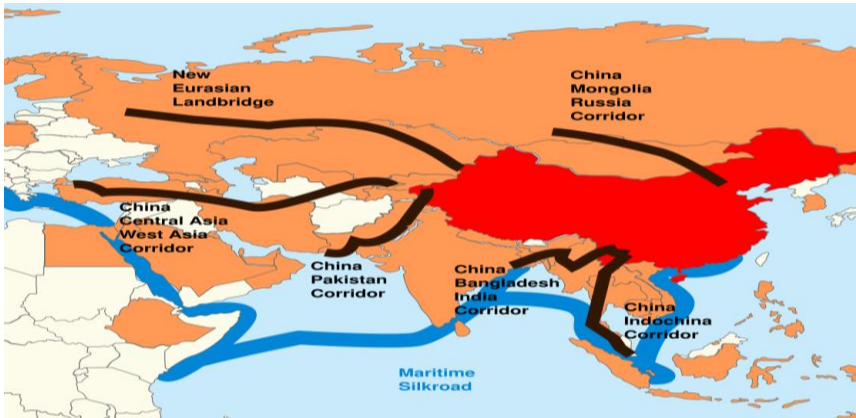


Figure 1.4: Belt and Road Initiative

Source: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-mediterranean-silk-road/>

The Chinese grand vision of regional connectivity has seen its true manifestation in shape of concept of “One Belt One Road (OBOR)”. The engine of Chinese economic growth is being run by her consumption of huge energy cargos, and there was a dire requirement to explore new avenue for meeting this rising demand and OBOR is going to get China the same in a visionary way. The presence of US in the South China Sea closer to global SLOC and fear of blockade at Malacca has made Chinese policy makers adopt imaginative ways and means to protect the fast growth while staying below the threshold of any conflict (Stratfor, 2017).

The OBOR not only afford regional connectivity and boost economic activity in the region, yet besides that China is able to secure its trade route from mainland China to the Mediterranean Sea and secure overland trade routes will also be built in the process (Stratfor, 2017). Chinese trade volume with the regional countries has increased to \$14.6 billion of FDI in 2015, double than 2014 (The Economic Times, 2017). This is not the end of it, China has rather put eyes on an astounding financial objective US\$1 trillion trade by 2020 with its regional partners.

5. CHINA'S KINETIC PRONG TO COUNTER US- STRATEGY OF STRING OF PEARLS

The maritime security vulnerabilities of China in terms of SLOC in South China Sea and a potential blockade of Malacca Strait has been a source of serious concern for the country. To ensure the security of maritime energy cargos from Mediterranean Sea to mainland China, a strategy containing “nodes of influence” in the broader Asia Pacific region has been adopted by China. Owing to the long distance the critical energy cargos must travel, Chinese thinkers have thought to create nodes of influence in friendly counties in shape of coasts, which could not only offer protection at the hour of needs but could also serve as logistic bases for refuelling/ deployment/ arming of Chinese Navy in near future (Khurana, 2008).

India have been seen making hue and cry over these Chinese nodes of influence in the Indo Pacific and this pain is quite understandable. India has termed it as encirclement of India, with grand strategic designs by the Chinese. This Chinese strategy since 2005 is famous as String of Pearls, whereby the pearls are in different friendly countries. These pearls include Myanmar port, Chittagong port in Bangladesh, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Gwadar port in Pakistan. Here again, China is increasing her perimeter of security at a slow place and this strategy is in line with Defensive Realist approach as spelled out by Waltz (Khurana, 2008).

The maritime security vulnerability of Malacca Strait offers an alternative in shape of China-Burma pipeline and also the construction of railway line from China to ASEAN countries. Such mega projects are not only going to enhance Chinese connectivity with the region but also ensure availability of alternative means for transportation of energy shipments (Zhang , 2008).



Figure 3: String of Pearls

Source: <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/string-of-pearls-redux-china-india-and-a-cambodian-base>

5.1. China's Blue-Water Navy

The US has been the sole superpower over the globe since past many decades and has enjoyed her control of the global trade routes/ maritime SLOCs by pre-positioning of its naval assets. At present, US feels threatened by fast economic rise of China and the resultant challenge to US hegemony in the global arena is fast changing the decades old US supremacy. The modernization of Chinese armed forces is happening at a very fast pace and is likely to alter the power equation in the blue waters. China is looking forward to project her naval power beyond her mainland coasts. The simmering backyard of China with regional dispute is a befitting reply by US, in an attempt to keep Chinese force projection in check. Chinese Blue water navy concept is likely to take its final shape by year 2030 and in case it gets materialized, then it would pose grave challenges to US maritime global/ national interests. The US is closely monitoring the situation and there is no denying the fact that Chinese anti-access/ area denial platforms (once fully operational) are going to be posing serious security concerns for the US. The naval assets of US in the region may require re-evaluating their response mechanism/ options against looming Chinese threat. A fierce maritime power contestation between the two power houses of the world is a writing on the wall (Cronin et al., 2017).

The Chinese leadership have paid added attention towards fast modernization of PLAN and huge chunk of cash has been released for meeting the desired targets at an earlier stage (Saunders et al., 2011). Chinese navy is attempting to project power away from its coasts and deployment of three ship task groups for maritime duties in Gulf of Aden is testimony to the same. This Chinese strategy is unlike US which has deployed Carrier Strike Groups to patrol

global blue waters. China is making steady progress and focus has been on submarines, which are more than surface vessels. China is also deploying unmanned cruise and ballistic missiles with less surface signature. The Chinese dream of blue water navy is line with her desire to get itself established as a global player and a strong military power. The ultimate rise of China is seemingly a writing on the wall and at present, “the dragon is just stretching her legs” (Saunders et al., 2011).

5.2. China’s Naval Buildup for Naval Operations beyond Mainland China

The ongoing fast-paced modernization of PLAN is not only for projecting power in the region for protection of energy cargos, but the country is looking forward to a role beyond that. A role that has the aspirations of becoming a global power, thereby shouldering global responsibilities. Though China is building a potent naval force able to operate away from Mainland China, yet there will be five challenges to which an answer would be required before embarking upon such a journey. These are distance, duration, capacity, complexity of coordination, and hostility of environment. While operating away from base, distance becomes a problem for a navy with no nearby bases to cope-up with the required logistics. The crew would be requiring dedicated medical care, food, fresh vegetables and portable water in term of logistics.

The Chinese modernization plans will take some time to get executed and in the same way, the capacity to conduct large scale operations away from Chinese coasts will take some time as well. It is going to be some time, once Chinese navy like US would be recognized as a global navy, however efforts by the PLAN are in hand at a fast pace to make this dream a reality. It will be though Blue Water Navy, in future, that China would be able to compete US in the blue waters and protect vital maritime national interest of the country across the globe (Yung et al., 2010).

6. KEY FINDINGS

6.1. US and China in the Changing Global Order

As the emergence of new powers and influential non-state actors has inexorably altered the distribution of power globally, the order largely constructed by the United States post-World War II remains very much in place. Moreover, the United States is growing more reluctant to use military force to maintain its position as the world's leader. The United States' standing, and authority have been undermined in recent years by China, Russia, and other lesser regional powers who have exploited this reluctance (Stares et al., 2020). Assisted by scholars and intellectuals, the Chinese party-state is conducting extensive

research examining what a China-led world order might look like. To achieve this, the party-state has rejected Western models and instead re-examined historical and traditional Chinese concepts of empire-tianxia (everything under heaven) and the tributary system (Rolland, 2020).

It appears that Beijing favours a partial, loose, and malleable hegemony. Hegemony implies a sphere of influence rather than ambition to dominate the world, thus it is partial. It is also loose at the same time, as Beijing does not seem to envision an absolute or direct control over foreign lands and governments. Hegemony is malleable as well, since the countries under Chinese hegemony do not appear to be strictly defined by geography, culture, or ideology, as long as they respect the dominance of China (Rolland, 2020).

Over the past few decades, the United States has taken an active role in global institutions and sought to establish close relationships with allies who share its views on democracy and the world order (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Policy makers in the United States appear to have remained obsessed with Rimland Theory, according to which control over Southeast Asia was a prelude to an aspired global power (Darling, 1971). As a result of this theory, the US wished to obstruct the free movement of ex-USSR naval vessels in Southeast Asian waters while at the same time ensuring that she could move her own ships in case of hostilities.

6.2. Formation of Unipolar World - The Emergence of New World Order

It is the United States' goal to create a unipolar world, dominate international affairs, and maintain significant advantages in politics, economics, science and technology, and military affairs for a very long time (Hall, 2021). Due to globalization, interconnectivity, and interdependence unlike in any previous era in depth and scale, America's unipolar dominance of a landscape bore the seeds of its own erosion (Ali, 2017). China's grand strategy is profoundly affected by uni-polarity. A direct confrontation with the United States is too costly and counterproductive, given the unipolar structure of power. However, till near future, China cannot afford to be in Washington's strategic spotlight. However, to ensure its own security, Beijing must minimize international concerns regarding China's growing power while closing the power gap with the United States (Wang, 2010).

There is a good chance that China's competition with the United States in security will intensify as it becomes more powerful. Over the next few decades, the structural contradiction between the existing hegemon which aims to preserve Asia's balance of power and the emerging power that may be able to dominate the region will become even more evident. In the future, uni-polarity will

disappear. One of the most challenging tasks in the 21st century will be to manage the US-China security competition properly (Wang, 2010).

6.3. Repositioning Towards Asia Pacific

China's economic and military rise has led the U.S. to launch its pivot to Asia strategy in 2011, aiming to counter China's significant structural changes. As a result of this strategy, the U.S. has rebalanced its Middle East policy and shifted its focus. Since the pivot, the United States has increased its presence in the Indo-Pacific and strengthened its cooperation with allies. It is important to note that this strategy has limitations, particularly in terms of funding. Because of this strategy, US-Beijing's relations have deteriorated, as the pivot has been a source of tension between the two nations (Poulin et al., 2021).

As a threat to American global hegemony, China has grown its economy and developed its naval capabilities over the years, surpassing the United States to become the world's largest navy. Therefore, the United States considers China to be its biggest adversary. It is therefore imperative that the United States curbs China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific and halts its plan to expand its capabilities and interests beyond its maritime borders by establishing aggressive naval presences in the Indian and Pacific Oceans to maintain the balance of power. By forming diplomatic and military alliances with other strategic partners, the United States can gain a substantial and long-standing position in the Indo-Pacific region (Randev, 2022).

6.4. Chinese Grand Strategy Towards Rise

As a result of China's rise, the United States is facing a challenge unlike any other. The US has not faced any adversary or coalition of adversaries which has achieved 60 percent of its GDP in more than a century. At the height of its economic power, neither Wilhelmine Germany during the First World War, Imperial Japan, nor Nazi Germany during the Second World War crossed this threshold. Nevertheless, Beijing itself quietly reached this milestone in 2014. China's economy is already 25 percent larger than the US economy when the relative price of goods is considered. Clearly, China is the most significant rival the United States has faced, and the way Washington handles its emergence to superpower status will determine the direction of the century to come (Hall, 2021).

6.5. One Belt One Road (OBOR)/ Maritime Silk Route

As part of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, China has also proposed the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (OBOR), which is an even broader and more ambitious project. OBOR will be financed by

the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was formed by China. The Chinese economy is transitioning from export-driven to consumption-driven growth. After the 2008-9 global financial crisis, which sharply weakened Western countries' ability to absorb Chinese manufacturing products and invest in developing countries, this process accelerated. Besides investing in developing countries, China also invests in developed economies (Zhu, 2015).

6.6. South China Sea Dispute between China – US

Due to its geographical location at the meeting point of the world's most intensive maritime routes, the South China Sea plays a very important strategic and economic role. South China Sea is surrounded by nine major nations: China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Brunei. Several regions of the South China Sea fall under the sovereignty of these Asian countries since China claims sovereignty over large parts of the sea, has built artificial islands in it, and is militarizing the region. Due to this, the United States intervened to form an alliance with other Asian countries bordering the South Sea, sending warships and aircraft to nearby regions. To make sure all international parties had access to maritime and air navigation routes, the United States sent its warships and military aircraft to nearby regions. The Asian and Western parties are afraid that this region may gradually become a "real conflict" point, and any clashes there could lead to dire consequences for the entire globe (Zubaidi, 2022).

6.7. China's Blue-Water Navy

Chinese desire to be seen as a global superpower on par with the United States drives the need for modernization and increasing Chinese sea power. In addition to countering US influence and regaining pre-eminence within maritime Asia, reunification with Taiwan and protecting their rapidly growing economy by securing crucial trade routes and energy routes, the Chinese want to secure critical trade routes and energy routes. Besides using this blue water force for power projection and protecting maritime interests, China will use the Pacific as a new Great Wall to enhance its overall security. Chinese navy will be able to extend their defence of mainland China by utilizing blue water capability (Pharis, 2009).

6.8. China's Out of Area Naval Operations

China's out of area deployments, although not new, herald another era in PLAN operations. The nature of these operations has thus far been cautious and incremental and can be expected to continue in that fashion for the foreseeable future. If China follows along our predicted continuum of operations, it will steadily progress toward capabilities in major combat operations out of area.

Before that happens, however, it will need to undertake significant efforts to improve ship and aircraft maintenance, food preservation, medical care, and logistics supply (at long distances). Most importantly, China will have to develop a network of facilities or bases its forces can rely on for maintenance, repair, and replenishment. In the absence of such a network, China will not be able to take part in major combat operations at distances far from home (Yung et al., 2010).

6.9. China's Pursuits of Overseas Security

As China protects its interests abroad, several implications arise for the United States. The uniformed PLA personnel may not be sufficiently representative of China's role in other countries' security affairs for analysts looking to understand Chinese involvement. The Chinese efforts to promote security for its overseas interests need to be viewed from a broader, more expansive perspective. China is likely to collaborate most readily with the United States in areas involving extremely limited commitments, low escalation risks, and opportunities to bolster its international reputation. U.S. military officials may discover that China employs a variety of military and nonmilitary forces to advance its security interests in the coming years. Identifying areas of collaboration and competition between U.S. and Chinese interests can help planners anticipate possible collaborations (Heath, 2018).

7. CONCLUSION

The significance attached to the Indo Pacific region can be attributed to the geographical location over the global map and the rich underwater maritime resources it houses. The Indo Pacific region attracts a lot of global investors owing to the huge populace it houses and resultant busy trade markets. The Chinese factor of fast growth rate has also helped the neighbouring regions to get benefitted in the process and enjoy the high ride of economic prosperity. The national interest of US made the policy makers to make necessary shift in their formulation of national policies for the region. Correspondingly, since 2009 a growing interest of the US in Asia Pacific was observed, and it got reflected in the policies of Pivot to Asia and Rebalancing to Asia under President Barack Obama. Under President Trump in 2017, the term Asia Pacific was replaced by a more focused Indo-Pacific. The year 2022 saw the adoption of term Free and Open Indo Pacific. These all-policy documents reflect the visible shift in US focus towards the region, ostensibly owing to the economic rise of China.

There is no doubt that self-interest plays an important role in international politics, but it manifests itself in many different ways, not all of them dishonest. The 'China threat' theory and the idea that China is America's 'other' could be

more effectively addressed with a better cultural and political understanding between the U.S. and China. Despite all the attention given to China's rise and its consequences, "the United States still has a very imperfect understanding of China's power and motivations, which fuels tension as much as Chinese actions." Conflicts of interests and ideals are inevitable, but if they are dealt with pragmatically rather than prematurely, they could ease Sino-U.S. relations. In the 21st century, two powers will most likely coexist in peace and work together through a policy of engagement. An increased level of engagement between the parties will only result in a deeper understanding of future issues (Fergusson, 2012).

The maritime security vulnerabilities of China include strategic SLOC in South China Sea and threat of potential blockade of Malacca Strait; however, China is not sitting idle. China is making tangible progress to address its security concerns in South China Sea by constructing artificial islands, yet this extension of perimeter of security is being achieved by China at a very slow pace. China is keeping its efforts under the threshold and not inviting any kinetic response from any regional or extra regional force, which indicates how carefully it is treading its path. The implementation of mega economic project of OBOR is earning China confidence and cooperation of its neighbouring countries. China has earned the name of regional connector through adroit application of visionary trade policies linked with well-planned regional connectivity corridors.

The sudden casting away of Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and unfulfilled economic promises has made the regional countries suspicious regarding intended US policies for the region. The promise of net Security provider seems getting vanished from the region and marginal influence to guard strategic SLOC passing through South China Sea will making US allies fall into Chinese lap in times to come. China by virtue of its contiguity with the maritime waters of the region has not only accrued the name of regional connector, yet it also is now serving as the main security provider to global trade SLOC. The fast-paced modernization of PLAN is yet another step in the same direction, whereby China is getting ready to take on the international maritime role in the Indo Pacific. The Blue Water Navy being built by China is not only going to project its force but also eyeing force protection missions at the hour of need.

China through her shared vision of economic prosperity is not only boosting regional economies, yet at the same time contesting water of South China has become less problematic, as the economic advantage is making regional countries let go off water disputes for now. US, seemingly, is not fully involved in the region militarily and economically, as if Washington just wants to project its force but not seek any direct confrontation in the South China Sea

waters. This amounts to acknowledging Chinese power/ presence in the region.

To conclude, it is argued that ongoing maritime power contestation between the established power (US) and rising power (China) is likely to continue unabated in times to come, short of a conflict. This is a struggle for domination by one and rising to the occasion for the other. China is a reality now; a rising power and future would see the dragon flexing its wings over the entire range of blue waters. It is reckoned that contestation at few places and cooperation at others, would be the key towards saving the two power houses falling prey to the infamous Thucydides Trap.

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