

The Indo-Pacific: A Turbulent and Evolving Region

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Introduction:

Geo-strategic constructs are created, redefined and abandoned to suit emerging security requirements of those who dominate world Order. The great powers usually play a major and decisive role in this process. This was evident during the Cold War when areas were carved out to suite military alliances and strategic influence by the US. Southeast Asia and Central Asia emerged as the US alliance partners in the so-called mission of containing communism in Asia. Why so called, because the US joined hands with one communist power China for more than two decades during the decades of 1970s and 1980s to isolate and contain the other communist power, the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR - Russia). It has also been described that the regions are “shaped by strategic, economic and cultural drivers”.¹ While “Indo-China” (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) conceptualised by the French historians was a product of the cultural drivers, “Asia-Pacific” and “East Asia” emerged out of Southeast Asia through economic forces and on strategic calculations. One wonders if that was why, India was kept out of the ‘Asia’ component of the “Asia-Pacific”. Now by including India, the Asia-Pacific has been redefined as the Indo-Pacific.

The term Indo-Pacific has a long and ambiguous history. Among early reference of the term was by a German geo-strategist Karl Haushofer during the 1920s. He had taken demographic and economic potential of the region comprising of China, India and Japan and expected that once free from colonial control, these countries will join hands with Germany in challenging dominance of the US, United Kingdom and their European allies.² In its contemporary narrative, the term is attributed to Japanese prime minister Abbe as he proposed it in his address to the Indian Parliament in New Delhi on 27 August 2007. He said: “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A “broader Asia” ... is now beginning to take on a different form”. Abbe's expression in its spirit was different from that of Karl Haushofer's. He was not aiming at the “broader Asia” as a challenge to the Western dominance and by underlining “freedom”, he was perhaps excluding China as a part of the new strategic construct. Abbe would have surely taken the US priorities in the region into account while making this proposal. The idea was soon endorsed by Australia and it has now gained currency in strategic pronouncements and discourse in the region and the world as a whole, save in China, Russia and North Korea.

¹ Amitav Acharya, “Turning the idea of the Indo-Pacific into reality”, *East Asia Forum*, 13 June 2024.

² “Indo-Pacific”, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Pacific>. Accessed on September 05, 2024.

The Indo-Pacific is one of the most significant regions of the world. It accounts for 44 percent of the world's surface area and 65 percent of its population. The total GDP of this region is 62 percent of the whole of the world. World's 46% of merchandised trade, 55% of the container trade and more than 70% of energy shipments transit through this region. There is no unanimity on the Indo-Pacific region's span. Broadly, it is assumed to be comprised between the eastern coast of Africa to the Western coast of Americas, and from Arctic to the Atlantic. However, different stakeholders define the region differently to suit their specific interests. The US Indo-Pacific Command, for instance, covers its operational area as lying between the US west coast to the western borders of India, and from the Antarctica to the North Pole. India in its narratives take Pakistan as lying outside the contours of the Indo-Pacific and Indonesia considers itself to be at the Centre of the Indo-Pacific region.

Strategic Conundrum:

The geo-strategic construct of Indo-Pacific has emerged from the strategic conundrum of the region. It has been triggered by China's phenomenal economic and military rise. China's GDP ranks second in the world at nearing 18 trillion US Dollars as against USD25 trillion of the US. There are speculations that it will overtake the US in the coming decade or so, but nothing can be said with certainty. Militarily, China has made notable advance on its strategy of Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD), aimed largely at the US military presence in the region. Its defence expenditure has grown tremendously reaching USD230 bn. in 2022 and reaching nearly USD280bn in 2026, according to Chinese official figures. China's capabilities in the nuclear, missile and cyber space fields have been remarkably enhanced. China has created new islands in South China Sea, militarised them and assumed an aggressive and expansionist stance towards ASEAN neighbours. China has encroached on the territory and territorial waters claims of its neighbours including Japan, India, Philippines and Vietnam. China has proclaimed that it wants integration of Taiwan with the mainland and will pursue this objective even by using force, if required. This has aroused concerns all over the region, also posing a challenge to the US primacy. A US Department of Défense Report in 2023 described China as "top pacing challenge". Talking to his Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) partners (India, Japan and Australia), during 2024 Summit in the US, President Biden is reported to have said: "China continues to behave aggressively, testing us all across the region, and it's true in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, South China, South Asia and the Taiwan Straits," He added, "At the same time, we believe intense competition requires intense diplomacy,".³ This "intense competition" and rivalry between China and the US, along with the gradual rise of the economic and military capabilities of many other countries, is the main

³ The Guardian (London), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/22/china-testing-us-across-the-region-biden-tells-leaders-at-quad-summit>. September 22, 2024.

source of strategic turbulence in the region. It has critical features of the bygone Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. China's assertion of its territorial claims against its other neighbours like Vietnam, Japan and India has also triggered other sub-regional rivalries. The competition and rivalry between India and China in South Asia is one of the prominent ones in this respect.

In pursuance of this rivalry, both China and the US are working out their grand strategies. China has taken initiatives on many fronts, while building its economic growth and military capabilities. Besides building its capabilities to counter the US dominance in the region, China has also initiated a multi-pronged approach to mark, expand and consolidate its strategic presence in the region, as also the world, through its economic, diplomatic and cultural heft. China is increasing its trade and investments in the region and engaging the countries in the region, diplomatically and culturally through various fora. This is being done under three initiatives, all launched in response to the US announcements of its 'pivot' and 'rebalancing' strategy in 2010. The Chinese initiatives are Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and (in 2025) Global Governance Initiative (GGI). Under the BRI, launched in 2013, China has been making huge investments in building infrastructure (rails, roads, power, ports and communication) to connect these countries with China physically and economically. The BRI is not only a project of connectivity and infra-structure, but is also aimed at expanding China's economic presence in the targeted countries and creating dependency relationships. These infra-structure projects also have a strong strategic dimension as China is seeking strategic access to ports, setting up surveillance facilities and reaching out to defence and military establishments of the countries concerned. China's investments in the developing countries reached USD 530 bn in 2023, that included USD 245bn in construction activity and USD 285bn in non-financial institutionalization. By 2025, it has been more than USD1tr, widening areas of investments to metals and mining, and technology and manufacturing. The implementation and outcomes of BRI have, however, precipitated many issues both for China as well as recipient countries. Under the GDI, launched in 2021, China has underlined support for poverty elevation, food security, climate change and green development, digital economy and connectivity. The GSI was launched by President Xi Jinping in April 2022. China denounces the "Cold War mentality of group and block confrontation" approach of the US which is driving the Indo-Pacific construct. China rejects this and advocates that global security is indivisible. The GCI was launched in March 2023, to declare China's support for diversity of civilizations and common human values through people to people relations.⁴ The GGI addresses unequal world order and stands for greater voice and representation for the global south. Under these initiatives, China

⁴ For some of the details of these Initiatives from Chinese perspective, see China's foreign ministry website. <http://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/gsi/index.shtml>. Also see, Dr. Teshu Singh, *China and the Indo-Pacific*, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, March 2023.

has created several fora to intensify its diplomatic engagements with the region, including at the sub-regional levels.

The US sought to disengage somewhat from West Asia where it was trapped in self-hurting local wars first in Iraq than in Afghanistan. The burden of these wars on the US economy was very heavy causing its decline as was evident in 2008. The US instead launched a new strategy of “Pivot to Asia”, which was subsequently redefined as “Rebalancing Asia”.⁵ The Obama administration released a press statement to define in details the thrust of its “Rebalancing” strategy, saying:

The United States seeks to preserve and enhance a stable and diversified security order in which countries pursue their national objectives peacefully and in accordance with international law and shared norms and principles, including: the peaceful resolution of disputes; an open economic order that promotes strong, sustainable, balanced and inclusive growth through a level, competitive playing field; and a liberal political order that promotes peace and human dignity, based on human rights and the rule of law. Our priority is to strengthen cooperation among our partners in the region, leveraging their significant and growing capabilities to build a network of like-minded states that sustains and strengthens a rules-based regional order and addresses regional and global challenges.⁶

The US approach has been reiterated by the subsequent US administrations, incorporating the Indo-Pacific construct.⁷ Under this strategy, the US redefined and reinforced its military alliances in the region, particularly with Japan, Australia, Taiwan and South Korea. With the countries averse to military alliances like India, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, the US has forged new strategic partnerships. It is fortifying its military presence in the region to balance and contain China militarily. The real challenge for the US is to protect its allies and partners from China's aggressive expansion. Co-opting India into this strategy of balancing China in the region, led to the emergence of Indo-Pacific construct. There have also been calls within the US administration of decoupling with China economically, specially in the areas of trade and technology. It is estimated that by regulating the US technology trade with China may reduce Chinese economy by about 9%. In order to meet the challenge of China's growing presence and influence in the developing countries, the US has also launched a Millennium Challenge

⁵ For a brief discussion of the US “Pivot Asia”, see: Introduction” Chapter in S.D. Muni and Vivek Chadha (Ed.), Asian Strategic Review 2014: US Pivot and Asian Security, Institute of Defense and Strategic Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, Pentagon Press 2014. Pp. 3-12.

⁶ The full text of the Press Release issued by the White House on November 16, 2015, is available at < <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>>.

⁷ Several writings have appeared on the US-China competing strategies in the Indo-Pacific. For a Chinese perspective on this competition, see Cheng Enfu and Li Jing, “Changes in the US Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and China’s Countermeasures”, *Monthly Review*, July 01, 2024.

Corporation to fund and support infrastructure and economic development in the developing countries of Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions.

Elements of anxiety and uncertainty about the US commitment to Indo-Pacific construct have cropped up during President Trump's second term. This has resulted from two consecutive events, President Trump's visit to China in May 2026 and the renaming of the Indo-Pacific Command of the US as Pacific Command in June 2026. During his China visit, he softened on trade issues and moderated US stand on the defence of Taiwan, in response to President Xi Jinping's assertive stance. The countries of the Indo-Pacific region fear that if such softening on the part of the US persists vis-à-vis China, the prospects of G-2 (China and the US) dominating the world order may emerge which will establish Chinese hegemony in the whole of Asia.

Some of President Trump's foreign policy moves have been unpredictable, causing considerable turbulence the world order, both on its economic and military dimensions. A careful scrutiny of the two events would however, suggest that Trump's visit to China was undertaken under the US fatigue in its war on Iran. One of the objectives of this visit was to persuade China from extending military support to Iran, and help in the normalisation of oil supplies through the Gulf of Hormuz. This has not, and may not result ever in surrendering huge US economic and strategic stakes in the region to the Chinese dominance. The renaming of the Indo-Pacific Command is a reversal of President Trump's 1st term decision in 2018 to rename its long standing Pacific Command established in 1947, while launching the Cold War. While renaming the command, its area of operation has not been curtailed which ranges from the western coast of the US to the western boundaries on India. This is the area that comprises as the Indo-Pacific region in the US perspective. The renaming seems to be the US reaction to hesitant response on the part of countries like India and Japan to forge a military front against China and expectedly share the US security burden in the region. The gradual moderation of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) initiated in 2017, among the US, Japan, Australia and India, for security and stability in the Indo-Pacific was one of the early triggers. The US disappointment with Quad perhaps led to the establishment of Australia - United Kingdom - US (AUKUS) in October 2021. Its purpose was to revamp the western military presence in the context of the Indo-Pacific security.

It is therefore, possible for the US to redefine its role in the Indo-Pacific region in view of its evolving economic and military compulsions. But that may not logically dissolve its stakes in the region in the long run and lead it to retreat completely, leaving the field open for China. President Trump's own several statements and also those of his senior associates, that reassure US strategic commitments to Southeast Asia, India and the region, clearly underline this resolve. Even when the US role is redefined, it does not invalidate the strategic connect of the Indian and the Pacific oceans for the countries of the region. They will innovate new ways and acquire new capabilities to

augment their search for a multipolar Asia which is not dominated by any single hegemon. This spirit is evident in the recent visits and exchange of views among India, Japan, Indonesia and Australia on Indo-Pacific issues.

The US- China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific poses a dilemma to almost all the countries of the region. Most of them have shown impressive performances of their economies and displayed enhanced self-confidence in pursuing their varied interests. On the one hand they do not want Chinese strategic dominance in the region and on the other they cannot ignore their trade dependence and lucrative economic investment incentives for infrastructure and economic development. Almost all the countries of the region, with the exception of India and Bhutan, have joined the BRI and entered into investment deals with China. They have also joined other Chinese initiatives and participate in various fora of diplomatic interaction. However, all of them also find it a challenging task to balance their economic interests with China, and their strategic concerns regarding China's assertion, expansion and aggression. China's aggressive military posture towards some of its neighbours in South China Sea, Taiwan strait and the Himalayas have pushed them in closer strategic embrace with the US in search of their security. India and Vietnam may be mentioned as examples in this respect. Even the US allies like Japan and Philippines have deepened and strengthened their military alliance with the US in the face of militarily aggressive stance and territorial claims by China. They do not find any semblance between China's rhetorical claims for Asian solidarity with the ground reality of China's behaviour. If China really wants to pursue the cause of Asian solidarity, it must resolve its differences with its Asian neighbours peacefully. None of these countries are prepared to face a direct military conflict with China in view of their military imbalance with China and the unpredictable consequences of such a conflict for themselves and the region as a whole. There are also concerns among smaller Indo-Pacific countries about debt trap and potential strategic imperatives of China's investments under BRI. The terms of the Chinese funded projects also seek to pressure the recipient countries towards a dependency relationship through the integration of their economies with China. Most of the BRI terms are one sided, dictated by China.

The strategic dynamics of the region also gets vitiated by the domestic political turbulence and regime changes in the region. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Thailand are some of the important recent examples of such changes. Besides the role of internal factors, these changes are also induced and impacted by the regional major players in order to keep the regional balance in their favour.

Variety of Perspectives:

There is a broad consensus amongst all the major players in the region, except China and Russia, on the characteristics of the Indo-Pacific. The terms

used to denote this consensus are free and open, peaceful and prosperous, inclusive and transparent, rule based order, and respect for sovereignty. These terms have evolved and articulated in various meetings and official documents related to mutual relations among these players. There is a possibility of more additions to these characteristics. For instance, the QUAD leaders have started emphasizing the democratic aspect, obviously intended to exclude China. As already noted, China and Russia do not accept the Indo-Pacific construct and view it as a part of the US moves to contain China and perpetuate its own hegemony in the region. It reflects, in their perception, the mentality of military blocks and confrontation that marked the Cold War. China's reservations on the Indo-Pacific construct also seem to emanate from the fact that it includes India in a significant way into the region's strategic dynamics. India is the only viable, potential competitor and rival to China within the region as China calls the US as an "outsider" and wants to fight its dominance. India is also a powerful anchor in the Indian Ocean with strong naval capabilities and a recognised nuclear weapon power state. It may be useful to keep in mind that China opposed India's proposal to join ASEAN+3 (Japan, Korea and China) arrangement during the early 1990s. It also had reservations on India joining the East Asia Summit. China's strong reservations on India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and United Nations Security Council are well known. Looking at the Indo-Pacific construct objectively, it is not devoid of the traditional US approach of 'balance of power' in managing its international relations. It was clearly evident in Europe during the second world war when it balanced one European power against others, it has been practiced by the US in dealing with various sub-regions in Asia and Latin America and now its thrust seems to have been deployed in the Asia-Pacific.

There is unanimity among the major Indo-Pacific players that ASEAN is central to their approach in the region. ASEAN clearly constitutes the core of the region geographically, but its centrality in strategically pursuing the vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' may be debatable on two counts. One is that ASEAN way is mainly through peaceful, negotiated resolution of disputes and conflicts. The Indo-Pacific as it is evolving, has a strong component of military deterrence. ASEAN does emphasise on maritime security and has forums like the ARF and ASEAN Defence Ministers (+8 of its dialogue partners, that includes China) meetings, but its members are not prepared for collective military solutions. Secondly, internal cohesion within ASEAN is gradually eroding. There is no unanimity within ASEAN on issues like South China Sea disputes and turbulence within Myanmar. The statement of a former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is illustrative in this regard. On March 13, 2018, in the course of a lecture, he said:

One area where ASEAN countries do not have a unified stance and for fundamental reasons, is our strategic outlook. A clear instance of the impact of this... is South China Sea dispute, or issue. Not all ASEAN members are claimant states. Even among the four claimant states –

Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines – there are different concerns and attitudes and nuances...

Looking ahead, ASEAN must continue working hard to remain effective and central player in the region... We also have to adjust to a strategic balance which is shifting both globally and in the region. New powers are growing in strength and influence, especially China and India.

Individual ASEAN countries must adapt to the new and changing landscape...

At the same time, the ASEAN grouping has to get used to new internal dynamics, as each member feels the influence of the different powers to different degrees. We must accept the reality of these tidal pulls without allowing them to lead to fault lines forming within...⁸

Despite these internal issues affecting the ASEAN, its centrality in the Indo-Pacific is continuously reiterated by all the key players in the region, perhaps to ensure that no other country, like China, or grouping, steps in the place of ASEAN.

Within the broader Indo-Pacific consensus, all the major players have their nuanced and specific thrusts in looking at the region. The US remains as the principal driver of the region's strategic dynamics. A close reading of the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy document formally issued by the White House in February 2022 and various other subsequent official statements and documents related to the Indo-Pacific, there is a clear emphasis on the security dimension that includes the use of military means. This is because the US has larger part of its military based in this region, which secures more than three million US jobs and gets about USD 900 bn of investments. Such a region cannot be allowed to go under any regional or other power's hegemony. The US identifies China as the main challenge in the region and claims to contain it thus: "Our aim is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it (China) operates, building balance in the world that is maximally favourable to the United States, our allies and partners and the interests and values we share".⁹ Accordingly, the security thrust takes the economic and developmental aspects into cognisance. It is an acknowledgement of the region's economic imperatives that the US is engaging itself with China on trade, investments and technology issues.

Other US allies and partners, like Japan, Australia and Europe, are not so explicit and direct in pinning down China as the main challenge, though China's expansion, buildup and assertion remains their main concern. Generally, they have avoided naming China in their declared and formal Indo-Pacific discourse. They lay greater emphasis on peace, freedom and prosperity and underline the inclusive nature of the region, which at least

⁸ For the text of this speech, see, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, <https://www1.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/03/press20180314>.

⁹ See the text of the White House Document, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

formally, does not exclude China. Japan and ASEAN which have extensive trade and investment relations with China have continued to expand them. Both Japan and ASEAN also face China's direct territorial and maritime aggression and have therefore avoided provoking China further by naming and blaming it and taking a military stance against China.¹⁰

India is also similarly placed. Initially, India was hesitant in endorsing the Indo-Pacific construct when proposed by Japan in 2007. There was a lurking suspicion that in this new move, Japan and the US may drag India into their conflicts against China. This indicated a lack of historical perspective in India's policy making. Indian cultural and civilizational presence in the region is centuries old. The British Indian empire added economic and strategic dimension to this presence. Indian historians like Kalidas Nag wrote *India and the Pacific World* as early as in 1941 and in an essay on "Indian Internationalism" he underlined that the Indo-Pacific space was a significant part of its historical; and cultural activities. Three years before India's independence in 1944, its first prime minister had written in his *Discovery of India* (published in 1946) that "The Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic in the future as a nerve centre of the world. Though not directly a Pacific state, India will inevitably exercise an important influence there". India's naval strategists in defining *India's Maritime Doctrine* since 2004 had clearly and repeatedly expressed a sense of the Indo-Pacific. An Indian naval strategic analyst Gurpreet Singh Khurana had used the term Indo-Pacific months before Abbe proposed it.

India has been endorsing the concept of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' in many of its international engagements. Its basic parameters were officially outlined for the first time by prime minister Modi at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore on June 01, 2018. Six important aspects were listed as : 'open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region', the centrality of Southeast Asia, common rule based order through dialogue, equal access under international law to the common places on the sea and in the air, no protectionism, connectivity initiatives with respect to 'the sovereignty and territorial integrity'. Underlining India's commitment to these parameters, Modi added:

We will promote democratic and rule based international order, in which all nations, small and large, thrive as equal and sovereign. We will work with others to keep our seas, space and airways free and open; our nations secure from terrorism; and our cyber spaces free from disruption and conflict. We will keep our economy open and our engagement transparent. We will share our resources, markets and prosperity with our friends and partners.¹¹

¹⁰ Key features of the Indo-Pacific strategies of these countries have been briefly discussed by Dr. Pankaj Vashisht, in "Indo-Pacific Strategies: What Do They Entail for India?", *JOURNAL OF INDO-PACIFIC AFFAIRS*, March-April 2023, pp. 110-119.

¹¹ Refer to Ministry of External Affairs, India, website, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

References to Inclusiveness, freedom of access to sea and air spaces and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity were made keeping the Chinese challenge in mind.

Notwithstanding the nuances and variations in the perspectives of the major players in the Indo-Pacific, the broad consensus on China's assertive and aggressive stance remains strong. Even without naming China and avoiding direct reference to military means, defence and security narrative runs high in this consensus. These major players have stepped up their mutual military activities, mutual defence cooperation and a variety of exercises to strengthen deterrence against any unexpected threatening move.

Forms of Engagement:

The Indo-Pacific countries interact with each other in various forms of engagements. The traditional forms of bilateral and more inclusive multilateral regional groupings have evolved to reinforced themselves and the new form of minilaterals has emerged to cope with the complex strategic dynamics of the regions and varying perspectives among its major players. Bilaterally, the US has reinforced and redefined its military alliances and forged strategic partnerships with non-military allies like India and Vietnam as noted earlier. The strategic partnerships forged by the US and other countries bilaterally do not follow a set pattern. Many of them have been qualified and upgraded as "special" and "comprehensive" to cater to specific interests. Among the broader, inclusive groupings, ASEAN, IORA and BRICS stand out as significant. They are redefining their parameters to retain their relevance and credibility in the region.

Minilateral engagement comprises of three four or even five countries. Notionally, this form of engagement may not be called a product of the Indo-Pacific dynamics as there are examples of minilaterals initiated much earlier. As early as in April, 1971, the United Kingdom initiated a Five Power commonwealth Defence Arrangements (FPDA) that included the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. Its objective was to have mutual consultations and devise means to respond if there was any threat or military attack on any of these countries. This was not an alliance but a forum of mutual consultations, with an outcome that was not pre-determined. Another minilateral of Australia, Japan and the US dates back to 2002. This was a grouping by the US with two of its traditional military allies for the purpose of effective coordination on specific strategic and security issues affecting them. In contrast to the grouping of the allies, the non-allies Russia, India and China (RIC) got together in a meeting in September 2002 for mutual consultations on the regional and international developments. The initiative had been taken by Russia and the group was initially labelled, in the western media, on the name of the Russian foreign minister as "Primakov triangle".

The RIC has since then been meeting mostly at the level of foreign ministers regularly every year. Its 18th meeting was held in 2024.

Therefore, the idea of minilaterals is old enough, however, its surge in the context of the Indo-Pacific is significant. Over the last decade and a half, the Indo-Pacific region has witnessed the forging of more than ten minilaterals. Most of them are packed around the US with its allies partners like Australia, Japan, South Korea, Israel and Philippines or strategic partners like India and the United Arab Emirates (India, Israel, US and United Arab Emirates - I2U2). Two of the most important minilaterals from the US strategic perspective are QUAD, and the Australia, United Kingdom, the US (AUKUS) group. There are minilaterals where the US is not present like Australia-France and India; Australia-India-Japan; and India-Australia-Indonesia, but here also, one or more of the US allies are involved. The minilaterals are seen by strategic analysts as the US led arrangements of the Indo-Pacific strategic restructuring. The exception to this would be the meetings of RIC. These analysts also see them as resulting from the erosion and inadequacies of the broader inclusive regional groupings.¹² This may be debatable because the larger groupings have endured and redefined themselves and some of the minilaterals like QUAD may become larger groups, not only because its agenda is being broadened, but also as many other regional countries are seeking participation in its deliberations. Minilaterals are not blocks or alliances. There are no binding commitments among their members. They are strictly specific issues and interest based arrangements for mutual consultations where decisions made may or may not be implemented. Some of them, being among the US traditional allies, are well structured and mutually binding like the AUKUS. As such they represent a soft and suave structure of security burden sharing in the region for the US. Others provide opportunities for intensive and focussed discussions. On the whole, they are responses to the evolving strategic flux in the region where traditional forms of engagements have not been found adequate.

QUAD has been one of the most discussed minilateral of the region. It is also the one which has evolved with the time and been institutionalised. The idea emanated from the naval co-ordinated Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HARD) response of the US, Indian, Australian and Japanese navies to the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Inspired by this response, the Japanese Prime Minister Abe proposed in 2007, to institutionalise it. After initial hesitation of both Australia and the US, Japan revived the idea in 2017 and the first meeting of these four foreign ministers was held on the side lines of the UN general Assembly meeting in 2019. The US hosted its first summit level

¹² See for instance, Sarah Teo, "The Rise and endurance of minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific", Lowy Institute, Australia, May 01, 2024. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rise-endurance-minilaterals-indo-pacific>. Also C. Raja Mohan, "The Nimble, New Minilaterals", *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/11/minilateral-alliances-geopolitics-quad-aukus-i2u2-coalitions-multilateralism-india-japan-us-china/>.

meeting in September 2021 and the idea was formally launched in 2022.¹³ The Quad started as a security dialogue but soon it has taken a much broader agenda of overall human security that includes, besides maritime and regional security, sustainable development, climate change, health security counter terrorism, disaster relief, role of women, girls and media in development etc.¹⁴ India is sometimes blamed to have led the efforts for diluting the security thrust and broadening the agenda but this is not the case. Soon after establishing the security dialogue, the member countries seem to have realised that the challenge posed by China was not only a military challenge. China had also started criticising Quad moves as those leading to the formation of an Asian or an “Indo-Pacific North Atlantic Treaty organisation” (Asian NATO). India, Japan and even Australia, did not want to be seen as preparing for direct military confrontation with China. Quad will remain as an evolving institution with a broader agenda depending on the changing strategic dynamics of the region. In some sections of the US strategic community, there was disappointment with broadening of the agenda. In order to reinforce security response to the region, the US took another unilateral initiative to establish AUKUS. There are two Pillars, one of Nuclear, and the other of conventional forces (army, navy and air force capabilities of the three members) under the AUKUS. Under the second pillar, the AUKUS countries are also coordinating their ‘defence trade and industrial base collaboration’.¹⁵

Hot Spots:

Strategic flux in the Indo-Pacific has sharpened its hot spots. Some of these hot spots like North and South Korea and Taiwan are the traditional ones, but a number of others have emerged in the context of the Indo-Pacific construct. The new ones are in South China Sea, and the Himalayas. The South China Sea hot spots have resulted from China's Nine Dash line and its artificial islands created by reclaiming the sea and developing them as military and logistic bases.¹⁶ There are seven of such islands, including Meiji (Mischief Reef), Yoonsuh (Fiery Cross Reef) and Zhubei (Subi Reef). The Nine Dash Line violates territorial waters and Extended Economic Zone claims of four ASEAN countries, namely Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Philippines. The artificial Islands have brought China into serious conflict with Philippines and provoked the strategy of the Freedom Of Navigation Operations (FONOP), raising tensions in the area. The tensions have been built up in the Korean

¹³ For some details of this evolution see, Dominique Fraser, “The Quad: A backgrounder”, Asia Society Policy Institute, May 16, 2023. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/quad-backgrounder>.

¹⁴ See for instance the latest Joint Statement of the Quad foreign ministers held in July 2024, issued by India's Ministry of External Affairs.. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38044/Quad+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+Joint+Statement>.

¹⁵ See AUKUS Defence Ministers Meeting Communiqué, issued by the US Department of Defense on September 26, 2024.

¹⁶ Gabriel Honrada, “China's new island-building tech sure to churn South China Sea”, *South China Morning Post*, May 24, 2024. <https://asiatimes.com/2024/05/chinas-new-island-building-tech-sure-to-churn-south-china-sea/#:~:text=SCMP%20notes%20that%20China's%20three,US%20bases%20in%20the%20Philippines>.

peninsula by North Korea's nuclear and missile development claims, suspected to be encouraged by China's help and support. The US President Trump tried during 2019-2022, to bring the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un on board for peace talks with its southern neighbour but in vain. In the Himalayas, China's encroachments in the Galwan Valley and other areas in Ladakh, and on the Bhutan border at Doklam, since 2017, led to rising of tensions and violent clashes with India, for the first time in the past more than 30 years. In relation to Taiwan, China is constantly flexing its military muscle declaring that it was preparing to unify Taiwan with the mainland even by force, if need be.

No one wants a war in the region but with so many hot spots, and some of them being on the edge, accidental and unintended direct conflict can be triggered and escalate into a major regional confrontation. Accordingly, everyone is preparing for the unintended war, ballooning the region's arms buildup. From their previous year's defence expenditure, the defence allocations for 2023 were higher in China by 6%, in the US by 2.3%, in Japan by 11% and in India by 4.2 %. Arms trade and defence production has increased significantly in the region. The US and China are the leading spenders on defence and the expansion in the Chinese military presence is phenomenal. There is a great deal of naval buildup in the region all around. New bases, surveillance facilities and port accesses are being created by all of them, wherever possible.

Two other persisting wars, one, between Russia and Ukraine for the past more than two years, with raising of the nuclear alarm by Russia, and the other, between Palestine and Israel for more than one year, with their further escalation and spread into a full scale war between the US and Israel on the one side and Iran on the other in West Asia, create a volatile context for the Indo-Pacific. These wars have disrupted supply chains, precipitated global energy crisis and created a serious sense of insecurity, reinforcing concerns for stability and peace in Indo-Pacific as well. One hopes that China draws positive lessons from these wars to moderate its aggressive stance towards neighbours. Neither Russia nor Israel, the bigger military powers, have been able to silence their poorer and smaller neighbours. One hopes that China's stated acceptance of evolving a code of conduct with the ASEAN in the South China Sea, and restore peace and stability in the Himalayas with India, of late, are prompted by the realisation that the great powers have entered an era of unwinnable wars and non-military, negotiated resolution of disputes and conflicts.

Summing Up:

The Indo-Pacific is economically one of the most dynamic and strategically volatile region of the world. Its strategic dynamics has been shaped by its two core rivalries, between China and the US and China and India. Depending on the pace and intensity of these rivalries, the region will continue to evolve.

Remote possibility of China or the US moderating on their competition depending on the nature of their economies and thinking of their leadership, such as the Trump factor in the US, exists. But if that does not happen, possibility of a direct conflict between them, involving not only the whole region but even the world cannot be ruled out.
