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U.S. CHANGING POLICY PRIORITIES IN ASIA: FROM “ASIA-PACIFIC” TO “INDO-PACIFIC”

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Any discussion on Asia Pacific or Indo-Pacific must begin by acknowledging that not only is it difficult to geographically delimit the regions' boundaries, but the mosaic of divergent cultures and shifting power balances makes it difficult to come up with any concrete definition.¹ Some scholars describe it as the 'arc of countries' resting on Japan and extending southwards to include the newly industrialising countries (NIC's) while others use it to include the whole relationship of the Asian Pacific region to the United States.² This issue brief is an attempt to explore how the construction of these terms itself is an ingrained political act which reflected the national priorities of European countries, and later the United States.

Historically speaking, Pacific as it was “invented” was conceptualised in terms of a Euro-American vision, which expressed the “demands of a nascent capitalist order” rather than expressing intrinsic needs of the region.³ The extensive European involvement in the region dates back to the fifteenth century, subsequently imperial control was established, which ultimately paved the way for American power consolidation. Asian powers, especially Japan, came to hold a prominent position in this construct only after they gained significant economic power and took part in actively shaping the region.

The U.S. in Asia Pacific

Cold War Years

Imperial Japan's unconditional surrender on 14th August 1945 left uncertain the reality of the Asia Pacific region, which in turn placed the U.S. in an enviable position to decisively influence the fate of the region as it emerged a decisive victor in the Second World War.

Although the Pacific War was overwhelmingly an 'American War', towards the end of the War, the Soviet Union had greatly strengthened its role:⁴ but overall it was the U.S. which had the final say when it came to the terms for Japan's unconditional surrender.

The Second World War paved the way for a bipolar world order and in the ensuing Cold War between USA and USSR, Asia emerged as a theatre for proxy warfare. Despite Soviet Union having a greater advantage in terms of geographical and cultural proximity to Asia, American policies were more successful in the region.⁵ Through a combination of effectively using their naval and air power bases, evolving an alliance system and through economic and cultural influence,⁶ America was able to consolidate its position in the region.

The Treaty of Friendship with Japan, or more popularly known as the San Francisco Treaty which officially marked the end of hostilities with signatories was hailed as being 'generous' to Japan as it did not exact heavy financial reparations from Japan, nor did it impose any post treaty supervision over Japan.⁷ However a balanced examination of the treaty processes and outcomes, decisively reveals that the treaty was framed in a manner that largely reflected American interests. Prof. Akira Iriye rightly labelled it "San Francisco system" which included "the rearmament of Japan, continued presence of American forces in Japan....here was a program for turning Japan...to a military ally frankly aimed at responding to the rising power of the Soviet Union and China in the Asia-Pacific region."⁸ The Soviets obviously did not agree with the treaty which so obviously benefited the U.S. and therefore chose not to sign it but nevertheless the American-British treaty came to be legitimised with forty eight nations signing the treaty in San Francisco on 8th September 1951.

In East Asia and the Pacific, the US formed separate bilateral or trilateral security alliances to confront communism such as the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad pact, later the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO); both collapsed during the 1970's. Simultaneously, USA continued diplomacy at the bilateral level and signed a mutual defence treaty with Philippines, and a tripartite security treaty with Australia and New Zealand on 1st September 1951 and strengthened security cooperation with Japan through a security treaty on 8th September 1951.

As the Cold war dynamics played out, the bipolar competition soon developed into a tripolar USA-USSR-China competition in Asia as the Sino-Soviet split became more pronounced. Increasingly, China came to occupy an important place in American strategic thinking, especially after it became a nuclear power in 1964. This followed a series of Sino-U.S. rapprochement moves and normalisation of relations. This closeness did not mean an end to competition but was driven

by compulsions arising from developments such as the U.S.'s own failure in Vietnam. Following the Vietnam War, President Nixon announced what came to be known as the Nixon Doctrine, wherein America started looking inward while urging its regional allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defence. In the post war period, this was possibly the first instance of America taking a step back from its regional commitments to focus more on its own domestic issues.

Post-Cold War Years

The dissolution of Soviet Union provided the immediate rationale for a unipolar world with the U.S at the helm of international affairs. Having seemingly achieved the "end of history" however removed the immediate rationale for the existing American alliance in Asia originally formulated to contain the spread of communism. Subsequently the reduced security tensions among the major actors in the region gave rise to what was touted as the "East Asian peace" thereby threatening the rationale for the security arrangements of the US from the Cold War bipolar days.

Although the U.S.'s economic interest in the region remained unaffected – which was to gain access to the large Asian markets – but due to serious federal budget deficit and trade deficit with Japan and China, it was pushed to reduce force militarily in the region, albeit not remove them completely.

The 9/11 terror attacks were a huge turning point for American grand strategy which came with prioritising Middle East at the expense of relative neglect towards Asia. As the U.S. voluntarily took on the mantle of "war against terrorism" it not only prolonged the costly military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq but relocated military, troops, planes, ships and intelligence assets across Asia to hotspots in Iraq and Afghanistan. This coincided with major geopolitical shifts happening in Asia where Japan and North Korea were militarily modernising, the 'East Asian tigers' registered significant economic growth

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American Strategies in Post-Cold War Period

Beijing has slowly, but steadily been expanding its presence in the region, through economic penetration into the countries and Chinese led infrastructure initiatives. American response to this has been a renewed commitment to the region by providing reassurance to old allies and making new partners.

a) Pivot to Asia

The vital importance of the region was officially recognised in President Obama's Pivot (or Rebalance) to Asia policy, which reinforced America's credentials as a Pacific power. President Obama announced that as the first step towards the rebalance the U.S. would deploy 2,500 U.S. Marines to Darwin and allocate 60 percent of its Navy fleet to Asia Pacific.⁹ This strategic reorientation was to be implemented through strengthening bilateral ties with allies and building new ones in Asia and getting into a 'constructive relationship' with China. At the multilateral level it involved cooperation with Asian institutions such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the promotion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The symbolic value of a rebalance is crucial, for it implies a revival of past diplomatic, economic ties following a period of relative inattention towards the region.

b) Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Under the Trump administration, Washington significantly revamped its efforts to design the

Indo-Pacific region and propagated the vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The Trump administration has no qualms about confronting China openly, unlike previous administrations.¹⁰ The White House, in its first National Security Strategy report under Trump's presidency, in 2017,

declared, "We welcome India's emergence as a leading global power...seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India."¹¹ The renaming of the U.S. Pacific Command to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command as well as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act in December 2018 undoubtedly showcases Washington's intentions for more serious engagement with India. In theory, while Trump's initiatives do convey American resolve towards Asia, the "token interest" and

"occasional transnationalism" of the U.S. towards its Asian partners has already had repercussions for U.S. alliance management in Asia.¹² Nevertheless, Trump's resolve towards an enduring presence in Asia is a positive sign towards its commitment to a 'rules based order' in the region.

c) Quadrilateral Security Initiative

In tune with Washington's key objective to contest with Beijing in the region, the Trump administration has gravitated towards QUAD the roots of which can be traced back to 2007, and was later formalised by Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in 2012. The first QUAD 2.0 meeting was

held in 2017 following which the U.S. released a statement that it rests on a 'foundation of shared democratic values and principles' and that all sides pledged to 'continue discussions to further strengthen the rules-based order' in the region.¹³ It is evident that the U.S. has emphasised the 'democratic nature' of the grouping to signal an assertive, authoritarian China of the unity

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between “like minded” partners, but even beyond its diplomatic scope the military dimensions of QUAD highlights U.S. commitment on the security front to the region.

Assessment

The United States clearly has a long history of engagement with the region, and has even withstood many challenges, whether it was the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour or failed attempts in Vietnam. This has led to adaptation and re-adaptation of foreign policy to suit the country’s own national priorities as well as the international and regional environment of the time. Henry Kissinger’s proclamation “America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests” applies most aptly in this region, where its friends and enemies have evolved to suit those interests.

Under the bipolar system, the U.S. policy largely relied on providing a nuclear umbrella and economic assistance to countries in the region in return for overseas bases, which relied heavily on the politically weak position of most countries in the region. Subsequently changed balance of power equations, among other factors, were responsible for its declining position in the region. Nevertheless, a timely recognition of the need to reassert itself in Asia led to a renewed focus on the region, as is evident from the increase in spending on America’s Asia strategy, including investment and military build-up and willingness to support allies in conflict areas such as the South China Sea.¹⁴ Apart from this, the U.S. has been working with other regional governments jointly, such as with Japan, India and Australia to mend connectivity gaps and pursue infrastructure building in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ This, however, is not as smooth as it seems, and in no way guarantees a secure place for America in the region, for the U.S. must understand that the “with us or without us” approach of its ‘war on terror’ mentality will not work in the region. In its current form, as reflected in the various speeches and documents of the U.S. administration, its engagement in the region seems to revolve around the theme of containing the expansion of Chinese power rather than development of the region itself.¹⁶ However, assuming that all countries in the region, irrespective of their fraught relations with China,

comply with this vision is a dangerous gamble for the U.S. India’s own Security and Growth For All in the Region (SAGAR) vision of Indo-Pacific despite converging over core the U.S. principles such as freedom of navigation, rule of law, freedom from coercion prioritises inclusivity and ASEAN centrality compared to the U.S. rules based narrative. Given India’s long history of wariness with alignments, it is unlikely that India will blindly comply with the American calls to join it against China.

It is evident that in the post-Cold War period American policies have predominantly invested in building security architecture to meet Chinese aggression, but the U.S. administration must realise that pouring ‘defence dollars’ without building an economic alternative to China in the region will not be enough to resuscitate its presence.¹⁷ Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) came with China spearheading a regional economic order for the region with negotiations for Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The United States no longer plays a hegemonic role in the region and is now turning to its allies to contain China through partnerships, yet there are signs of divisions among its partners evident from contentious negotiations over burden sharing. The Trump administration itself seems to be divided over whether it wants its allies to take a more independent approach to their own defence as he focuses on ‘America First’ or invest more to support in the face of Chinese might. Therefore, the U.S. must tread carefully in this delicate region, build a regional policy which emphasises potential areas of mutual cooperation to focus on win-win, rather than a zero-sum relationship.

Notes

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