

INDO-US CONVERGENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: CHINA'S CONTAINMENT AND LINGERING CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract: The interests of India and the United States (US) converge on multiple aspects in the Indo-Pacific. These interests range from economics to geopolitics to regional stability. India's Look East Policy, rechristened as Act East Policy, in addition to economic, cultural and commercial goals, includes strategic interests to expand India's influence in East Asia and to the larger Indo-Pacific. The US, challenged by the rise of China, has initiated a quadrilateral grouping of democracies (QUAD) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy with the objective of reasserting American primacy in the Indo-Pacific. The US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region signed in 2015 and the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019 emphasize the indispensability of the partnership between the US and India in the Indo-Pacific. The policies of the US and India towards the Indo-Pacific converge on ensuring peace, stability, maritime security, freedom of navigation, the fight against terrorism, peaceful settlement of disputes and ensuring connectivity of land, sea, and air transportation. Though not stated bluntly, containing the growing Chinese influence by mobilizing countries in the region figures prominently in the strategic schemes of both India and the US. As the most important strategic region in world politics, India, the US and China have vital economic and security interests at stake. By relying on a realist approach, the paper probes the main drivers and constraints of the Indo-US strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific. The paper outlines and analyses the context of the Indo-US collaboration in the Indo-Pacific, their shared views and concerns, its anti-China mode and the constraints of the partnership. This study adopts qualitative methods and uses interpretative and analytical tools to explain the case.

Keywords: India, United States, China, Indo-Pacific, security.

The Indo-Pacific is a combination of Pacific and Indian Oceans that includes countries located on and within the edges of both the Oceans. Shaped by the rise of China and India, and in-

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creasing economic and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Oceans, the region is becoming a single strategic system and the center of world politics and economy. The key driver of the geo-strategic transformations of the region is the rise of China. Strategically the great power shift marked by the rise of China and the relative decline of the US will have great impact on the balance of power and geopolitics in the region. Disputes over maritime territories, its militarization, sovereignty claims, assertion of freedom of navigation and rule-based order are key to geopolitical transformations taking place in the Indo-Pacific. Economically, the Indo-Pacific is central in terms of availability of natural resources, trade flow and energy transportation. This region is of great strategic significance to both India and the US. It is key to India's pre-eminence in South Asia and Indian Ocean, its growing economic interests, maritime security, and great power ambitions. The huge coastline of over 7.500 km, with 1.200 islands and Exclusive Economic Zone of about 2.000.000 square km with nearly 55 percent of India's trade passing through the region is strategically crucial for India's maritime and economic interests (Kumar 2019). Maritime interests of India in the Indo-Pacific include protection from sea-based threats to territorial integrity, ensuring stability in maritime neighborhood, creation, development, sustenance of a 'Blue' Ocean-Economy, support to diasporas, and retaining a regionally favorable geopolitical maritime position (Chauhan 2019). As a rising power, India is ambitious to play a greater regional and global role in South Asia, East Asia and the larger Indo-Pacific.

As the sole superpower, the US' economic, strategic and security interests are entangled with the region. The US Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris in 2018 testified before the US Senate that "the US has an enduring national interest in the Indo Pacific" (Senate Armed Services Committee 2018). The US' economic interests in the region are based on ideas of free market, private finance and liberal investment. According to the US Department of State Report-2019 on Free and Open Indo-Pacific:



the US is the largest source of foreign direct investment in the region and it has over \$1.9 trillion worth of trade with the region, supporting more than 8.1 million jobs in the United States (US Department of State 2019). It has key interests in the protection of sea-lanes of trade and communication in the region. Strategically the US considers itself a resident Indo-Pacific power with a very long maritime border stretching from the US coast to the Indian Ocean, home to the Pacific Fleet and key alliance partners which includes key non-NATO allies as well (Rosenblum 2018). It has key territorial possessions and bases in the Region which include Guam in the Western Pacific, Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, and Denver in Australia. The US has huge military assets in the Indo-Pacific with the objective of ensuring its hegemony in the region (Stuart 2012).

The rise of China with its massive economic and strategic investment is the first real test of US' pre-eminence in the region. The US tries to maintain its hegemony in the region with the help of potential friends and allies. India is identified by the US as an indispensable ally to ensure peace, stability, prosperity and maintain US predominance in the Indo-Pacific. Containing the growing Chinese influence constitute the underlying strategic objective of Indo-US convergence. The construct of Indo-Pacific is a case of two rivalries – in the Western Pacific between the US and China and in the Indian Ocean between India and China (Das 2019). Given the geopolitical dynamics of the region, India's ambition to become a great power and the sustainability of US predominance in world politics depend on how they work together. This probe is a realist assessment about what brings India and the US together to balance against China's rise in the Indo-Pacific and analyses the constraints that beset the partnership. In what follows, I briefly describe the growing engagement between India and the US, their shared views and interests in the context of the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific. Section two examines China's expansionist strategies in the Indo-Pacific and how it accentuates the anti-China mode of Indo-US convergence. The third section



analyses the constraints of Indo-US strategic partnership followed by concluding remarks.

INDO-US ENGAGEMENT: THE NEW STRATEGIC CAMARADERIE

The growing Indo-US engagement takes place in the context of the evolving geopolitical dynamics of Indo-Pacific as a region of strategic significance. The key to this dynamics is the on-going power transition taking place in international system- the power shift from the West to the East and the corresponding resurgence of Asia (Nye Jr. 2014). The US has been the most important political, economic and security player of this region since the Second World War. China's economic growth and military capability powered by nuclear weapons and its assertiveness is a cause of apprehension not only for the US and India, but also for Japan, Indonesia, and Australia and others in the region. The US counts India as a potential player and an ally in balancing the rising power of China in the Indo-Pacific. It is even argued that India's emergence as a key player and strategic partner of the US has contributed to the emergence of Indo-Pacific as a single strategic entity (McDevitt 2013: 8). In this sense Indo-Pacific itself is constructed on the strategic convergence of interests between India and the US.

India and the US were on the opposite sides of world politics with divergent security interests and worldviews during the first four decades of their relationship. But with systemic changes effected by end of cold war and the unprecedented rise of China, India switched over to pro-US and pro-West policies (Mohan 2003: 100). India's economic resurgence and emergence as a major power further intensified the relationship with the US. Soon India and the US began to be described as "natural allies", by the top leadership of both the countries (Indian Embassy 1998). Increased diplomatic engagements with the US marked by high level



visits, growing strategic understanding, deepening economic cooperation, commonalities of views, support for India's inclusion in global bodies, India toeing the US line on international issues such as sanctions on Iran and increased defense collaboration including defense trade and joint military exercises have exalted the relationship to new heights. Since 2000 every US president has visited India compared to just three in the second half of the 20th century. A Central Intelligence Report characterized India as the most important swing state in international system (Tellis 2004). Condelezza Rice former US Secretary of State opined that India as a rising power can be a pillar of stability and peace in a rapidly changing Asia (Rice 2006). The Obama administration considered India-US relationship as one of the defining partnerships of the century. The Indo-US Framework for Maritime Security Cooperation-2006 counts India as a maritime counterweight to China's naval capabilities (Ministry of External Affairs 2006). The Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Deal in 2008 which recognized India as *de facto* nuclear weapon state (Mohan and Agarwal 2019), and the 2015, US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region that focus on the importance of Indo-US collaboration in the Indo-Pacific (The White House 2015), highlighted the potential for Indo-US strategic convergence. Total bilateral trade (goods and services) between the US and India from 1999 to 2018, increased from \$16 bn to \$142 bn makes the US, India's first and India the US' eighth largest trading partners (Ayers 2020). The US support for India, in principle, for United Nations Security Council membership and non-proliferation regimes such as Nuclear Suppliers Group, Wassenaar Agreement, Missile Technology Control Regime and Australia Group and joint fight against terrorism and non-conventional security threats further cement the relationship.

The most remarkable aspect of Indo-US convergence has been in the defense sector. The New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship signed in 2005 and renewed in 2015 with emphasis on defense cooperation in maritime security and humanitari-



an assistance and counter terrorism (US-India Relations 1947-2020: 2020), India's designation as a "major defense partner" of the US in 2016, renaming of the US Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command, the 2+2 dialogue between the Defense Ministers and Foreign Ministers of the US and India on an annual basis, since 2018, signify the increasing importance of defense cooperation in bilateral relations (Sreenivasan 2019). The Foundational defense agreements signed between India and the US such as General Security of Military Information Agreement-2012, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement-2016, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement-2018 (Lakshmi 2016), India specific version of the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement, the Industrial Security Annex in 2019 together provide for greater defense technology transfer and exchange of logistics support are of central strategic importance (Peri 2019: 9). Today the US conducts the largest number of military exercises with India than any other country (Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2016). The Malabar naval exercise, which began between India and US in 1992, has become an annual show of anti-China muscle power along with Australia and Japan. The first ever tri-service military exercise, codenamed "Tiger Triumph", aimed at interoperability between the two forces of India and the US was conducted in 2019 (The Economic Times 2019). The growing arms deal between the two has become the fundamental driver and pillar of the strategic relationship. India's defense hardware purchases from the US that stood at zero in 2008 have crossed an estimated \$18 billion in 2019 (Expanding Defense Trade 2020). The defense and strategic relationship today encompasses a broad spectrum of activities from intelligence sharing to joint humanitarian and relief efforts, mutual port visits by naval ships, joint exercises, trade in military hardware, and most importantly, co-production and co-development of military systems. The geo-political dynamics of the Indo-Pacific marked by the rise of China is the key factor in the growing strategic and defense cooperation between India and the US.



COMMONALITIES OF VIEWS, INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES

India and the US have common views and interests and face identical threats in the Indo-Pacific. Referring to Indo-US collaboration, former Indian Ambassador to the US, Nirupama Rao remarked, “Indo-Pacific is a space that impacts our destinies, whose security and prosperity is vital to both of us and we have an increasing convergence of interests” (Rao 2013). In 2018, Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, had spelt-out clearly, “India’s strategic partnership with the United States is a new pillar of our shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region” (Ministry of External Affairs 2018).

The Indo-Pacific Report-2019 released by the National Maritime Foundation of India stated that India’s approach to engagement with the Indo-Pacific is based on respect, dialogue, cooperation, peace and prosperity (National Maritime Foundation 2019). Similarly the US policy towards the Indo-Pacific has been guided by identical ideas as stated in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The US Department of Defense’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019 proclaims, “the United States and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, and defines Indo-Pacific as “a free and open region with four principles that govern American policy here: *a*) respect for sovereignty and independence; *b*) peaceful resolution of disputes; *c*) free, fair, and reciprocal trade; and *d*) adherence to international rules and norms” (Department of Defense 2019). The Report 2019 further highlights the importance of rule of law, resilience in civil society, good governance and transparency and asserts that no one nation can or should dominate the Indo-Pacific. The US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2017 states “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region” (National Security Strategy 2017). By implication these policy documents and statements at the highest level refer to the competition between free and open world order postulated by



the US and India on the one hand and the illiberal and closed system of China on the other. The common views on FOIP between India and US assumes a common strategic posture in response to China's aggressive maneuvering in the region.

The Look East Policy initiated in the 1990s rechristened Act East Policy (AEP) is the chief mechanism to achieve India's economic and security objectives in Indo-Pacific. The Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) is key to India's AEP. Indian Prime Minister stated in 2018 that ASEAN "has laid the foundation of the Indo-Pacific Region" and that "ASEAN centrality and unity [...] lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific" (Thakker 2018). India's association with East Asian multilateral institutions such as ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, defense relationship with ASEAN countries are aimed to increase its overall influence in the region. India has identified the South China Sea as an area of interest after key parts of the Indian Ocean region. Many East Asian countries count on India as a contributor to regional stability and a balancer in the region (Mohan and Mishra 2018:165). Closer cooperation in combating terrorism, collaboration for peace and stability in the region and promotion of maritime security based on international norms and laws are pursued by India in the region (Press Information Bureau 2015). India is perceived by the US as "a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond" through its Look East Policy (Department of Defense 2015: 28). According to the US Department of State 2019 Report on A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision, the ASEAN is central to US' FOIP concept. There is great convergence between the ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook-2019 based on inclusivity, openness, good governance, and respect for international law and the US' FOIP.

The US plans to counter the Chinese challenge primarily through a network of alliances centered around the QUAD¹ and FOIP, which in combination constitute a security and economic strategy. The QUAD is based on shared values and cooperation on maritime security, infrastructure and connectivity in sup-



port of rules-based frameworks that find resonance with the common views and interests of US and India for an open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific (Wire 2019). India's support for QUAD, which is described as the "strategic fulcrum of Indo-pacific" and "Asian NATO", is indicative of India shedding its aversion to military blocs and security alliances (Liu). The US has security and strategic interests connected to building "a network of states dedicated to free markets" in the Indo-Pacific through FIOP (Kim 2018). The FOIP links the economic interests of the US to free flow of capital, goods, services, and ideas around the region and insist that it is imperative to maximize the prosperity and security of the region. In other words, the FOIP which invokes freedom and security in the seas and provide an alternative to China's authoritarian rule, unilateral militarization, land reclamation in South China sea and state controlled infrastructure projects being materialized through the BRI (Tan 2020). India is a key player of the QUAD and FOIP. The US woos India on account of its potential to balance the rise of China along with US and allies (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016: 70-83).

Thus, increased diplomatic engagements, defense cooperation, deepening economic collaboration, maritime security, emphasis on shared values between India and the US that are knitted through various policy documents, and complementarity between QUAD, AEP, FOIP and innumerable treaties and agreements with an express intent to counter China constitute the basis of Indo-US strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific.

THREATENING RISE OF CHINA

The major driver of Indo-US strategic convergence is the growing role of China in the Indo-Pacific and their attempt to counter it. China's ambition is to become the number one power in the region and beyond by building comprehensive national power. Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th National Congress of the



Communist Party of China (CPC) clearly stated that China's aim is to transform it into a "strong maritime country" for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and eventually become the number one power in the world (Xinhua 2017). China pursues four core strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific; exerting control over its near seas, defending and advancing Chinese sovereignty claims, promoting China centered regional economic integration and the Belt and Road Initiative.

China exerts control over the near seas through military modernization by enhancing the Peoples Liberation Army's (PLA) capacity to conduct regional military operations, including what China refers to as counter intervention operations. This refers to a chain of capabilities and missions aimed at preventing foreign, especially US military forces from intervening in a conflict in China's near seas. As part of expanding its sovereignty claims China has been actively asserting its territorial and jurisdictional rights over the Spratly, Paracel and Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in both the East China and South China Seas. China seeks to change the status quo in its favor in the East China and South China Seas, through the strategy of "salami slicing"² (Glaser 2014). The announcement of an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in 2013 has been to keep away the external powers from intervening in its expansionist strategies. According to the Indian Navy sources, the Chinese Navy is expanding rapidly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and at any given time there are about 7-8 vessels and 85 per cent of their defense exports are meant for the IOR (Peri 2020). Indian navy's presence and oil exploration in the South China Sea with Vietnam and joint military exercises with the US and other allies are objected to by China. Beijing's blunt statement that the "Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean" is indicative of China's realist schemes for the Indo-Pacific (Wang 2010: 97).

China's naval capability is powerful enough to curtail US influence in the region and could weaken US initiated FOIP. According to a survey conducted by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (CSIS), China has conducted 25 maritime survey mis-



sions in the Indo-Pacific between April 2019 and March 2020, compared to 27 by the US, Japan, India, Australia, France and the Philippines combined (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2020). Today China has the largest Coast Guard and a maritime Militia which is capable of intimidating rivals with sheer number and threatening postures (Jai Singh 2020). China's Military Strategy White Paper 2015 highlights maritime military struggle as an important aspect of Beijing's plan to develop a blue-water navy fleet, able to carry out operations for offshore protection (The State Council of Information Office 2015). China has already consolidated its presence in Africa through dual use ports meant for civilian and military purposes as in Djibouti and Tanzania. Chinese push towards the Indian Ocean with dual use ports, increasing military exercises with regional navies, the establishment of politico-economic relationships with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Maldives undermine India's interest in the region (Abraham 2018: 27-37). The military and economic aid to these countries have strengthened Chinese presence in the Indian subcontinent. China's increasing presence in South Asia is aimed at containing India's rise regionally and globally through what is called the "string of pearls" strategy³. The Chinese control of Pakistan's Gwadar port could eventually emerge as a military base facilitating interoperability between Chinese and Pakistani navies. Even in the midst of the world fighting the Covid-19, China flexed its military muscle against Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines and Taiwan in South China Sea and India in its terrestrial borders (Kondapalli 2020).

Economic dependence on China and promoting regional economic integration are integral to Beijing's strategy of persuading its neighbors of the benefits of China's rise and dissuading them from challenging Chinese interests. In the first quarter of 2020, ASEAN overtook the European Union to become the largest trading partner of China (Asian Briefing 2020). Towards this end China has schemes such as the Maritime Silk Road, the creation of free trade zones along China's periphery, the establishment



of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China funded infrastructure projects and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The Maritime Silk Road focuses on enlarging China's control over some of the world's most strategic waterways in the South China Sea and make China an important player in the Indian Ocean region.

China's expansionist agenda and aggressive postures challenge the US hegemony and Indian interests simultaneously and have transformed the Indo-US convergence into anti-China mode. The US sees China's rise and behavior as a source of acute instability and have repeatedly stressed the need for China to adhere to a rules-based order, specifically by observing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). In July 2016 India and the US supported the UNCLOS Arbitration Tribunal Award which declared China's Nine Dash Lane claims invalid (Singh 2016). The 2015 US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, the 2017 US National Security Strategy (The White House 2017) the US Department of Defense, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report-2019 categorically postulate China's revisionist agenda to mold a world opposed to US values and the use of military modernization and coercive economics measures for the realization of the same.

The US counters the Chinese naval power by military deployment and regular freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. A report by the National Institute of South China Sea Studies, a Chinese Think Tank, states that the US has enlisted 60 percent of its Navy ships, 55 per cent of its Army and two-thirds of its Marine Corps of the Indo-Pacific Command in the region (Xuanzun 2020). The Trump administration has conducted 22 "freedom of navigation" exercises till date compared to 4 by Obama in eight years (The Hindu 2020). The patrolling of the Indo-Pacific waters by three US Aircraft Carriers accompanied by other naval assortments even in the worst days of covid-19 pandemic is indicative of the intensive power struggle.



Indian strategic analysts Mohan Malik, C. Raja Mohan, T.P. Sreenivasan, Brahma Chellany consider China as India's number one threat and Indo-Pacific as the "rivalry arc" between the two. The India-US collaboration through QUAD, Act East Policy, common views on FOIP, partnership with allies, defense deals, joint military exercises, high level diplomatic exchanges and port calls are meant to counter China's unilateralism, militarization and discard for rule based order.

CONSTRAINTS IN CONVERGENCE

Indo-US convergence in the context of Indo-Pacific is beset with certain constraints that are visible at four levels. First, India and the United States have different geographic perceptions of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific and its strategic mapping. The US view of Indo-Pacific extends from the West coast of India in the Indian Ocean to the West coast of the US in the Pacific Ocean, whereas India, regards the "Indo" to indicate the whole of the Indian Ocean, stretching from South Africa to Australia (Singh 2019). The strategically important Western Indian Ocean does not figure in the US conception. This divergence in strategic mapping is significant because it signals divergent strategic priorities for the two countries. The US consistently has supported a bigger military role for India in the Pacific Ocean, but for India, the Indian Ocean is more important than the Pacific. If India is a central partner for the US in the Indo-Pacific, the regional strategy must take into account the aims and objectives of both parties. This incongruence is reflected in the opinion of India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar who stated at the 2019 Delhi Dialogue conference that one of the problems in building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific maritime region was the lack of consensus on what such a concept meant or even its geographic extent (The Hindu 2019). Because of this difference in strategic mapping the US navy's cooperation with the Indian navy is confined to the



Eastern half of the Indo-Pacific region whereas at the Western end, where India's vital interests are intertwined, maritime cooperation with the US is minimal (Wire 2017). Again the US accords least importance to India's concerns over Chinese Navy's India specific activities in the Indian Ocean (Observer Research Foundation 2018).

Second, the Indo-US partnership lacks the strategic depth of an alliance. When alliances are characterized by binding responses by parties to specific events, strategic partnerships are opportunistic in nature. India has a historically rooted aversion to alliances and military oriented security partnerships. India-US strategic partnership is characterized by joint military exercises, intelligence sharing to diplomatic consultations, and a whole range of treaties in myriad fields and high end defense deals on par with that of the United States' closest allies and partners. Despite these strong connectivity, it is contended that the US-India military partnership has not developed the "habits of cooperation" that the US typically enjoys with its closest partners (Ladwick, Mukherjee 2019) and the relationship has high dose of uncertainty about the US intentions in the region (Shankar 2017). The 2019 US decision to end the special trade status given to India since 1970 that allowed entry of tariff free goods to US market is a case in point. The fragility of the alliance is also visible in the functioning of the QUAD, FOIP and AEP. The QUAD has the problem of structural inability and divergence of opinions on the threat China poses to the members and the strategies to be adopted to deal with it. It remains unclear whether the US can allocate the resources needed to accomplish its objectives and coherently wed its strategic ambitions with the interests of other regional actors (Brattberg, Philippe 2019). The US response to China's coercive measures to enforce disputed sovereignty claims with countries in the South China Sea including to its allies have been limited to normative liberal preaching on freedom of navigation (Flournoy 2020). The FOIP lacks credibility to counter China's massive developmental projects through the Maritime Silk Road. The Act



East policy which is central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy is more of an economic and soft power endeavor than a security plan. The policy, so far, has not helped India to attain a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific (Jaishankar 2019). India's ambiguity to align completely with the QUAD, emphasis on economic and commercial relations with ASEAN, frequent vacillations in Indo-US relations over tariff hikes and H-IBVisa, skepticism to embrace market economy to the satisfaction of the US, aversion to bloc politics, big power ambitions, the policy of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy⁴, unwillingness for joint patrolling with the US Navy in South China Sea, wavering positions on the Malabar exercise and reluctance to align completely with the US in its rivalry with China are indicative of strategic deficit in the partnership. The implication is that Indo-US convergence in the Indo-Pacific lacks a comprehensive plan and machinery for the realization of the stated objectives.

Third, there are differences between India and the US over issues that are of key security concern to India. India's most important security threat is at the terrestrial borders with Pakistan and China. India and the US have not so far entered into any understanding to deal with this threat. Despite India's opposition, the US has continued with its military aid to Pakistan and considers Pakistan vital for US' foreign policy and national interests, reports the Congressional Research Service (Iqbal 2015). Pakistan has a history of using US supplied weapons against India in border conflicts and proxy wars. In the recent stand off between India and China in the border at Galwan valley in June 2020, the US response was muted and neutral.

Fourth, is India's strategic ambiguity to deal with China. India's relationship with China is complex for many reasons. China is India's most important neighbor with seemingly protracted border disputes with no signs of resolution in sight and at the same time one of its biggest trading partners. In economic strength, military capability and political might China is way ahead of India. India considers China a threat to its security and a



check on its global and regional influence and big power ambitions. Should India deal with China through means of confrontation or cooperation is the biggest dilemma. There are conflicting signals from official circles in India as visible in various policies. India does not see “Indo-Pacific” an entirely security-oriented scheme against China. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 it was categorically stated that India does not consider the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or grouping directed against any country. Both India and Chinese leaders have emphasized the need for cooperative relationships between the two for the realization of Asian century. On the one hand, India partners with the US and allies in the Indo-Pacific against China, and on the other hand, strives for a peaceful relationship with it. Rajagopalan calls it evasive balancing which is a combination of balancing and reassurance happening simultaneously in India’s relationship with China (Rajagopalan 2020). This ambiguity handicaps India to evolve a clear policy in the Indo-Pacific against China. These limitations restrict Indo-US strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

CONCLUSION

Indo-US convergence in the Indo-Pacific is based on a set of common views, interests and challenges. Though apparently liberal economic and political arguments constitute the basis of the partnership, in reality the rise of China on a realist prism constitutes the rationale of the strategic and security convergence between India and the US. Both India and the US are reluctant to state openly that containment of China, in realist terms, constitute the key objective of the partnership. India’s objective is to maintain its predominance in South Asia and consolidate its strategic primacy as an Indian Ocean state and extend it beyond the region. The objective of the US is to maintain and consolidate its hegemonic role in the Indo-Pacific. This is possible only by containing the rise of China. The US as the net security provider in



this region supports a key role for India in this endeavor. In reciprocity India supports a dominant role for the US as an extra regional power in the region. But India is skeptical to take on China directly. Though the US has supported a bigger role for India which is in agreement with India's big power ambitions, India is cautious of challenging China's core interests, especially in the South China Sea (Hall 2018: 65-81). This has to be read along with the gap in the relative capabilities and contradictions in the strategies adopted by the US and India in the Indo-Pacific.

Despite the deepening of bilateral relations, India is reticent and circumspect to openly align with the US especially in security related joint ventures. India's continued adherence to certain traditional tenets of its foreign policy such as strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and inclusive order is contrary to hardcore security alliances and bloc politics. India focuses more on the economic and soft power aspects of the relationship whereas the US stresses on strategic and security issues giving more importance to military cooperation and joint operations. The US has not done enough to reassure India of its reliability as a partner under all circumstances and in all terrains – both oceanic and terrestrial. That is why India has resisted the idea of joint-patrols in the South China Sea. This blocks the graduation of their collaboration into a truly strategic partnership, especially at the security front, against China.

The differences between India and the US in strategic mapping of Indo-Pacific, lack of strategic depth in the partnership, US' lackadaisical approach to India's priority security threats at its borders with China and Pakistan, conflicting priorities of Act East Policy and the QUAD, reluctance to admit publicly the underlying realist objective of containing China and India's ambiguity over how to deal with China render India-US collaboration in the Indo-Pacific strategically reticent and to a great extent ineffective. Therefore, a full-fledged strategic partnership between India and US with the underlying objective of containing China is unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future. India will not completely align with the US against China rather it would accommodate US



interests to the point of not provoking China directly. India will ambiguously balance between the US and China with the objective of promoting India's interest in the region. The objective of evolving a regional security mechanism in the Indo-Pacific to ensure peace, stability, progress and security is unlikely to be materialized on account of the inherent limitations and contradictions in the partnership. However, the act of convergence between India and the US will continue in the context of the geopolitics of the region characterized by the rise of China.

NOTES

¹ The QUAD has been a quadrilateral alliance of "maritime democracies" Australia, India, US and Japan put forth by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 with the primary objective of containing China through alliances and military build up with focus on a rule-based order. The US administration under Trump has reactivated it as QUAD 2.0 in 2017.

² "Salami slicing" (cabbage strategy) refers to the Chinese strategy of eventually dominating a landscape in which they cabbage-targeted areas for seizure slowly piece by piece. This strategy of territorial expansion has been followed in the South China Sea and the territorial borders with India.

³ "String of Pearls" is a Chinese plan to acquire several strategically located ports and naval bases in South Asian countries- Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar. India views it as a strategy to encircle it with China's naval capability with an objective to contain India in South Asia and consolidate China's primacy in the Asian region at large.

⁴ Strategic autonomy, a central principle of India's foreign policy, stands for independent foreign and security policies. The policy of multi-alignment emphasizes engagement in regional multilateral institutions and the use of strategic partnerships to boost economic development and national security without ideological or other constraints.

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