



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NOVEL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT (IJNRD) | IJNRD.ORG**
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

"NAVIGATING THE INDO-PACIFIC: KEY ACTORS, STRATEGIES, AND CHALLENGES"

Mr. Sherwin Prakash, Prof. (Dr.) Nagalaxmi M Raman

Research Assistant master's in international relations, Director and Head of Institute

Amity Institute of International Studies, Amity Institute of International Studies Amity University Uttar Pradesh.

Abstract : The Indo-Pacific involves key actors like the United States, China, India, ASEAN, and the QUAD. China's strategic perspective, illustrated by its Five Theater system, focuses on territorial control, maritime claims enforcement, economic incentives through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, and maintaining power dynamics, particularly with Taiwan and India. The Korean Peninsula plays a pivotal role, with China supporting North Korea as a buffer state against the U.S.-aligned South Korea. South Korea's foreign policy walks on a delicate balance due to economic reliance on China, and the threat posed by North Korea. The United States, through various multilateral institutions, and military presence, aims to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, foster regional connections, and enhance security. India's evolving strategy involves active engagement with Southeast Asian nations, participation in QUAD, and maritime presence initiatives like the Security, and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). ASEAN is a critical player, that navigates between Beijing, and Washington, with economic trends indicating a potential shift toward China. Japan, adopting a stronger posture, focuses on financial aid alternatives, increased military expenditure, and partnerships like the QUAD, trilateral dialogues with India, Australia, USA, and with the ASEAN countries. As the world enters a new era of strategic foreign policy, the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape requires careful navigation. The decade ahead will determine the countries' collaborative ability to address climate change and sustain principles of openness and inclusivity. The study emphasizes the interconnectedness of economic, military, and geopolitical factors, underlining the need for collaboration among major actors to ensure stability.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, China, United States, India, ASEAN, QUAD, geopolitical complexities.

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific is a region that constitutes the three sub-theaters of North-East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia alongside Australia, Oceania, and various islands and archipelagos that comprise the rim of this gigantic geo-political area. The key actors in the region include the United States, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, India, ASEAN, the QUAD, who all, by nature of proximity and national security objectives, hold a vested interest in the region. The nature of this region as a hotbed for growing economies and corresponding increases in military expenditure and national ambitions have led to increasingly strong national postures in the region and thus, greater volatility. This paper will attempt to divide the region into smaller theaters and help provide a broad overview of the key actors and their objectives.

China

The PRC's view of the Indo-Pacific can be seen through the lens of the Five Theater system that was introduced by the current premier, Xi Jinping during his first term in office. The pivot towards a strong naval command located in four of the five port-carrying theaters made the PRC's national ambitions in its immediate neighborhood and what it calls the First Island Chain evident. The Northern Theatre Command based out of Shenyang, Liaoning Province, is seen as the primary PLA (People's Liberation Army) command system that is presumed to handle matters regarding Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Russia. Similarly, the Western Theater command system is expected to deal with perceived internal threats from Xinjiang and Tibet as well as the contested border with India². The Easter Theater Command is expected to deal with Taiwan, and contested islands with Japan while the Southern Theater Command is anticipated

to deal with the South China Sea and the enforcement of Chinese maritime claims in the regions². The goals of this organization are set by the Central Military Commission which is chaired by Xi Jinping. The understanding of this hierarchy is of overarching importance as it depicts how the foreign policy apparatus and the military apparatus are headed by the same person and allows for clearer communication and collaboration among these organizations. In addition to that, the existence of the Strategic Support Force (SSF), which is an organization on par with the theater commands, comes under the CMC, and thus, Xi Jinping depicts China's commitment to investment in the cyber, information warfare, electronic and space capabilities of the nation².

The overarching goals of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific can be highlighted as follows:

- i. Regain control of Taiwan (peacefully or militarily).
- ii. Enforcement of Chinese maritime claims in the region and expanding Chinese naval power projection to the first island chain.
- iii. Increase economic incentives and build more resilient supply chains via various BRI projects.
- iv. Maintain Chinese hard power projection in the South China Sea vis-à-vis the seven artificial islands and the maritime 'fishing' fleets.
- v. Maintain the asymmetric power dynamic with India regarding the hotly contested border.

These goals must only be considered as extremely broad generalizations and do not consider the various land border disputes that the PRC has with Vietnam, India, Myanmar, etc. However, the goals mentioned above do provide a small insight into how the Chinese view the region that they are inherently a part of.

The Korean Peninsula

The existence of North Korea itself has, historically, created a pivot point in the region that revolves around the needs of the current North Korean leadership. Despite the risks associated with a rogue actor on its border, the PRC has made clear its commitment to the continued existence of the DPRK. The reasoning here can be explained pretty simply. The existence of a buffer state between the Chinese mainland and the US-aligned South Korea is of critical importance to the PRC's national security concerns. Specifically, the communist regime in the North that takes a hardline stance on the United States allows the PRC more breathing room in the region due to the nature of the periodic North Korean agitation in the region which allows the CCP to present itself as a comparatively reliable and trustworthy stabilizing force.

South Korea's foreign policy in the region is broadly defined by the volatility of the North with a specific emphasis on arms procurement and a commitment to ensuring stability on the peninsula. However, a key third point is that South Korea is an economy that is highly reliant on the Chinese market and thus, walks a tightrope between Beijing and Washington. The continued danger posed by a rogue nuclear state that regularly threatens Seoul cannot be understated, with any major foreign policy shift from the Blue House being framed to keep in mind the reaction from the North and to a lesser extent, from the PRC upon whom the South Koreans are economically reliant. Issues such as the stalled procurement of THAAD missiles, the pursuit of membership of the QUAD, and the refusal of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol to meet Nancy Pelosi directly after her visit to Taiwan can be directly or indirectly attributed to Seoul's economic reliance on Beijing. Even as Seoul attempts to reorient towards a tri-lateral arrangement with Tokyo and Washington, the decisions, coming from a decidedly pro-USA president are perhaps the most apt framing through which one can view South Korea's predicament.

The United States

The United States with its enormous military and economic power projection capabilities via the IPEF, the QUAD, APEC, AUKUS, the Five Eyes Program, the BBBW initiative, and various other multilateral institutions brings immense capabilities to the table. Any approach to understanding Washington's strategy in the area must start with an understanding of the hard power aspects of its foreign policy. With the Indo-Pacific Command headquartered in Hawaii, USINDOPACOM has forward bases and significant command centers across the region, including in Guam, Okinawa, South Korea, mainland Japan, and more. These bases play a significant role in combat operations, deterrence, and the extension of the American nuclear umbrella, security force assistance (SFA), and Humanitarian Assistance (HA) in the region. The posture of the military in the region is a matter of great internal debate within the United States, however, the forward deployment of US naval assets is a matter of consensus with the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group headlined by the USS Nimitz again conducting freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea in January of 2023.

The significant presence of the American military in the area is supported by its economic partnerships in the region. Specifically, institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework are seen as the stalwarts of old and new phases of American strategy, respectively. The QUAD through its four member states (the US, India, Japan, and Australia) has also had proven experience with vaccine allocation and is seen as providing an alternative source of funding to the BRI, however, there is no doubt that the most widely publicized financial grant projects have been the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) and to a lesser extent, the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership. A closer inspection of these institutions and projects holds great merit however that is outside the scope of this article.

The utilization of these American assets is outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States that was published by the Biden administration in February 2022. The main objectives are:

- i. Advance a free and open Indo-Pacific
- ii. Building connections within and beyond the region
- iii. Drive Indo-Pacific security
- iv. Bolster Indo-Pacific security
- v. Building regional resilience in the face of new era threats

This pivot to the Indo-Pacific that was initiated by Obama and is being heralded by the Biden administration has significantly strengthened the bargaining power of local actors and has the ultimate goal of securing the interests of the United States in the region. This portion of the article should serve as a basic building block from which the actual comprehension of the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy can be understood and internalized.

India

The Indian strategy to the Indo-Pacific has shifted considerably over the last twenty years. From the era of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the PRC's recognition of Sikkim as an Indian state to the current era of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, the India-China relationship has undergone various highs and lows however the constant of the unresolved border conflict remains at the core of the India-China issue. Thus, any long-term settlement must resolve the border conflict.

Now, about the Indian outlook on the region as a whole, New Delhi has, in the last decade, shown an active interest in engaging with various Southeast Asian nations through policies like BIMSTEC, SAARC, and the Act East Policy. That, coupled with New Delhi's newfound commitment to the QUAD following the clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers in June of 2020 has led to a perception among the CCP of India being "in play" like it never has before. As a strategic partner of ASEAN and an increasingly active actor in the region, India has made a noticeable shift towards increasing its maritime presence in the ocean named after the nation. This can be seen through the various projects run by the Indian government in South East Asia. Examples include the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation and India's leading role via the India-ASEAN free trade agreement. This, combined with the rapid expansion of the Indian Navy's radar bases and listening stations that dot the various nations in the Indian Ocean. This comprehensive strategy can be seen through the lens of SAGAR, the Security and Growth for All in the Region strategy that the Modi administration has implemented. It should be explored in greater depth for anyone with an interest in India's strategic posturing of the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN

As is evident, so far in the article one of the key theaters in the Indo-Pacific is the South China Sea with all the major players in the region sans China, being members of ASEAN. The organization is effectively an economic and political union that attempts and largely succeeds at creating an organizational framework through which the nations involved can help each other and respond effectively to internal crises. As the pivot point in an already exceedingly important theater, the ASEAN member states tend to walk the tightrope between Beijing and Washington.

In addition to that, Tokyo has solidified its foothold as the largest FDI provider to Southeast Asia. Conversely, South East Asia has, collectively, become China's second-largest trading partner while China remains ASEAN's largest. These economic trendlines have led the CCP to calculate that ASEAN is steadily shifting towards Beijing. Thus, this internal confidence of the CCP and the state apparatus was, once again, put under duress as the United States under the Biden administration has taken a far more active stance in the region as outlined above.

Japan

Japan, under the successive Abe and Kishida, has adopted a noticeably stronger national posture with regards to the Chinese, both in the East China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific. Tokyo's intensifying efforts as an alternative source of financial aid and FDI has been felt throughout the Indo-Pacific, especially in South East Asia and in India. From the figure, we can see the broad scope and financial depth of these investments. In addition to that, Japan, as one of the principal driving forces behind the original QUAD, has, since the reinvigoration of the grouping, maintained a strong commitment to the stability of a free and opinion Indo-Pacific region. In addition to the QUAD, the tri-lateral dialogue with Seoul and Washington and the strong Japan-ASEAN ties (Rudd 128) have put the Japanese in a strong economic position in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, the new Japanese commitment to increasing military expenditure to deter its foreign rivals, primarily China, North Korea and Russia. These nations have been described as "the greatest strategic challenge", "even more grave and imminent threat" and "strong security concern" by the National Security Strategy of Japan from December 2022. The future, therefore, holds much room for military expansion and modernization for the Japanese and the impacts of this decision remain to be seen.

Research Through Innovation

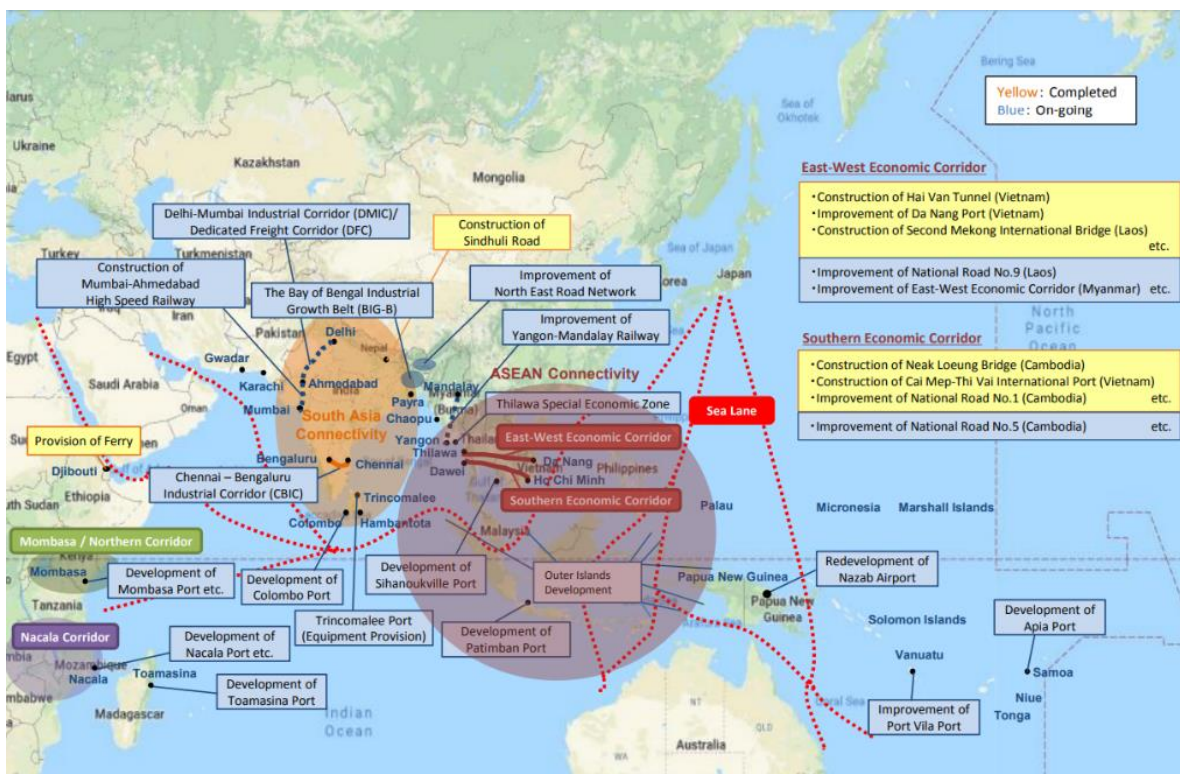


figure from the free and open Indo-Pacific basic thinking material from the ministry of foreign affairs of Japan

Conclusion

The world has entered a new period of foreign policy that demands more from the Indo-Pacific region since the Second World War. The geopolitical interests of various large and small actors collide in the region, some of whom represent an institutional threat to the global rules-based order from which all the major actors have benefitted. In this environment of greater volatility and militarization, the overall de-escalation and calming of tensions will depend, not only upon Beijing and Washington but increasingly on New Delhi, Tokyo, Seoul, and ASEAN and their respective capabilities vis-à-vis Beijing and to a lesser extent, Pyongyang.

This decisive decade before the world will determine if the region can confront and address climate change, reveal how the world rebuilds from a once-in-a-century pandemic, and decide whether the world can sustain the principles of openness, transparency, and inclusivity that have fueled the region's success.

References

- [1] Atkinson, Joel. "Don't Mistake South Korea's Yoon Suk-Yeol for a China Hawk." *The Diplomat*, James Pach, 27 Aug. 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/dont-mistake-south-koreas-yoon-suk-yeol-for-a-china-hawk/>.
- [2] "Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Formally Launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment." *The White House*, The United States Government, 27 June 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-formally-launch-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>.
- [3] "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, 16 May 2022.
- [4] "Indo-Pacific Division Briefs." *Ministry of External Affairs*, Apr. 2019.
- [5] "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States." *The White House*, 21 Feb. 2022.
- [6] "INDOPACOM - Home." *Public Affairs Communication & Outreach U.S. Pacific Command (JOPAC)*, Department of Defence, <https://www.pacom.mil/Contact/Directory/J0/Public-Affairs-J01PA/>.
- [7] Kajari Kamal and Gokul Sahni and Gokul Sahni and Kajari Kamal. "India in the Indo-Pacific: A Kautilyan Strategy for the Maritime Mandala." *ORF*, 23 Feb. 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-in-the-indo-pacific/>.
- [8] Lerner, Mitchell. "The Domestic Factors behind North Korea's Missile Tests." – *The Diplomat*, For The Diplomat, 27 Oct. 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-domestic-factors-behind-north-koreas-missile-tests/>.
- [9] Mahadzir, By: Dzirhan, et al. "USS Nimitz Back in the South China Sea after Singapore Port Visit." *USNI News*, 27 Jan. 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/01/27/uss-nimitz-back-in-the-south-china-sea-after-singapore-port-visit>.
- [10] "Ministry of National Defense." *Theater Commands - China Military*, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/TheaterCommands/index.html>.
- [11] "National Security of Japan." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, Dec. 2022.

[12] Pavey, Andy. "Deterrence by Denial: Japan's New Strategic Outlook • Stimson Center." Stimson Center, 22 Feb. 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/deterrence-by-denial-japans-new-strategic-outlook/>.

[13] Rudd, Kevin. The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China. Public Affairs, 2022.

[14] "U.S. Ground Forces in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress." Congressional Research Service, 30 Aug. 2022.

[15] "What Are China's Theatre Commands and Service Branches?" South China Morning Post, 15 Aug. 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3144921/chinas-military-structure-what-are-theatre-commands-and-service>.

