From ‘Asian Century’ to ‘America’s Pacific Century’ and Evolving Contours of the Indo-Pacific Reality: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract: The post-cold war international strategic landscape is constantly evolving and there is no consensus on the nature as well as nomenclature of the emerging global order. However, a new concept of ‘Asian Century’ has gained currency with the simultaneous rise of China and India. Out of these two countries, China’s sustained economic growth and its assertive power projection in its Asiatic neighbourhood have forced the US over the last few decades to pivot away from the Euro-Atlantic realm and ‘rebalance’ its forces in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ theatre, combining both Indian and Pacific Oceans. US policymakers have introduced yet another concept of ‘America’s Pacific Century’ to signify long-term US pivot to the region. The paper seeks to isolate the compulsions behind shift in US policy as well as the responses from countries in the region, with special focus on India, and to assess its sustainability. The paper argues that given the interconnectedness of the globalized world today, it is far from certain whether Indo-Pacific will remain the only important theatre, as it was evident in the case of Russian assertion in Ukraine recently. Such events may compel the US and its allies and/or partners to constantly revise their policies towards the region. Moreover, in view of the complexity of inter-state engagements in the region— including the instance of US-China interdependence— regional countries may seek simultaneous engagement with the US and China in military and economic spheres respectively and hope that increased US strategic attention, together with China’s compelling economic interests would ensure regional peace and stability. Therefore, rather than seeking ‘alliances’, the US should focus more on quality partnerships in the region to shape a truly pacific century.

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Not long ago, many discerning observers of international politics had announced the arrival of an Asian Century. It was regarded both as the return to—the geostrategic fulcrum or centre of gravity of global power, to Asia, with the simultaneous rise of two most populous states of the world in the Asian continent, i.e., China and India—one characterized as a dancing dragon, and the other as a lumbering elephant. China with its unrepentant (if not unmitigated) authoritarianism, and India with its established democratic credentials presented two distinctly contrasting possibilities for economic growth and development. While India was rated as a reliable and sustainable growth story, China was regarded as a concern and a threat. Over the past decade, China has clearly outpaced India in wealth-accumulation and resilience, while the US has clearly struggled to pull out of the economic slowdown and retain its advantages as the predominant power on the world stage. The resultant power equations among them, and their interactions with other powers across the world, weave a web of relationships that is too complex to fit into any neat theoretical paradigm evolved by scholars of international relations.

Over the last decade, the global strategic scenario has changed rapidly, through the international engagement in Afghanistan, the US-led war in Iraq, prolonged political effervescence across West Asia and Northern Africa, an ongoing economic downturn in the US and Europe, souring of Sino-Japanese relations, tension in Sino-Indian relations, muscular assertion of China in South China and East China Seas, and US declaration of its strategy of pivot and rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific Asian geo-strategic theatre, encompassing North-East Asia, South Asia and South East Asia including the associated maritime zones. The issues that have attracted greater scholarly attention, in the wake of such events/incidents are: relative decline of the US, growing self-confidence of China, the nature, scope, wisdom and sustainability of the pivot/rebalance policy, and assessment of Chinese power and intentions. More than anything else, discussions on global politics have, in recent years, revolved around the theme of China’s rise and the emerging contours of US-China-India relations in the aftermath of the policy of rebalancing by the US. Against this backdrop, this paper critically analyses the emerging strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific region, ‘from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas’, and assesses their impact on regional and global politics.

**US pivoting towards Asia since the 1990s**

There is little doubt that since the end of the cold war, the US has slowly turned its attention away from the Euro-Atlantic theatre to Asia, whether it is for the purpose of dealing with the threat of international terrorism, or engaging China and India, two growing economies with strong military capabilities. For the US, despite its deep economic engagement with China since the mid-1970s, it was felt necessary to keep an
eye especially on China’s global political ambitions, because of its opaque and authoritarian system and its affinity with countries of concern around the world. If one analyses US policies towards the Asia Pacific since the end of the cold war, there was a perceptible shift in emphasis on dealing with China in a more proactive and pragmatic manner. From the 1990s, this shift became quite obvious with the first Clinton administration’s efforts to mainstream China in international politics by both integrating it into the world system at one level and enmeshing it in a new regional power architecture in the Asia Pacific, which would ensure regional and global peace and stability, at another. This policy was continued by the succeeding Bush administration that notably said that it would ‘unthreaten’ China but not allow it to go unchecked.

As regards the US approach towards India, in the post-cold war days, there was a realization both in the US and India that they had converging strategic interests, not only because of their shared concerns about China, but also because of their common democratic values and global aspirations. Through important strides during Clinton and Bush administrations the contours of a strong Indo-US strategic engagement began to emerge and slowly get consolidated into a lasting policy. While the two countries continue to have differences over many issues and have their concerns about each other, the relationship has gained traction with each passing year. From being intensely suspicious of US presence in the region, India has come to look upon the US as an important factor in regional stability. Similarly, senior officials in the US government have emphasized India’s role as a linchpin in US defence strategy ‘to provide security’ to all countries in the Indo-Pacific region— ‘the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia’.

**Naming US strategy: Pivot and Rebalance**

It goes to the credit of the Obama administration (2009 till date) that it put a label on US policy towards the extended region by calling it ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalancing’. The then US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton both in her address to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Ministerial forum on 11 November, 2011 (as also in her now much-quoted article in *Foreign Policy*, in October-November 2011), argued about the need for the US ‘to pivot to new global realities’. Two days later in the same forum², and six days later on 17 November, 2011, in the Australian parliament, President Obama, in his separate addresses re-emphasized this turn in US policy, and said that ‘the United States has been, and always will be, a ‘Pacific nation’, and that it would seek to promote ‘security, prosperity and dignity for all’ in the region.³ As an indication of US commitment to altering the strategic landscape and an assurance to the countries in the region, he referred to his directions to the US ‘national security team to make [American] presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority’.⁴
Australia-US alliance
In fact, as a clear indication of reviving the ‘ANZUS of future’, he committed 250 US marines at Darwin an Australian air force base on rotational basis to begin with, and gradually be raised to 2500 by 2017. It was part of an agreement to expand the existing collaboration between the Australian Defence Force and the US Marine Corps. Former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard explained that the alliance between the two countries had been the ‘bedrock of stability’ in the region and this new agreement would mean ‘better respond together, along with other partners in the Asia-Pacific, to any regional contingency, including the provision of humanitarian assistance and dealing with natural disasters’.5

The message was clear that the US was banking on Australia as an important ally in the region and trying to convey a message to any possible spoiler of peace in the region that it was serious about responding to any threat and any contingency in case there was a need for it. In an oblique manner, while admiring Chinese achievements in lifting hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty, Obama held that with its economic rise, came ‘increased responsibility’, and he expected China to play by the ‘rules of the road’.6 The message was not lost on China, as its foreign ministry was quick to react, that it ‘[might not have been] appropriate for the United States and Australia to contribute to a military buildup in the region’.7

And months hence in January 2012, the new strategic guidance for the Department of Defense8 shifted to a new term called ‘rebalancing’ towards Asia Pacific and ever since, numerous commentaries have been written about the US strategy. From ‘Asian Century’, there is now a shift towards ‘America’s Pacific Century’ and later to bring in the Indo-Pacific dimension as a strategic continuum to accommodate India, either in recognition of India’s rising strategic profile and rope in India into the evolving security architecture.

Strategic objectives
The larger strategic objectives of the US are not difficult to discern. Some critics rightly argue that Obama’s policy is not a departure from that of his predecessors and he has sought to ‘tweak rather than transform’9 US policy towards the region. As the former National Security Advisor to President Obama, Tom Donilon pointed out, the rebalancing strategy sought to redress a perceived imbalance between America’s strategic overinvestment in some areas and underinvestment in others. There was a view perhaps that Asia Pacific did not receive as much attention that it deserved.

Therefore, a clear enunciation of policy was required to rebalance regional priorities in a multi-pronged manner. Rather than getting excessively focused on the military component of the strategy, it was a comprehensive and multidimensional in its orientation by focusing on several key areas, seeking to ‘harnesses all elements of U.S.
power—military, political, trade and investment, development and...values’, without any prejudice to US involvement in any other regions of the world. It focused on:

(i) strengthening alliances;
(ii) deepening partnerships with emerging powers;
(iii) building a stable, productive, and constructive relationship with China;
(iv) empowering regional institutions; and
(v) helping to build a regional economic architecture that can sustain shared prosperity.  

Responses to US strategy
The responses to thus spelt-out US strategy, within the US country as well internationally have been mixed. The Obama administration has allocated considerable attention convincing policymakers and analysts at home about the need to upgrade its policy towards a region where US was losing its influence rapidly. Domestically, it also convinced the administration in switching the attention as well as focus of its policy to new US policy articulations but its implementation remains unrealized completely.

It is noteworthy that both amongst analysts in the Indo-Pacific region, who welcomed this policy, and skeptics of long-term US commitment, there was a common thread of approval with regard to greater US presence in the region, even if at the official levels, across the region, there was a relatively muted response. Moreover, some countries in the region were worried about ‘the prospect of intensified US-China strategic competition’ in the region, and they did not ‘want to get crushed in the nutcracker of U.S.-China competition’. There was also a view that Obama administration had to rename its strategy in moderate ways and therefore the term ‘pivot’ was substituted by ‘rebalance’ within months. This could well have been in deference to reactions from Chinese analysts who were rather caustic and indignant, even though the official responses from China were relatively cautious and restrained. There is perception, especially in countries where the prospect of US re-committing itself to playing a larger role was received with enthusiasm and a sense of relief, that the US was too engaged with China to carry its policy of ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ to its logical conclusion, and ensure peace and tranquility in the region.

It is true, nevertheless, that US efforts since the 1990s have been guided by the consideration that in the post-cold war period, the US needed to stay engaged with the region to ‘constrain’, if not contain China. Hence, many analysts did indicate that while US may not be expected to fight for them in future in the event of any Chinese aggression, it will maintain its linkage with both China and other countries in the region to exclude the possibility of any conflict and confrontation—especially involving China.
Ongoing US efforts in the region

Economic engagement
If the US continues with its rebalancing strategy it will have some stabilizing effect in the region. It is now participating in regional fora like ASEAN, the APEC, and the East Asian Summit. It has signed free trade agreements with South Korea and Singapore and is discussing similar arrangements with Thailand and Malaysia. At the same time, it is also encouraging negotiations among the regional countries for a Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free trade agreement among eight regional states and three extra-regional ones, structured around its core business principles, viz., intellectual property rights, labour rights, environmental protection, open markets, fewer restrictions on exports, transparency, overall commitment to fairness etc., to promote regional trade and create jobs. Some observers construe it as a political ploy to isolate China, as they believe the WTO-plus norms advocated by the TPP is unlikely to attract China anytime soon.

However, China has shown some interests in the TPP in the meanwhile and should it join such an arrangement, it will mean a clear revision of its approach to trade. The US is emphasizing on norms and rules-based systems to establish an alternative trade paradigm in the region, which is expected to have a positive bearing on the Chinese behaviour in the long run. As it is widely known, even though China has reaped huge dividends by joining the WTO with an active US backing in 2001, it has consistently bypassed the WTO norms. It is known for manipulating its currency, rigging tender procedures, providing cheap finance to its state-owned companies, and violating intellectual property laws. China is also seen encouraging a parallel free trade agreement effort by the ASEAN countries called Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which is much limited in its scope and focusses mainly on tariff cuts and limited flexibility. China’s interest in the TPP may, however, have a beneficial impact on the larger trade environment and improve China’s perception in the US and the region.

Security Engagement
American military presence in the Asia Pacific region has been a post-world-war strategic imperative. The US ‘pivot’ and ‘rebalance’ has rejuvenated an otherwise stagnant and outmoded Asia-Pacific policy framework that Hilary Clinton characterized as ‘forward-deployed’ diplomacy. In Japan alone the US has up to 56,000 troops; the upper limit of its rotational presence in South Korea stands at 28, 500, and it has 500 troops in the Philippines and 4500 in Guam. With the decision now to station about 2500 Marines in Darwin, Australia, and plans by Singapore to station four littoral
combat ships, the US engagement is likely to further consolidate its position, and perhaps match its presence at the cold war level or even surpass past levels. In recent decades, various reports prepared by the Congressional Research Services (CRS) indicate that the US has considered it necessary to respond to China’s military modernization efforts and its assertiveness. This has emerged as a key issue while the US is evolving its new ‘politically sustainable, operationally resilient, and geographically dispersed’ defence posture.

In line with this thinking, even as the US struggles to stabilize its economy and address pressing domestic issues such as health and unemployment, the need for a sustained off-shore military presence as a potential deterrent to periodic Chinese assertiveness in both South China and East China Seas remains a high priority. The US is also restoring its network of alliances of the cold war era and bolstering its position in the Indo-Pacific theatre, through new partnerships, such as with India, based on shared interests and concerns.

**Future Trends**

**Import of the Asian theatre**

Despite Obama administration’s efforts to tone down its rhetoric over its rebalancing strategy, and the attempts being made by the new Secretary of State John Kerry to maintain a semblance of seriousness in its engagements with other regions of the world, the fact remains that its future anxieties will be sourced to the Indo-Pacific geostrategic compulsions. There is a growing consensus among scholars and analysts of all schools of thought—realist, liberal and constructivist—that future locus of international power politics will rest in this strategic realm—largely concentrated around events in the larger Asian landmass, and the Oceans washing the Asian shores, extending from the Gulf of Aden, through the entire expanse of Indian Ocean up to the Western shores of the US. It is not only the shift in economic centre of gravity, but also the chronic political turmoil in the West Asian region with its convoluted security situation that will retain increased international attention in the near future.

**Continued US preponderance**

At the same time, the so called ‘Asian Century’—despite the fact that a more energized Asia, home to two most populous and rapidly growing economies in the world—will not necessarily undermine American preponderance at the global level. While the Chinese dragon and Indian elephant may gain in their relative economic status, in terms of their gross power potential, they will continue to lag behind the US, in the medium term. Because of its pre-existing technological superiority, and advantages accruing from it, as also due to its continued zeal and determination to retain its advantage by
according primacy to research and development (R&D), the US will continue to stay far ahead of both, in critical indices of power projection. However, in many ways the US can lose its advantages, i.e., by nurturing a sense of complacency about, and believing too much in, its destined leadership of the world, by excessively focusing on the possibility of the rise of a global rival and turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy through its disproportionate reactions and backpedalling on its balancing strategy, and also by failing to employ diplomacy as a major tool in its policy of ‘con-gagement’ (seeking to both contain and engage) which could neutralize any possible negative effects of the rise of China as a major power.

A new paradigm of international relations
It is also likely that the days of states practicing crass and forthright realism in their foreign policy are over, even though the basic tenet of realism that the state would continue to pursue their interests in amoral ways in an anarchical environment, will continue to hold, challenging the constructivist contention that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. World politics today is indeed much more complex, as state system has evolved in unalterable ways and the nature of international anarchy has changed its shape. To understand state behaviour and predict its course in such a complex environment would require deeper understanding of different theoretical paradigms and perhaps a more creative enmeshing of the ideas contained therein. In an infinitely densely connected world, with relatively more representative systems of governance worldwide, the interstate relationships are no longer overwhelmingly intergovernmental in nature. Moreover, the multi-cornered balance-of-power strategies being employed by most major actors in the Asia Pacific theatre complicate the job of any analyst to decipher the nature and direction of change. Perhaps an unconventional approach, based on a creative fusion of all theoretical frameworks, will help us better understand the nature of international politics taking shape all around us today and in this case in the Indo-Pacific.

India and the US pivot

India and the United States have never mattered more to each other.
Hilary Clinton\textsuperscript{17}

[US policy of rebalance] has opened simultaneously for India a rare opportunity to shape the Asian balance of power and the real danger of being drawn into the conflict between the world’s foremost power and the rising challenger.
C Raja Mohan\textsuperscript{18}

Indian reactions to US pivot have alternated between enthusiasm and ambivalence.\textsuperscript{19} In a recent study/policy brief by a US-based scholar, seeking to analyze Indian reactions to
pivot, it has been argued that India is ambivalent about US policy of rebalancing in Asia, primarily because there is a vigorous debate at the domestic level on US rebalancing in Asia and there is a fractured consensus over the issue. Moreover, the Indian reluctance indicates that the soft-Nehruvian nationalists continue to have an edge over their detractors in the sphere of strategic policy making. However, such analyses may not be entirely correct. There is a marked shift in India’s policy towards the US since the end of the cold war. India is more assured today as less alarmed about the US presence in the region. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, India had surprisingly offered its facilities for use by US forces, unlike the latter’s regional allies.

Delhi’s concerns vis-à-vis a rising China has led it in the past and will continue to nudge it in future to seek strategic partnerships with other countries in the world to externally balance China without overtly articulating it. As an Indian analyst has stated, ‘India will never accept a Sino-centric Asia’. India’s ‘Look East’ policy and engagement with countries in central and East Asia may as well be interpreted as a balancing policy vis-à-vis China, which has made forays into its immediate neighbourhood in the last decade which is a matter of concern for India. Reacting to the US policy of rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific, former Indian ambassador to the US had stated that there was no dissonance in India’s policy towards the region and India’s vision was ‘to create a web of inter-linkages for our shared prosperity and security’, and it would want ‘the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions to develop into a zone of cooperation rather than one of competition and domination’.

‘Rebalance’ welcomed
In this context, India’s strategic community has welcomed the shift in Obama administration’s policy from seeking a de facto condominium with China to ‘rebalancing’ its defence posture in the Asia-Pacific. Some of them have even gone to the extent of saying that the emphasis on Indo-Pacific signals a welcome departure in the US thinking on South Asia, and there is a quiet recognition of the region as an India- or Indo-centric one. Some analysts have even argued that India could take advantage of the evolving strategic scenario and ‘the unfolding Sino-American rivalry in Asia’ has generated new ideas on reinventing ‘non-alignment’, with the realistic option for Delhi resting in building a ‘solid alignment’ with key regional powers.

Nevertheless, there is a view in the US that India has been rather cold and indifferent to the US policy towards Asia Pacific, and reluctant to assume leadership in the region, despite the fact that it is being backed by US as a ‘linchpin’ in the pivot strategy, as a ‘regional economic anchor and a provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region’. Indian reluctance to assume leadership of the region, and to explicitly back the rebalance strategy does not indicate its disapproval of the US policy. It is rather following a nuanced policy of strengthening its strategic partnership with US on the one hand, and engaging China on the other.
While there is no official reaction to the US ‘rebalancing’, there is a strong appetite for closer Indo-US coordination in areas of defence and security. As the joint statement on Manmohan-Obama summit meeting in Washington in September 2013 indicates, India has drawn parallels between the ‘US rebalance to Asia’ and its ‘Look East policy’ and both the countries agreed ‘to partner more closely with other Asia-Pacific countries, including greater coordination with Japan, China and ASEAN, among others, including through the evolving institutional architecture of the region’. Thus, there can be little doubt that even without getting into an alliance with the US, it would support the idea of enhanced and proactive US military and economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

Continuing engaging China
Simultaneously, India is expected to pursue its policy of engagement with China in its own interest. Its trade with China has already touched US $70 bn and growing, despite increasing border violations in recent years. The two countries remain engaged in talks for settlement of the border disputes issue. Simultaneously, India is concerned over the growing Chinese footprints in South Asia and its periphery (String of Pearls strategy) and advocates restraint in official reactions. Such a policy has invited intense critics from many analysts in India, who would rather want India to be more assertive in dealing with China. India’s official middle path approach of engagement and defiance to China’s assertiveness resembles the US preferred policy posture towards China. The US has tried to assure China that the policy of rebalancing is not aimed against China. Hilary Clinton, the former US Secretary of State had recognized that ‘there are some in both countries who believe that China’s interests and ours are fundamentally at odds. They apply a zero-sum calculation to our relationship’, but clarified ‘that is not our view.’\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, John Kerry has also tried to reassure China that the US policy was not aimed at containing China on several occasions.\textsuperscript{27} Rather than being ambivalent, perhaps, India does not want to officially spell out its reaction in a manner that would complicate its relationship with China. The excuse of ‘strategic autonomy’, which is being cited many analysts as a relic of India’s policy of non-alignment does not in any way preclude the possibility of India and US pooling their resources together, along with others in the region and outside, to evolve a security architecture which would deter China and safeguard itself against misadventures of any regional state including China.

The Challenge of Managing China
Since 1993 the US policies towards China and also India has alternated between periods of intense engagements and long spells of distrust, competition and even confrontation.
The periodic shifts in US policy are all well-known, as evident from placating China over cross-strait affairs in the late 1990s to confronting China over its testing of missiles during the Clinton presidency, as also, from inviting China as a regional inspector in South Asia to rebalancing its power in the region primarily to curb its assertiveness in the region during the first Obama administration. These contradictions though can be understood through the prism of pragmatism in state behaviour and understanding the limits of hard and soft power. Perhaps, the US has rightly chosen by not confining itself to any fixed policy paradigm and allowing itself to be flexible while dealing with apparent changes in Chinese behaviour. Despite mutual concerns, the US has little option but to engage and hedge China at the same time. The growing differences between the US and China on a host of critical regional and international issues, starting from disputes in the Pacific, North Korea, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria does not augur well for the future of regional and international security.

However, the US is not alone facing this predicament, as most of its allies and partners face similar predicaments about how to deal with a China which is getting increasingly buoyant about its power potential and has not qualm about asserting it periodically. The cases of China’s face-off with the USS Impeccable in South China Sea in March 2009 and USS Cowpens in December 2013, declaration of Air Defence Identification Zone in November 2013, blatant intrusion into Indian territory along the disputed border with India in Ladkah (in May 2013) and Arunachal Pradesh (August 2013), muscle-flexing against Vietnam and Philippines in South China Sea, and against Japan in the East China Sea clearly demonstrate China’s propensity for force display as opposed to diplomacy. It is rather expedient for China not to shun diplomacy and reconciliation. Most countries having economic linkages with China need not be unnecessarily wary of Chinese intentions as China too has much stakes in maintaining these linkages by smothering political differences. China has also realized the benefits of engagement and decision to join the WTO, and working with its maritime neighbours to evolve a code of conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea.

**Need for Cautious Realism**
While the countries in the broader Indo-Pacific region are coming to terms with increased global attention towards the broader Indo-Pacific region and unfolding US involvements at the heels of China’s assertiveness, that may potentially swing the strategic pendulum in unpredictable ways. There is also the likelihood of new emerging conflicts in other regions, diverting US attention from the Indo-Pacific. As seen from the recent events in Ukraine and Russian aggressiveness to reclaim its suzerainty over Crimea, global attention has shifted to the broader Eurasian geopolitical theatre. The post-cold war debates over the nature of the evolving global security architecture,
therefore, remain inconclusive. Russian behaviour vis-à-vis Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 indicates that the quintessential Indian dictum of ‘jiski lathi uski bhains’ (one who yields the stick owns the buffalo) may continue to hold true in world politics. Such issues can divert attention of the US and other powers away from the Indo-Pacific and commit already stretched military and economic resources in managing the Trans-Atlantic power (im)balance. This may strengthen the sense of suspicion in the region about the sustainability of US strategy and will of the Obama administration to sustain its Indo-Pacific strategy.28

On the contrary, the existing framework of working with the US in the military sphere while engaging China in the economic domain will be the most preferred strategy for most countries in the region including India. However, it is uncertain whether such a policy option will ensure peace and tranquility in the region, in view of China’s determination to pursue its territorial claims and interests with force. Possible diversion of US attention towards any other region would only allow China the strategic time and space to consolidate its influence in the region. While China’s connectedness with the world economy and its military power may ‘prevent any friction to escalate into bigger conflict’, it is likely that the Asia Pacific region will continue to be a ‘zone of contestation’ between the US and China, with other countries in the region gravitating towards the US for their own security in the near term.29

While the US and its partners and allies may be advocating a realist approach vis-à-vis China, such a policy will require constant revision and calibration in response to China’s behaviour. Managing a rising power at the global level can be extremely challenging, and even more so in the case of China at present which is by inward-looking nationalism, unable to transform itself, and facing its own set of challenges at the internal level. The phenomenon of competing nationalisms in the neighbourhood, especially in Japan (with baggage of the past) may lead to further consolidation of a more jingoistic identity projection in China. Faced with an internal crisis, it could also turn its attention outward in its bid to ensure internal unity. In this context, China’s assertion over disputed territorial issues, spanning from land borders in South Asia, to its maritime frontiers in the South China and East China Seas is likely to grow in the future. In such cases, policies of the US, as well as all its allies and partners will have to be nuanced and well-coordinated. This may entail regular dialogues at the political level on the issue, increased interoperability in joint military exercises, high levels of cooperation and coordination among the militaries and greater preparedness to deal with any unforeseen conflict.

In this regard India is likely to constantly assess the international balance of power and new alignments, as the situation evolves and calibrate its strategic policies. In the changing strategic environment, ‘nonalignment’, a much reviled concept in the West, may not be an unrealistic option for India to exercise. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs’ statement following the Crimean referendum recognised the
‘legitimate interests of all states in the region’. On Libya, India did not support the western interpretation of the United Nations Security Council resolution and on Syria too, India has taken a neutral position. Such policy of non-alignment and maintaining strategic autonomy in foreign policy may run the risk of strengthening the constituency of India-sceptics in the US and dampen the spirit of bonhomie between the two countries. It has be understood here, nevertheless, that as much as India would like to intensify its strategic partnership with the US and the West, it seems likely in the near and medium term that it would reserve its right to differ with them on issues it perceives as sensitive, from its own point of view. However, given their convergence of interest in larger global strategic issues, they may yet find a way of incrementally consolidating their ‘partnership’, which is critical to the evolving security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion
The ‘Asian century’ is a cliché, which seeks to project the shifting power dynamics, in the post-cold war setting, in an oversimplified and misleading manner. ‘Asian Pacific Century’ with its emphasis on the ‘Indo-Pacific’, could be equally deceptive. In an interconnected world, the centrality of a state or region in economic terms alone is questionable given the multitude of factors that define power such as military strength, strategic culture, political will and leadership. Also, the power asymmetry between major, middle and rising powers requires deeper study and analysis to comprehend the dynamics of emerging power configuration and balance at the global level. Moreover, the official US’ Asia policy excludes West Asia and Eurasia which are important strategic theatres likely to have decisive impact on world politics.

The key challenge that the pivot or rebalancing policy seeks to address is the rise of China and how to mainstream it in the liberal world order. But there are other major players in the international system, such as Russia that cannot be overlooked in any debate on Asia/Indo-Pacific. The opening of the northern sea route in the Arctic and the Chinese efforts to overcome the Malacca dilemma (this increases the importance of Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Eurasian land mass) give new meaning to Asia-Pacific in the changing geo-strategic context.

Therefore, it is a legitimate question to ask whether the idea of Indo Pacific will sustain as a strategic system. ASEAN (which is aiming at ASEAN union by 2015) is very sensitive about its centrality in any regional architecture in Asia. At the EAS, Russia has floated an idea with few takers among the ASEAN countries of a much broader regional architecture. South Korea is talking about an Asian paradox and an East Asian architecture with focus on Korean peninsula. Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) is also slowly assuming a new and wider identity with robust engagement between India and Australia within this framework. Thus, the idea of Indo-Pacific will need to
accommodate these regional aspirations and associations and strategic conceptions for a wider acceptability and relevance in the region. In this context, the concept of US-China condominium is also an interesting proposition that suits US policies of China containment without confrontation. A noted Chinese academic, for example, acknowledged the ongoing trend of bipolarization in the region but concluded that China-US relationship would be the most important relationship in the world in the long-term, and they would have to find some way of working together. China and the US are like Siamese twins due to great degree of trade and economic interdependence in spite of their mutual sense of suspicion and hostility about each other.

Above all, the future looks far from certain. Unforeseen events like the Ukraine crisis may inadvertently suit China’s policy calculations as it would dilute US attention to the Indo-Pacific. Increased role play by powers such as Japan and Russia to assert their relevance in the Indo-Pacific may add new dimensions to the emerging Indo-Pacific security architecture. Similarly, internal factors such as US preoccupation to stabilise its economy from the impact of the decade long war in the Gulf and Afghanistan, India’s enormous human development and governance challenges and China’s troubles with the restive Xinjiang province, modernization reforms and bickering in the Chinese Communist Party are factors that may constrain their respective capabilities for staying engaged on a long term basis and shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific and the Asian century.

NOTES


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


14 The countries wishing to join TPP are Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States, and Vietnam. TPP has its origin in an earlier trade agreement, loosely called P4 among New Zealand, Chile, Brunei and Singapore in 2005.


26 Hillary Clinton, Op.Cit.

27 See for example Kerry’s interaction with Chinese media at JW Marriott Hotel, Beijing, China, 14 February, 2014, where is said: ‘Our partnership with China we view as one of great potential. It is one that is continuing to be defined, and we are convinced that both regional and global challenges that we face, China and the United States, when they can act together in concert with common purpose, have the opportunity to be able to make a significant difference’. On pursuing climate change agenda with China Kerry wrote: ‘This isn’t about who wins and who loses. Revolutionizing the way we use and produce energy can be a ‘win, win, win’ — a win for America, a win for China, and win for the world’, John Kerry, ‘Getting the U.S.-China Climate Partnership Right’. http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/07/212219.htm.


30 The statement from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said that the Indian Prime Minister ‘emphasized the consistent position India had on the issues of unity and territorial integrity of countries’ and ‘expressed his hope that all sides would exercise restraint and work together constructively to find political and diplomatic solutions that protected the legitimate interests of all countries in the region and ensured long term peace and stability in Europe and beyond’. http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/23101/Prime+Ministers+telephone+conversation+with+Russian+President+Vladimir+Putin. Accessed on 19 March 2014.