

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

Muhammad Zubair Cheema¹ and Lubna Sunawar²

¹Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan,
Email: zubaircheema342@gmail.com (Corresponding author).

²Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan,
Email: lubnasunawar@ndu.edu.pk

Abstract

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

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

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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, the US fought a long, tiring, and costly war in Vietnam (Hastings, 2018). The confrontation with the 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 1990s saw the rise of the U.S. as the sole superpower, despite the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. (Monteiro, 2014). However, the dawn of the 21st Century saw the unprecedented economic rise of China, which has started

threatening the U.S. status of a hegemon in world politics (Rabena, 2017). The changing world order and rise of multipolarity have posed significant challenges for U.S. policymakers, and correspondingly, the U.S. government has announced National Security Strategies, Defence Strategies, and national policies for the Asia-Pacific region (Campbell & Andrews, 2013) over 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 the 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 the 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 the strategic vulnerability of its Sea Lines of Communication (particularly in the South China Sea), China has embarked on an ambitious military modernization plan, coupled with the initiation of mega economic projects involving the majority of Asian nations. The evolving and rapidly changing maritime power contestation landscape, driven by divergent national interests between the U.S. and China, coupled with ongoing trade wars, poses serious challenges to global peace (Rourke, 2019).

The last decade or so has seen the Indo-Pacific region coming into the limelight and garnering increased attention among the world's powers. This region remained in focus during the post-World War II era, as the once infamous Imperial powers abandoned it in 1945-55. It was during this time that the US made efforts to overtake Vietnam, although the Cold War saw 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 Communication (SLOCs), the rich hydrocarbon resources, and the vast swath of land/ maritime mass all add to the enhanced significance of this region. The significance is further accentuated by the presence of China and India, the two countries with the largest human resources in the world. Besides this, the presence of Southeast Asian nations and Australia within and along its borders

further highlights the strategic importance this region carries. There is no denying the fact that the world has traditionally been looking towards the U.S and the EU after the mid-20th Century, yet the world is seeing a great shift (attributable to many factors) of economic boom/ activity towards the East since the start of the 21st Century. Hence, it can be said that this change of focus towards the East is likely to play a pivotal role in shaping the world order in the current millennium.

The U.S. has always remained the only power (the sole security guarantor) in this region and has exerted strong influence for a long time; 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 the U.S. began paying increased attention to this region and adopting national policies, such as the Pivot to Asia and Rebalance to Asia, which are clear indications of the same. The U.S. adopted policy contours of enhanced engagement with the region; however, the contestation with China in the maritime domain has been significant. U.S. aerial flights in the 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 the near future (Jennings, 2018). There is no denying that U.S. aerial missions are aimed at conveying a strong message to the Chinese counterpart regarding the forced conversion of these islands 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 the U.S and China will be able to avoid falling into the 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 attempts to address the intellectual question regarding the future of US-China maritime power contestation, a topic that has been widely discussed among intellectuals and strategists alike and remains 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 the various national strategies adopted by the U.S.

administration in the 21st Century, with a focus on containing 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 the claims of the regional countries on these waters. 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 realist theory, while observing the maritime power contest between the U.S. and China from 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 have been analyzed through the application of selected realist 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 examined from various aspects of national policymaking, particularly 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 the Current Century has been studied, focusing on maritime power contestation between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific.

2.1 US Employing Offensive Realism

The famous book written by Mearsheimer, "Tragedy of Great Power Politics," houses his masterpiece work on the infamous theoretical framework of Aggressive Realism. The term "Offensive Realism" has also been used in other contexts, carrying the same meaning. The US is following the offensive realism approach in conducting its global policies. This literary work by Mearsheimer draws a relationship between how Superpowers 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).

The second assumption suggests that a state with an offensive military capability can attack another state within 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. The fourth assumption pertains to every state's fundamental right to the protection of its territorial integrity, which is a genuine concern. Fifthly, the states in the international system tend to behave in a rational manner, and the adopted strategy indicates the desire for survival in the international arena (Mearsheimer, 2011). Thus, these essential assumptions lead to the formulation of a structure, wherein states feeling insecure take actions/ steps for their ultimate survival in this anarchic international system. This leads to the 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, a militarily and economically strong state can coerce the behavior of weaker states by applying different state-sponsored pressures. In such an anarchic system, threatened states are always 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

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 international politics, as this could potentially lead to increased friction and tensions between two states. Waltz has presented a considered opinion that contrasts with offensive realism, wherein states in the international system have a nearly equal distribution of power, resulting in greater stability among states and making them less prone to conflict (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 that aims to increase their power, but they must be mindful that such an elevation is not achieved by undermining other states. In offensive realism, a state pursues its agenda at the cost of other states. A state may be putting another state in fear by making certain selections of arms, and the other state is doing the same, thereby creating a security dilemma between the two. The existing Security Dilemma

between the U.S. 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, weaker states feel less insecure in the face of a much stronger state (Taliaferro, 2000).

2.3 Realist Lens Explaining Inter-State Power Contestation

The interstate power contestation compels the states in the 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 that has more power would always use the same to further the interests of the country and in the process undermine the national interests of other states. The theoretical lens of realism, and more specifically offensive realism, best explains the ongoing maritime power contestation between the U.S. and China in the 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 its national maritime interest in the Indo-Pacific, but at the cost of undermining the 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 powerhouses of the anarchic international system.

On the other hand, China is trying to safeguard against its energy needs passing through the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) running close to mainland China, thus acting within the sphere of its 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 attempting to secure its interests by maximizing its security near its maritime borders/ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Waltz, 1979). Though China is also seeking power in the international system, it is not attempting to do so at the cost of another state. China is extending the perimeter of its security at a very slow pace, including the construction/ conversion of artificial islands, thus fitting into the definition of the defensive realist lens, as outlined by Waltz. There are maritime challenges, such as the Malacca Dilemma, yet China is applying elements of national power in a thoughtful and strategically considered manner, thereby accruing an extended perimeter of security in line with its maritime national interests (Zhang, 2011), amidst ongoing maritime power conflicts with the US.

2.4 The Hybrid Conflict Mapping Model

Based on the Hybrid Conflict Mapping Model, the rise of a new power whose economic and maritime security interests differ from those of an established power would lead to fierce maritime power competition between the two. Conflict would arise from divergent viewpoints on the protection of national maritime interests, leading to a fierce power contest and potentially escalating into a 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 of which are embedded in maritime cooperation and not power contestation between the US and China. This research work has attempted to achieve the same goal, enabling 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 the maritime domain have been projected based on the national interests of countries.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach has been employed for the 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 behind human behavior, as well as the observation of existing documents. Due to the subjective nature of research work, this methodology was selected. The problem is investigated through exploratory research, aiming to clarify the 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, which considers philosophical aspects that inform the selected research methodology, is discussed first. The Michael Crotty Model, encompassing epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology, was examined in detail and formulated into a suitable model (based on the four elements of research), thereby ensuring that research strictly follows it (Crotty, 1998). In line with Crotty's model, the epistemological ground of research turns out to be subjectivism, owing to the nature of research work being subjective in nature. The theoretical base of the research work has been selected as interpretivism, as it 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 used

for conducting research. The rationale for selecting grounded theory explains that it aims to understand the meanings and experiences of participants within a particular context, aligning with interpretivism's emphasis on understanding social phenomena through interpretation (Birks & Mills, 2015). As different themes emerged from the open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with respondents from varied backgrounds, the identified method for data identification and analysis proved 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 respondents) were conducted, enabling the 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. 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 lead to the selection of a correct method is as under:

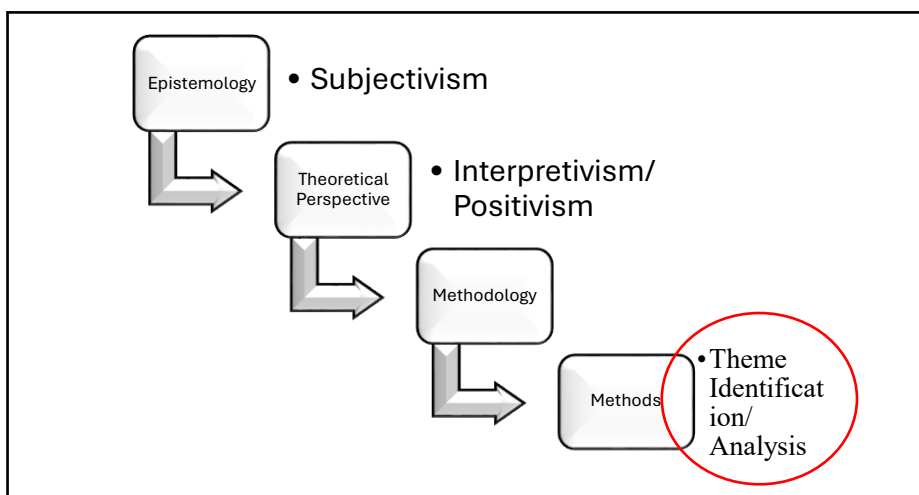


Figure 1.1 – Adopted Model for Research with Selected Method for Analysis

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 Communist and capitalist power blocks. The region came into the limelight with the US's announcement of its Pivot to Asia and Rebalancing to Asia national strategies, then shifted from Asia Pacific to a more specific Indo-Pacific and finally to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy in the last decade or so. The economic

potential of the region, combined with China's rapid and steady economic growth, has further enhanced the strategic significance of this area. Besides, vital SLOCs housing a major chunk of world maritime trade, coupled with the presence of different Choke points, further adds to the overall significance of this region for both the US and China.

It can be argued that the final chapter of the changing world order in the 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 that contribute to the overall significance of Indo-Pacific is discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.2 Geographical Significance of Indo-Pacific Region

The geographical layout of the region, by virtue of the connectivity it affords to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, gives it a distinctive strategic importance. The infamous Malacca Strait (posing a strategic dilemma to Chinese maritime shipment), considered a SLOC that houses heavy maritime traffic/ trade throughout the year, is present in this region. Besides, the water body of the South China Sea, which is another vital global trade SLOC, is in this region, thus further adding prominence to this region for competing powerhouses of the world. The presence of China and India (the two rising economic powers) with tremendous human resources further adds to its geographical importance. The proximity of this region to the emerging/ economically vibrant markets of Southeast Asia and East Asia is a significant attraction for 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 the Sea Line of Communications (SLOCs), which are undoubtedly the most important maritime trade lanes in the world. The Malacca Strait is considered the second-largest Oil trade route (Strait of Hormuz being the 1st one). It is worth mentioning that approximately 16 million barrels of oil pass through the Malacca Strait in a single year (Villar & Hamilton, 2017). Besides Malacca, other trade routes are also available in the region, namely the 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) house three SLOCs. The major one is Malacca; however, the other two, Sunda and Lombok, are not very spacious owing to the limitations of trade container specifications. The Malacca Strait is a crucial choke point, given its strategic vulnerability to Chinese shipments in the event of a blockade. This makes it further valuable in the backdrop of the ongoing maritime power contestation between the US and China. Any traffic that has to enter/ exit both the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean is, by 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 neither is suitable for all kinds of sea trade container traffic, owing to the limitation of their size and depth, etc. The 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 a huge volume of annual maritime trade from the 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 during the Presidency of Barack Obama in 2009 that the US began showing clear signs of a strategic shift in foreign policy, with an enhanced focus on Asia, relegating the Middle East to a lower priority. The lesser importance of the Middle East was reflected in the significant decision to prioritize the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and a reduction in Afghanistan. Having made

tangible progress in the laid-out objectives of force reduction, President Obama began to look 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 shift in foreign policy by the US was seen by the world as recognizing and accepting the Strategic value of the Asia Pacific by the established superpower of the world. It also became clearer that the 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 indicates, was focused on establishing a reinvigorated relationship with the regional countries of the Asia Pacific in four key areas. These included facilitating the economic potential of the region through purposeful economic ties, reinforcing and re-establishing the US as the primary security provider for the region, implementing planned infrastructural projects, and valuing the human resources of the region by establishing population-centric contacts/ exchanges. Hilary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, saw “The Pivot” as the US showing a forward-leaning posture towards the Asian region. The US's seriousness towards the successful accomplishment of the laid-out objectives of economic prosperity and promised security for the region was also stressed by the Secretary of State.

The Pivot term started gaining attention in the academic, political, and diplomatic circles after being mentioned in the article “America’s Pacific Century”. After the Secretary of State was President Obama, who further endorsed the term during an address to the Parliament of Australia (Parker & Anderson, 2016). Pivot’s announcement was seen as a US strategy to tackle the economic rise of China and hinted towards the US initiating policy measures for the 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 come at the cost of other states, and this reflects the adoption of an offensive realist mindset, as outlined by Mearsheimer. The economic rise of China and discussions of the Asian Century prompted the strategic decision of the US to announce the Pivot to Asia (Sultan, 2013).

4.2. Rebalancing to Asia

The journey of enhanced focus in US foreign policy towards the Asia Pacific, as outlined in The Pivot Strategy, underwent continuous monitoring at

home, with changes in set objectives made in response to the evolving strategic environment of the region. The next policy, having incorporated required changes, was announced as Rebalancing to Asia. It is argued that this US policymaker gave added attention to the Asia Pacific due to two major factors: military and economic ones. As was the case in the pre- and post-Cold War eras, the US initiated regional engagement primarily in the military domain, with the economic factor relegated to the lower end of the priority list. However, the Chinese response came both in the military domain (by building artificial islands in the South China Sea) and in the economic domain (by initiating the Belt and Road Initiative-related economic projects) to counter the US-led TPP. This led the US government to reevaluate the Pivot and quickly prioritize economic engagement with the region over its previous military focus. Thus, “Rebalance to Asia” is labelled as the US readjustment with the region from military to economic engagement. The hard power went in the background and the soft power took the lead (Sutter et al., 2013).

The main goals of the rebalance strategy include policy steps to augment the US-led world order, accessing and tapping the economic potential of Asian trade markets, refreshing and reassuring the US security commitments to regional allies, and encouraging them 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 the Rebalance strategy gained prominence owing to China’s economic rise on the global stage. China’s emergence not only threatened the essential national interests of the US in the Asia Pacific, but also successfully demonstrated its presence as a rising superpower in the changing global order of the 21st Century (Tellis, 2013).

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

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

The President Trump era saw the announcement of NSS 2017, yet a careful look at the document highlights the US administration's comparatively lesser focus on the relationship with the Southeast Asian region (housing South China Sea and ASEAN countries), contrary to previous administrations. NSS 2017 does mention two ASEAN countries, i.e., Thailand and the Philippines, as important allies of the US, whereas economic partnerships 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, the term seems less China-centric. The lack of focus on the ASEAN countries, specifically the US allies, has raised alarm bells in the region regarding US promises of economic prosperity and security needs (Sheng, 2017).

In a nutshell, it can be argued that US policy for the region has not changed significantly, but the US appears reluctant to play a military role in resolving regional disputes. The NSS 2017 reflects a careful approach being adopted by the US government; yet, the strategy seems fully aligned with the accomplishment of national policy goals in the region.

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

The eight-year effort of the Obama administration in terms of economic engagement with the Asian Pacific region, as a signatory to TPP, was abandoned by President Trump on his first day in office (Solís, 2019). Although Mr. Trump did demonstrate the US's economic commitment to the region, the damage had already been done. Those who worked towards the conceptualization and implementation of TPP felt torn away by the action of President Trump, as through such economic initiatives, not only the economy on US soil could have benefited, but this would have contributed towards enhanced influence/ economic leverage in the region against the Chinese onslaught of Belt and Road initiatives.

There is no denying that the regional leadership viewed the US decision as a difficult one, which also raised their suspicions regarding the seriousness of the US's economic and security promises/ commitments to the region. The planned visit of the US President to the Philippines and Vietnam further alienated the other countries in the ASEAN region, which assessed these diplomatic signs as a US effort to secure its own national interests, with little benefit for the region (Solís, 2019).

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

After shifting from the Asia Pacific to a more focused Indo-Pacific in Trump's era, the President, on September 22, during the Quad leaders' Summit, outlined the cardinal principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Through FOIP, the US again demonstrated its commitment to a region that is free and open, a region that is interconnected and has bright prospects for economic prosperity, afforded by this mutual connectivity, and a region that is secure and resilient. The new strategy outlines that the US will be working with regional countries towards a journey of success in the rule-based world, noting that this cannot be accomplished alone without the cooperation of all stakeholders. The US urged all the regional countries to 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 outlined in FOIP encompassed key areas, including ensuring free and open seas in the region, promoting economic trade, addressing the security concerns of regional nations, and supporting good governance through the adoption of best practices. In drafting the vision, a glimpse into the historical insights of the region was considered necessary to visualize and introduce the values and policies that would pave the way for regional growth and prosperity, while ensuring the region's security (Hang & Thuy, 2018).

The FOIP further enhances the strategic economic and military significance of the Indo-Pacific region, spanning from the West Coast of India to the West Coast of the US. The central point of FOIP policy turns out to be cooperative engagement with regional countries and institutions, such as ASEAN. It is argued that the concept of the Indo-Pacific is not new, as it has historically been shared by many countries around the world. In a nutshell, FOIP vision 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 experienced sustained economic growth over the past few decades; however, this growth is critically dependent on the uninterrupted supply of energy resources to meet its domestic requirements 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 that 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 en route from the Mediterranean, the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf, and to the West Coast of the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese dependence on shipments far away from home becomes further complex, owing to the availability of the world's fourth-largest Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) deposits in the mentioned maritime regions.

The engine of Chinese economic growth is dependent upon the supply of energy resources, and this shipment, which must travel a long way, faces a critical maritime choke point of the Malacca Strait. China is highly sensitive to this maritime vulnerability and would view any attempt to block this critical choke point as detrimental to its national interests. A corresponding military response to ease the situation may be a leading option for the Chinese leadership (Zhang, 2008).

The SLOCs available to China for transportation of her maritime energy cargo include the Malacca Strait (move of cargo from the Middle East to the Western Pacific Coast), the Sunda Strait (which could serve as an alternative to Malacca), and the Gaspar and Lombok Straits. Though all these straits can accommodate varied categories of energy cargoes, Malacca alone houses 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 have 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 the maritime trade of China has the Malacca Strait as its lifeline, owing to the passage of a major chunk of energy cargo

passing through the strait. Fast economic growth requires energy cargoes at home, and these cargoes, which travel long distances, must finally go through the Malacca Strait (Zhang, 2011). The infamous Malacca Strait Dilemma is a situation where China has significant economic and strategic stakes in the Strait, yet, being far from home, China has limited influence in this area, which causes a maritime security vulnerability for China (Shaofeng, 2010).

Owing to ongoing maritime power contestation, there is a likelihood of a blockade of the Malacca Strait, and as China is heavily dependent upon this critical maritime artery, this adds to the delicate security situation of China in the maritime domain. A wise adversary of China would likely seek to exploit this strategic maritime vulnerability 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 ASEAN countries of Malaysia and Indonesia are separated by the narrow water channel of the Malacca Strait. The southern tip of the Strait has the presence of Singapore. It is important to note that this maritime waterway accommodates almost 25 percent of world maritime trade every year, and around 60,000 trade containers of varied types pass 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 carriers (VLCC); however, a major portion of China's oil cargoes is 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 the blockage of the Malacca Strait. The modernization of the 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 the Chinese mainland. China is also focusing on the security of its maritime energy cargoes in the Middle East; steps include utilizing transit facilities as well as constructing new ports at required locations along the maritime route of energy cargoes. Such imaginative and well-thought-out measures are surely going to

address the problems to a great extent, as this would enable a controlled yet fluent flow of required cargoes through the Malacca Strait. The maritime security concerns also include the threat of piracy, and as a result, the importance of Anti-piracy missions cannot be ruled out. The formulation of a joint task force with the regional countries for ensuring the 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, there are many security concerns for the Chinese in this water; yet, the adoption of an all-encompassing maritime approach is likely to be a long-term solution (Shaofeng, 2010).

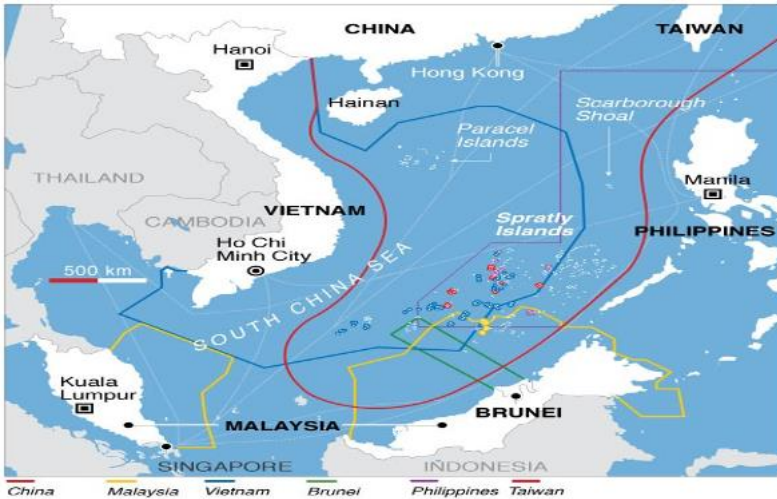


Figure 1.3: South China Sea Dispute

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 on a journey of Energy Diplomacy, yet it is pertinent to highlight that this has further increased energy consumption at home, as the requirement for rapid growth is pushing local consumers towards increased

demand. It is argued that Chinese growth is related to the provision of an uninterrupted supply of energy cargoes, which must traverse thousands of miles in the maritime waters from the Mediterranean to the Chinese mainland, thus further compounding China's energy security problems. Besides the maritime alternative routes, there is also a possible alternative in the shape of energy pipelines for land-based import. China must also adopt energy alternatives, which means that alternative energy could be employed to support and decrease its dependence on oil-based domestic consumption (Siklos, 2016).

4.8. Territorial Dispute of the South China Sea

The Chinese mainland has contiguity to the South China Sea, which is one of the strategically important SLOC in the global maritime trade route, thus adding to the importance of this water body. The presence of underwater maritime natural resources, including natural oil, gas, and rich fisheries waters, has further led many ASEAN countries to raise their right of ownership. The South China Sea waters have contiguity with many regional countries, yet China, by virtue of its military and economic might, enjoys near naval supremacy in the region. There are states that could choose allies (e.g., the US), and this contestation over the underwater resources of the South China Sea may move into a serious conflict in the region, maybe at some point in time in the near future. Besides other islands, the Paracel and Spratly Islands emerge as of more importance and have become an area of maritime contestation. It is essential to note that it is not only the untapped underwater resources, but also the overall presence of these islands on the global SLOC, that makes them a focus of enhanced attention. 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 for added importance (Choi, 2005).

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

same water body (Choi, 2005).

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

China has employed a delaying tactics strategy in the South China Sea contested waters and has avoided implementing the court decision (Fravel, 2011). There has been an increase in Chinese military/ naval presence in this important SLOC, and at certain locations, China has also deployed ground/ aerial platforms to cater for any future developments. It can be argued that China is buying time to solidify its military/ naval presence in the waters of the South China Sea, thereby denying regional countries the opportunity to challenge its naval supremacy. The dawn of the 21st century has seen a further increase in Chinese presence in the South China Sea waters. This can be attributed to the military and economic might of China at the regional level, and now China has started dictating terms where required to protect its national interests. The US presence has further exacerbated the ongoing maritime power contestation in the region, and so far, China has emerged as the winner, owing to the proximity/ contiguity of the Chinese mainland to these waters (Fravel, 2011).

There is no denying the fact that modernization, which is in progress for the People's Liberation Army and Navy (PLAN), is not only aimed at settling down the territorial claims of the South China Sea waters, but the country is looking towards the strategic objective of securing the SLOC to address its 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 the US, who want their share of the pie in this region (Morton, 2016). China is making headway in the region and, in the process, is making its presence felt on the international chessboard of global geopolitics. The US has felt the structural stresses the most, owing to China's rise, and has correspondingly labeled China as a revisionist power. The US has also blamed China for employing coercive economic and military tactics to further its gains in the region. On the other hand, China's grand strategic design is reflective of its desire to be acknowledged as a rising power, which is well capable of protecting its

national interests in its coastal region (Morton, 2016).

4.9. US and Maritime Dispute of the South China Sea

The Chinese mainland has contiguous borders with two water bodies, its Southern and eastern borders, namely the South China Sea and the East China Sea, respectively. However, China does not have free control over both, owing to claims made by various countries. The South China Sea is strategically more important. However, this maritime contestation not only involves regional countries, but also extra-regional forces, such as the US and Japan, 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 the South China Sea. There are underwater features also present, which are geographically located at four different locations in the seawater. There are many countries that lay their claim to the water of the South China Sea, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Brunei. Taiwan is one country, interestingly, which has made claims to both the above-surface and the under-surface features of the South China Sea. According to maps held by China, which highlight the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, approximately 80% of the sea is claimed by China. This topographical map is not accepted by the countries that have laid claims to these waters, and as a result, this issue is a permanent source of concern between China and the ASEAN countries (McDevitt, 2014).

There are different types of claims that are made by countries over rocks in the sea, and in particular, conflicts regarding fisheries rights in certain 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 the US), which likes to maintain its influence in these waters. As per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), any country can claim the surface and underwater resources of a particular water body which is contiguous to its mainland; China's claim is understandable in this context (McDevitt, 2014). However, there are other ASEAN countries that lay claim to these resources in light of the same UNCLOS. However, China is not ready to entertain its claims, and this continuous contestation between China and the claiming countries is a warning sign. The US, as a global power and a key player in trade and alliances in the region, is also interested in maintaining its presence; thus, freedom of navigation operations are being conducted in the 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 a possible scenario for the potential resolution of this dispute. Both countries can work out a solution whereby China's new status may be accepted, and the US is also able to exert its influence in the region in terms of maritime security and trade/energy cargoes. 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 the air-to-air and ground-to-air missiles, fighter jets, and air defence assets have been deployed in these islands. There is a presence of ground to air missiles and other ground assets (mainly US allies), and these can be used in the future towards a naval blockade of South China and the East China Seas. It is pertinent to mention that these force projection capabilities of the US are not yet fully operational, and these can play an 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 aligns with Defensive Realism. The Chinese encroachment in the South China Sea is a peaceful form of coercion, as it is progressing slowly in accordance with the international environment and available space. By adopting such a wiser course of action, China is not only keeping things calm, but the land mass (surface and submerged) in the South China Sea is also improving in favour of China (McDevitt, 2014). The US is conducting freedom of navigation operations under the UNCLOS, which is seen as highly proactive and offensive by the Chinese and sees these actions by the US as something that is hurting the peace in the region. There have been challenging circumstances for the political and diplomatic leadership of both countries, with naval ships and air assets coming into close proximity, which may contribute to heightened escalation in the future (McDevitt, 2014).

It is evident that the US desires to project its naval presence in the South China Sea, but this non-coherent approach is not yielding the desired results, and chances of further escalation do 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. Although there are assets available in the region, their suitability for the task is a serious source of concern. It seems that the US does not desire to project force in this region, and the effectiveness of these assets under a unified command is not given due attention. Such an approach in the long term will pose serious implications for the concept of a Net Security provider in the region (Hastings, 2011).

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

Though there have been a number of U.S. National Strategies to counter the Chinese rise, the Chinese response follows suit. The Chinese adopted strategy has two main prongs: 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

Following the regional financial downturn, China was able to capitalize on the economic opportunities presented 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 a cooperative Chinese posture, marked the beginning of a period of economic cooperation with regional countries, and trade volume increased to \$24 billion by 1998. The economic dividends for the region reached new heights, with an outstanding rise in trade figures from US\$78 billion in 2003 to US\$444 billion in 2013. It can be argued that the region also rose in tandem with China's economic growth and fully benefited from 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 higher heights in times to come (Ba, 2003).

4.10.2 Chinese One Road (OBOR Economic Initiative)

The status of China's global economic power can be attributed to its sustained economic growth and the visionary leadership of the country, which enables a free trade environment. The resultant economic strength has put the country on a path whereby it can utilize its economic viability to drive forward new economic projects for the ASEAN countries (The Economic Times, 2017).

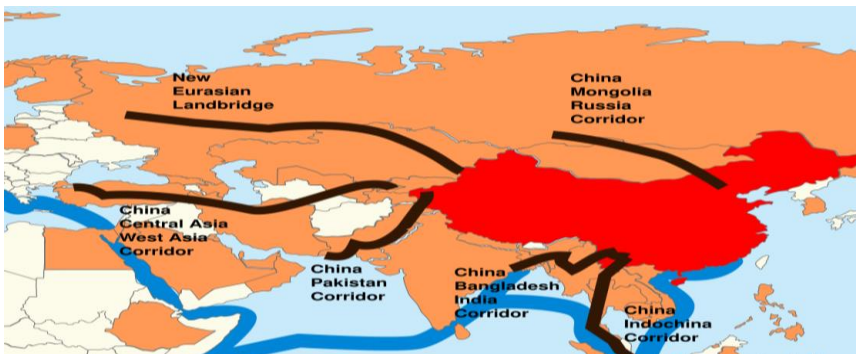


Figure 1.4: Belt and Road Initiative

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

The Chinese grand vision of regional connectivity has seen its true manifestation in the shape of the concept of “One Belt One Road (OBOR)”. The engine of Chinese economic growth is being run by her consumption of huge energy cargoes, and there is a dire requirement to explore new avenues for meeting this rising demand, and OBOR is going to get China the same in a visionary way. The presence of the US in the South China Sea, closer to global SLOC, and the fear of a blockade at Malacca have 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 affords regional connectivity and boosts economic activity in the region, but also secures China's trade route from mainland China to the Mediterranean Sea, and overland trade routes will be secured in the process (Stratfor, 2017). Chinese trade volume with the regional countries has increased to \$14.6 billion of FDI in 2015, double that of 2014 (The Economic Times, 2017). This is not the end of it, China has set its eyes on an astounding financial objective of 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, particularly in terms of SLOCs in the South China Sea and a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait, have been a source of serious concern for the country. To ensure the security of maritime energy cargoes from the Mediterranean Sea to mainland China, China has adopted a strategy that involves “nodes of influence” in the broader Asia Pacific region. Owing to the long distance the critical energy cargos must travel, Chinese thinkers have thought to create nodes of influence in friendly countries in the shape of coasts, which could not only offer protection at the time of need but could also serve as logistic bases for refuelling/ deployment/and arming of the Chinese Navy in the near future (Khurana, 2008).

India has been making a hue and cry over these Chinese nodes of influence in the Indo-Pacific, and this concern 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 the String of Pearls, whereby the pearls are in different friendly countries. These ports include Myanmar port, Chittagong port in Bangladesh, Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar port in Pakistan. Here again, China is expanding its security perimeter at a slow pace, and this strategy aligns with the Defensive Realist approach as outlined by Waltz (Khurana, 2008).

The maritime security vulnerability of the Malacca Strait offers an alternative in the form of the China-Burma pipeline and also the construction of a railway line from China to ASEAN countries. Such mega projects are not only going to enhance Chinese connectivity with the region but also ensure the availability of alternative means for transporting 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 for many decades and has enjoyed its control of the global trade routes/ maritime SLOCs by pre-positioning its naval assets. Currently, the US feels threatened by China's rapid economic growth, and the resultant challenge to US hegemony in the global arena is rapidly altering the decades-old US supremacy. The modernization of the Chinese armed forces is occurring at a rapid pace and is likely to alter the power balance in the blue waters. China is looking forward to projecting its naval power beyond its mainland coasts. The simmering backyard of China, with regional disputes, is a befitting response by the US, in an attempt to keep Chinese force projection in check. The Chinese Blue Water Navy concept is likely to take its final shape by 2030, and if it materializes, it would pose significant 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 pose serious security concerns for the US. The naval assets of the US in the region may require a reevaluation of their response mechanisms and options against the looming Chinese threat. A fierce maritime power contestation between the two powerhouses of the world is a writing on the wall (Cronin et al., 2017).

The Chinese leadership has paid particular attention to the rapid modernization of the PLAN, and a substantial amount of funding has been allocated to meet the desired targets at an earlier stage (Saunders et al., 2011). The Chinese navy is attempting to project power beyond its coasts, and the deployment of three ship task groups for maritime duties in the Gulf of Aden is a testament to this effort. This Chinese strategy differs from the US, which has deployed Carrier Strike Groups to patrol the 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 a blue-water navy aligns with its desire to establish itself 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 to protect energy cargoes, but the country is also 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, there will be five challenges for which an answer would be required before embarking upon such a journey. These are distance, duration, capacity, complexity of coordination, and hostility of the environment. While operating away from base, distance becomes a problem for a navy with no nearby bases to cope with the required logistics. The crew would require dedicated medical care, food, fresh vegetables, and portable water in terms of logistics.

The Chinese modernization plans will take some time to execute, and similarly, the capacity to conduct large-scale operations away from Chinese coasts will also take some time. It will take some time, but once the Chinese navy, like the US, is recognized as a global navy; however, efforts by the PLAN are underway at a rapid pace to make this dream a reality. It will be through Blue Water Navy, in the future, that China will be able to compete with the US in the blue waters and protect the vital maritime national interests 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 global distribution of power, the order largely constructed by the

United States after World War II remains largely 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 also malleable, as countries under Chinese hegemony are not strictly defined by geography, culture, or ideology, as long as they respect China's dominance (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 it could move its 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, America's unipolar dominance of the landscape bore the seeds of its own erosion (Ali, 2017). China's grand strategy is profoundly affected by unipolarity. A direct confrontation with the United States is too costly and counterproductive, given the unipolar structure of power. However, in the 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, unipolarity 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 prompted 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 that 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 an export-driven to a consumption-driven growth model. Following the 2008-09 global financial crisis, which significantly 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 and – 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. The 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

The Chinese desire to be seen as a global superpower on par with the United States drives the need for modernization and an increase in Chinese sea power. In addition to countering US influence and regaining preeminence within maritime Asia, the Chinese aim to reunify with Taiwan, protect their rapidly growing economy by securing crucial trade routes and energy routes, and 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. The Chinese navy will be able to extend its defense 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 our predicted continuum of operations, it will steadily progress toward capabilities in major combat operations outside its area of operations. 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 its geographical location on the global map and the rich underwater maritime resources it houses. The Indo-Pacific region attracts numerous global investors due to its large population and the resulting thriving trade markets. The Chinese factor of a fast growth rate has also helped neighbouring regions benefit in the process and enjoy the high ride of economic prosperity. The national interest of the US prompted policymakers to make a necessary shift in their formulation of national policies for the region. Correspondingly, since 2009, a growing interest in the Asia Pacific by the US has been observed, and it has been reflected in the

policies of the 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 the 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 a significant role in international politics, but it manifests itself in various ways, not all of which are 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 interest 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 lead to a deeper understanding of future issues (Fergusson, 2012).

The maritime security vulnerabilities of China include strategic SLOC in the South China Sea and the threat of a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait; however, China is not sitting idle. China is making tangible progress in addressing its security concerns in the South China Sea by constructing artificial islands; however, this extension of its security perimeter is being achieved 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 the mega economic project of OBOR is earning China confidence and cooperation of its neighbouring countries. China has earned the reputation of a regional connector through the adroit application of visionary trade policies, coupled with well-planned regional connectivity corridors.

The sudden withdrawal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and unfulfilled economic promises have made the regional countries suspicious of the intended US policies for the region. The promise of a net Security provider seems to be fading from the region, and marginal influence to guard strategic SLOCs passing through the South China Sea will make US allies fall into the Chinese lap in the 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, but it is also 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, as China prepares to assume its 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 its shared vision of economic prosperity, is not only boosting regional economies, but at the same time, the contest over water in South China has become less problematic, as the economic advantage is prompting regional countries to temporarily set aside water disputes. The 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 a few places and cooperation at others would be the key to saving the two powerhouses falling prey to the infamous Thucydides Trap.

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