

CHANGING DYNAMICS IN THE INDO-PsACIFIC REGION: FROM 'CONFRONTATION' TO 'CONVERGENCE'

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With the turn of the 21st Century, the 'Indo-Pacific' region has become a centre of gravity for Great-Power rivalry. The changing dynamics in the 'Indo-Pacific' region from increasing militarization and growing competition for resources have altered the geo-strategic landscape of the region. It has become a theatre of competition where great power play among countries has been unfolding at a fast pace. Amid the fast-changing reality, it takes a moment to realize how the regional configuration is distorting the stability and peace in the region.

The region is vital, accounting for 60% of worlds GDP, rich in oil and energy resources with the net total energy imports increasing drastically in last two decades from 27.0 million tons of oil equivalent (Mtoe) in 1994 to 410 Mtoe in 2014. Being one of the busiest sea lanes in the world with \$ 5 trillion trade (approx.) it is considered as the lifeline for the connectivity, trade & commerce and food supply for the nations surrounding the region. But due to the geostrategic and geo-economic power shift from Europe to Asia and many security and economic dynamics unfurling daily in the region it has become vulnerable to various threats and challenges. Significant challenges like North Korea nuclearization, trade war, continuous friction in cross-strait relations, the rise of belligerent China, US relative economic decline vis-à-vis China, territorial conflicts, piracy, terrorism, human trafficking, etc. are emerging as dangerous flashpoints in the region.

The emergence of these challenges give rise to an essential question as to what will be the future strategy of the key member nations would be and can there be a single solution to the multiple existing problems in the region?



Illustration: Craig Stephens

Changing Geo-Strategic Equations

The changing strategic and economic dynamics can be witnessed as a result of the current conundrum being played out in the region. The key countries have come to define the region in their way to suit their best interests. The United States shift from “[Pivot/Rebalancing](#)” strategy under the Obama administration (2009-10) to the “Indo-Pacific” strategy, the region acquired an important priority under the Trump administration (2017). The change of term from “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” and usage of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ multiple times in a number of US official documents ([National Security Strategy](#) and [National Defense Strategy](#)) and multilateral meetings illustrated Trump administration commitment to “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

The US ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy fundamentally revolves around containing revisionist Chinese foreign policy and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Both of which though looked promising with the redux of [Quadrilateral Security Initiative \(QSI\)](#) and [Singapore Declaration](#), is being criticized for not making any sufficient progress.

Last week, two major events posed a major challenge to America’s engagement in the region. Firstly, US President Donald Trump cancelled the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a fourth official visit to North Korea by accusing China of not helping enough in pressurizing North

Korea over denuclearization process. Second, Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull being ousted by his own party's conservatives who have been critical to Trump's administration 'Indo-Pacific' strategy. With the change in the Australian leadership, Scott Morrison replacing Malcolm Turnbull in just less than three years, Australia gets its fifth PM in just five years. It will be interesting to see how Australia's emerging China policy under the Morrison administration unravels given the fact Australia is one of the member countries of Quadrilateral Security Initiative (QSI).

China's assertive policy under Xi Jinping has sharpened the competition between US and China. Its economic expansion through its ambitious "[Maritime Silk Road](#)", "[One Belt One Road](#)" and burgeoning military expenditure in the region poses multiple threats to the regional security. United States National Security Strategy (NSS) report recognizes the rise of belligerent China as a major threat in the region. It states that "*geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order taking place in the Indo-Pacific and though China presents its ambitions as mutually beneficial, but Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific*". On the hand, Beijing has been wary of United States 'Indo-Pacific' strategy and claims that any attempt to contain it and hinder its peaceful rise would result in more coercion and instability in the region. Thus, the US-China dynamic continues to threaten the regional security architecture of the region which requires deft and sensible handling of the dispute.



President Donald J. Trump and President Xi Jinping at the G20 summit.

Photo by Shealah Craighead/Official White House Photo.

Towards Greater Convergence and Cooperation

Uncertainty about future US-China dynamics threatens overall security in the region. Countries for long have been hedging their bets over US and China, as to from whom they can benefit more. Given China's economic rise and US relative decline on the one hand and relying on the United States for diplomatic and military engagement on the other affects the ability of significant players to converge on issues that are of grave concern in the region.

It is imperative that Washington counter Chinese assertive foreign policies by boosting its ties with its major regional and extra-regional allies in the region. The presence of US in 'Indo-Pacific', working along with other regional and extra-regional countries to counter China is an essential and crucial force for maintaining regional stability in the region. The United States uncertain policies under Trump administration should not lead to disengagements rather regional countries should continue to engage with the US to maintain the balance of power in the region. However, the engagement of US with other member countries through military exercises cannot be premised on the mere increase in ships and troops. The increasing engagement will depend more on building common agenda, norms, values and rule-based order that is compatible with other member countries in the region.

Regional and sub-regional groupings like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, (BIMSTEC), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and recently the revival of Quadrilateral initiative are essential mechanisms for quick decision-making and building a stable security architecture in the region.

Member countries have to remember that any instability or domination of any one power in the region could result in a full-blown crisis or [war as pointed out recently by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte](#). He recently reiterated that continuous expansionist activities of Beijing in the South China Sea could soon tilt towards an armed conflict. Hence, key players in the region should be cautious of the growing flux in the region and aim towards engaging

at multiple levels based on greater convergence, collective dialogue, tangible cooperation, intensified economic interaction and stable balance of power in maintaining long-term security and peace in the 'Indo-Pacific'.