

FROM COOPERATION TO RISK REDUCTION: MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF US-CHINA STRATEGIC COMPETITION

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Since the normalisation of relations between the United States and China until 1989, both states benefited from close military cooperation as it was directed against a common adversary—the former Soviet Union. However, the end of the Cold War transformed the dynamics of bilateral relations and with the intensification of strategic competition, the nature of military engagement has also changed as both sides now focus more on risk reduction and less on cooperation. Bilateral exercises, since 2017, have been restricted only to US-China Disaster Management Exchange which focuses on humanitarian assistance and disaster management. Since 2010 until January 2021, military-to-military contacts peaked at 41 in 2014, and declined under the Trump administration where it did not exceed 20 per year.¹

With China and America increasing their forces and operating in proximity of each other—the risk of a 21st-century Cuban Missile

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1. “U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relations”, Congressional Research Service, January 4, 2021, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11712/2>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

Crisis is at an all-time high. The consequences of China's rise are being felt most acutely in the Indo-Pacific region, as Beijing is steadily expanding claims in the South and East China Seas. Although the term Indo-Pacific has only recently entered diplomatic lexicon, it has gained global recognition and is widely viewed as the "epicentre" of US-China global competition.² Today, the greatest anxieties emerge from the uncertainties arising from how China will translate its technological advancements into precise capabilities and whether it will deploy them in offensive action. To address this, Washington must prepare for the worst, while also updating bilateral risk reduction and crisis management mechanisms. It is against this backdrop that the paper traces the evolution of US-China military relations and highlights the major reasons for the intensification of bilateral military competition in the 21st century. It identifies the Indo-Pacific as the 'hotspot' of this military competition and identifies the way ahead for India to navigate this competition.

EVOLUTION OF US-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS

Historically, bilateral military relations have largely been dictated by larger, all-encompassing political forces—determined by both domestic and international factors—governing bilateral relations. The 'on again, off again'³ pattern in US-China military relations has similarly followed the constantly fluctuating trajectory of political relations. One of the long-standing sources of US-China tensions has been over security issues, including—but not limited to—Taiwan's status, US alliances in Asia, nuclear and missile non-proliferation, maritime territorial disputes, and episodic regional security issues. Most of these issues stem from enduring differences and have the potential to turn into devastating military clashes between two nuclear armed states, which has made military cooperation between the two countries vital. Recognising this, both countries engaged in security cooperation even before the formal establishment of state-to-

2. PTI, "Indo-Pacific Epicentre of 'Great Power Competition' with China: Mark Esper", *The Hindu*, August 27, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indo-pacific-epicentre-of-great-power-competition-with-china-mark-esper/article32457060.ece>. Accessed on March 5, 2021.

3. Phillip C. Saunders and Julia G. Bowie, "US-China Military Relations: Competition and Cooperation", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 39, no. 5-6 (2016): pp. 662-84.

state relations. Broadly speaking, through these contacts Beijing and Washington found ways to accommodate some of their differing, sometimes even opposed, security interests, allowing overall bilateral relations to grow. Both countries saw the Soviet Union as a common threat and cooperation was seen as a strategic necessity to deter aggressive action from Moscow. In the United States, there was an understanding that a powerful PLA in China would conform to American interests and contribute to peace and stability in Asia. This sentiment was reflected in a 1979 statement by then US Vice President Walter Mondale who said, “any nation which seeks to weaken or isolate China assumes a stance counter to American interests.”⁴ Following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980, America extended security cooperation with China to arms sale. Prior to this, Washington restricted security cooperation to “American statements of support for Chinese security against a Soviet attack.”⁵ In 1980, Washington promoted China’s Coordinating Committee for Export Controls (COCOM) status to category ‘P’ which permitted Beijing to purchase dual-use technology and military support equipment on a case-by-case basis, while maintaining the ban on sale of lethal weapons.⁶ The following year, the Reagan administration eased this restriction and allowed sale of lethal weapons on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile, Beijing saw military cooperation with United States only as a strategic necessity, with no intention to build an alliance or even coordinate defence strategy—but simply to deter Soviet military action by projecting a joint military front.

US-China military contacts came to an abrupt halt over the question of US arms sale to Taiwan and stagnated for two years until the issue was addressed in the 1982 communique. The United States agreed to reduce gradually its sale of arms to Taiwan which temporarily addressed the problem, allowing military ties to resume. In 1983, US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger proposed the ‘three pillars’ approach to military relations with China constituting

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4. Byong-Moo Hwang, “The Evolution of US-China Security Relations and Its Implications for the Korean Peninsula”, *Asian Perspective* (1990): 69-90.
 5. Kevin L. Pollpeter, “U.S.-China Security Management: Assessing the Military-to-Military Relationship”, RAND Corporation, August 16, 2004, at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG143.html>. Accessed on March 5, 2021.
 6. Hwang, n. 4.

high-level visits, functional level exchanges and military technology cooperation, creating a more solid foundation for institutionalising relations.⁷ As a result of these developments, Chinese purchase of dual-use technology from America expanded to \$1.2 billion in 1984 from just \$350 million in 1982.⁸

Towards the latter half of the 1980s, relations stagnated as Washington had strongly expressed disapproval over China's arms sales policy in general, and missile sales in particular. Chinese sale of Silkworm missiles to Iran and of a CSS-2 intermediate range ballistic missile to Saudi Arabia were of particular concern to Washington.⁹ The Chinese HY-2 silkworm anti-ship missiles posed a direct threat to US naval vessels in the region—in May 1987 a US naval vessel, USS *Stark*, was attacked by an Iraqi fired Exocet missile and the following year an American owned tanker and a Kuwaiti tanker under the US flag were hit by Silkworm missiles.¹⁰ Washington first lodged a formal protest against the sale but Beijing denied such transactions, despite strong US intelligence evidence suggesting the contrary—ultimately leading to a short-term one-year freeze on further liberalisation of arms and technology sale to China from 1987.

For Beijing also, the strategic imperatives to continue engagement with Washington was fast evaporating in the wake of changed Soviet foreign policy orientation under Gorbachev's "new thinking" which prioritised normalisation of relations with China. PLA's reckless action at Tiananmen Square prove to be the final blow to already deteriorating relations, and just a day after the incident, President Bush announced the suspension of all weapons export and reciprocal visits by top military personnel to China and on transfer of some technologies with military applications.

US-CHINA MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD

The end of the Cold War impacted both American and Chinese

7. Pollpeter, n. 5.

8. Ibid., p. 74.

9. Thomas L. Wilborn, *Security Cooperation with China: Analysis and a Proposal* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1994).

10. Bates Gill, "Chinese Arms Exports to Iran", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 2 (May 1998), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria598_gill.html. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

thinking about international politics and their respective definitions of national security. A 1992 US Congress report hailed the end of the Cold War as having “banished the threat of global nuclear conflict”—in view of which it contemplated, “very substantial reductions in (US) defense spending—perhaps to the lowest level in 40 years and to turn our attention to other pressing national needs.”¹¹ There were widespread calls for a “peace dividend”—redirecting spending from military to civilian purposes—from American officials and public who felt Washington was spending too much on a defence architecture which was no longer needed as the “Soviet threat” had evaporated. Subsequently, throughout the 1990s a “Post-Cold War drawdown” took place where the military shrank by almost 37 per cent—from roughly 2.17 million in 1987 to 1.37 million in 2000.¹²

The 1991 Persian Gulf War in many ways set the stage for intensified US-China military competition in the 21st century. Washington saw US military forces’ resounding victory as decisive proof that the United States “remains the only state with truly global strength, reach and influence in every dimension.”¹³ The US military drawdown was in many ways also an expression of this changed nature of warfare, where precision warfare could swiftly defeat the adversary and pave the way for an “uncomplicated” victory. Many scholars also see the Gulf War as Washington’s attempt to define a new “military centred global order” where political-military dominance would be the determinants of Superpower status.¹⁴ Such a system was seen to be in Washington’s advantage, given its unmatched military preponderance at the time. Washington’s massive and rapid deployment of forces, display of technological prowess, overwhelming air superiority generated great concern in Chinese military high command—especially since the Pentagon had defeated

11. US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, “After the Cold War: Living with Lower Defense Spending”, OTA-ITE-524 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, February 1992).

12. Maria C. Lytell et al., “U.S. Military Drawdown Could Affect Gains in Service Member Diversity”, RAND Corporation, October 26, 2015, at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1008.html. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

13. United States President Bush (1989-1993), “National Security Strategy of the United States”, The White House, 1991.

14. James Petras, “Gulf War and the New World Order”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 9/10, March 29, 1991: 482-84.

an enemy whose military structure, tactics and weapons was very similar to PLA.¹⁵ Some observers even described it as “psychological nuclear attack” on China.¹⁶ Acknowledging that RMA necessitated a change in strategy and weaponry, Chinese military underwent a major overhaul. In an interview to the *Economist*, General Chen Zhou, who was then Research Fellow at the PLA Academy of Military Science stated, “We studied RMA exhaustively. Our great hero was Andy Marshall in the Pentagon [the powerful head of the Office of Net Assessment who was known as the Pentagon’s futurist in chief]. We translated every word he wrote.”¹⁷ Correspondingly, the PLA instituted changes in its command structure and accelerated military modernisation to keep it adept in an ever-evolving battlefield. Commenting on these changes, a Shanghai-based military expert stated that the Gulf War forced the military “to skip the mechanised stage and jump straight to develop information technologies.”¹⁸ The war also brought to the fore the outdated nature of the old PLA Doctrines like ‘People’s war’ and under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, Beijing began preparing for “local wars under high-technology conditions”—as evident from the 1993 military doctrine titled the same. Unlike the previous doctrines—which focused on defensive capabilities to counter a mainland invasion—the 1993 doctrines emphasised offensive capabilities to fight regional wars under modern conditions.¹⁹ A key feature of the doctrine was the adoption of joint operations and emphasis on incorporation of technology in the military. Previously the PLA prioritised land forces, often at the cost of navy and air force—but with adoption of the joint operations the relationship between the three Services was redefined.

15. Shane C. Tayloe, “Crossover Point: How China’s Naval Modernization Could Reverse the United States’ Strategic Advantage”, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1-25.

16. Liu Zhen, “What Was the Turning Point for China’s Military Revolution?”, *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2021, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3118083/china-us-rivalry-how-gulf-war-sparked-beijings-military>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

17. “The Dragon’s New Teeth”, *The Economist*, April 7, 2012, at <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2012/04/07/the-dragons-new-teeth?fsrc=nlw%7Cchig%7C4-+5-2012%7C1303226%7C36310463>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

18. Liu Zhen, n. 16.

19. It was offensive as it emphasised first strike to take advantage of adversary forces, the doctrine highlighted the importance of striking first instead of the People’s War concept of “striking after the enemy has struck.”

By 1995, many in America became conscious of China's rapidly modernising military, especially advancements in military-technology integration. Critics within the US Congress felt that Beijing was not reciprocating Washington's overtures as it continued to remain opaque internally and to the outside world. The publication of the unclassified version of the Final Report of the Select Committee on US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China—more famously known as the Cox Report—even alleged that China has been conducting espionage against the United States since the 1970s and has acquired US nuclear weapons.²⁰ Subsequently Congressional scrutiny came to play an important role in US-China military relations resulting in the 2000 National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA) which forbade "military-to-military exchange or contact that included inappropriate exposure to the PLA in the areas of force projection operations, nuclear operations, advanced logistical operations ... arms sale or military-related technology transfers, release of classified or restricted information."²¹ By the turn of the century, US-China military-defence establishments had to confront several contentious issues which went beyond the Taiwan issue, into broader arenas of strategic intentions, due to which prospects for security cooperation further diminished.

Intensification of Military Competition in the 21st Century

The intensification of security competition in the second decade of the 21st century was partially a response to "changing Chinese perceptions about its claims ... and enhanced Chinese capabilities to protect them."²² China has made major strides in the creation of a formidable military posture backed by a firm economic growth and is displaying newfound confidence in its military abilities under the leadership of Xi Jinping. This forced a reassessment in Washington about whether the strategic motive underlying US policy of

20. US House of Representatives Select Committee, "US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China (1999)".

21. John Warner, "S.1059—106th CONGRESS (1999-2000): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000", Congress.gov, October 5, 1999, at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/senate-bill/1059>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

22. Evan S. Medeiros, "The changing fundamentals of US-China relations", *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2019): 93-119.

engagement and military-to-military contacts towards China could survive Beijing's rapid military modernisation pace. United States has woken up, albeit late, to the reality of an economically strong and increasingly assertive, ambitious China and is altering its policy to face its strategic competitor. Major causes which set the stage for intensified competition between Beijing and Washington are as follows:

- *Increasing Chinese Military Power and Assertiveness*

Since President Xi assumed power, he articulated a very clear vision for the PLA as the guardian of Chinese interests abroad and under the strict command and control of the Communist Party. Xi's military priorities were also clear—force projection, enhancing combat effectiveness to ensure overall military dominance. At the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, Xi declared that PLA had “reached a new historical starting point in strengthening national defense and the armed forces.”²³ Indeed, between 2012 and 2017, China had completely restructured the military to ensure absolute party control over the PLA, strengthened theatre commands, built a strong naval force, stepped up indigenisation of weapons and equipment development, made major strides in military preparedness. At his speech marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi hailed the “indelible achievements” made by the Chinese military while reiterating the need to “follow a Chinese path to military development” which includes “political loyalty of the armed forces.”²⁴

China is not only building its military power, but is much more assertive in deploying this power, as a show of its strength. Here assertiveness is broadly defined as a departure from the doctrine of ‘peaceful rise’ and shift towards more ‘aggressive’ and ‘offensive’ behaviour. There has been a visible offensive turn in Chinese narrative surrounding “core interests” which—until 2006—was restricted to

23. “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress”, ChinaDaily.com, November 4, 2017, at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

24. “Full text of Xi Jinping’s speech on the CCP’s 100th anniversary”, *Nikkei Asia*, July 1, 2021, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary>. Accessed on August 23, 2021.

Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang but now includes South China Sea and parts of East China Sea. China has been steadily increasing its presence in South China Sea, which has clearly taken an offensive turn after public reports of militarisation of the 'illegal' artificial islands it has been constructing.²⁵ It has demonstrated increased willingness to threaten and coerce through display of force on issues relating to control of waters, air space, surface features and resources off China's coasts. Currently the China Coast Guard (CCG) patrol ship fleet—with over 130 ships—is the largest in the world, and operates more aggressively than coast guards around the world, with larger, more heavily armed ships. Despite previously vowing to use only peaceful means to achieve reunification with Taiwan—in 2019—he asserted that China “makes no compromise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means.”²⁶ Beijing has not restricted itself to rhetoric only. In 2020 alone, the Chinese People's Liberation Army flew roughly 380 sorties into Taiwan's air defence identification zone.²⁷ Similarly China has been dredging and building islands in the South China Sea since 2013 and by admission of head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, is now “capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war.”²⁸ In April 2020, when the world was fighting a global pandemic, Chinese militia sank a Vietnamese fishing boat with eight crew members off the Paracel Islands.²⁹

A study conducted by Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold based

25. PTI, “Beijing Using Militarised Outposts in South China Sea as Platforms of Coercion: US”, *The Economic Times*, September 28, 2020, at <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/beijing-using-militarised-outposts-in-south-china-sea-as-platforms-of-coercion-us/articleshow/78361945.cms>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

26. Lu Hui, “Xi Says ‘China Must Be, Will Be Reunified’ as Key Anniversary Marked”, *Xinhua*, January 2, 2019, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/02/c_137714898.htm. Accessed on March 5, 2021.

27. John Xie, “China Is Increasing Taiwan Airspace Incursions”, *Voice of America*, January 6, 2021, at <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/china-increasing-taiwan-airspace-incursions>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

28. Hannah Beech, “China's Sea Control Is a Done Deal, ‘Short of War with the U.S.’”, *The New York Times*, September 20, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-navy.html>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

29. Shashank Bengali and Vo Kieu Bao Uyen, “Sunken Boats. Stolen Gear. Fishermen Are Prey as China Conquers a Strategic Sea”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 2020, at <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-11-12/china-attacks-fishing-boats-in-conquest-of-south-china-sea>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

on interviews with Beijing and Shanghai-based analysts identified a major trigger for Chinese aggressiveness in the period between 2008 and 2010 to be what they term as “premature triumphalism”.³⁰ In Chinese strategic thinking, the 2008 financial crisis and its impact on American economy was seen as decisive proof that Washington had entered a period of steep and inevitable decline—fearing no backlash, China confidently embarked on aggressive military action. Some analysts offer a different explanation for China’s newfound assertiveness. They view it as reactionary—that Beijing is simply ‘pushing back’ against ‘provocative behaviour’.³¹ Thus, Beijing’s seizure of the islands and halting certain Philippine imports during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off, was seen as a ‘reaction’ to Philippines detaining a Chinese fishing boat in disputed waters for violating Philippine fishing regulations. Similarly, Beijing’s deployment of anti-ship cruise missiles to Spratly Islands in 2018 was justified by citing the increased Freedom of Navigation Operations by the US Navy. This hardly survives the scrutiny of logic due to its obviously disproportionate nature and can be best described as “opportunistic assertiveness”.³²

- *US Strategic Distraction: War on Terror?*

For over a decade, anti-terrorism agenda was the central organising principle of American foreign and defence policies, until US President Barack Obama did away with it, at least in rhetoric. The war on terror entailed a complete transformation of the US armed forces to build an army equipped in anti-terror operations and new basing arrangements. It called for a “coalition of the willing” which involved revitalising traditional alliances while also collaborating with other nations to fight “emerging threats to peace and security.”³³ By defining “terror” as the target, America embarked on a futile search for “absolute security” hoping to

30. Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, “An ‘assertive’ China? Insights from interviews”, *Asian Security* 9, no. 2 (2013): 111-31.

31. Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu and Alastair Iain Johnston, “Debating China’s Assertiveness”, *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2014): pp. 176-83.

32. Andrew Small and Dhruva Jaishankar, “For Our Enemies, We Have Shotguns’: Explaining China’s New Assertiveness”, *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2020, at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/for-our-enemies-we-have-shotguns-explaining-chinas-new-assertiveness/>. Accessed on March 3, 2021.

33. Colin Powell, “Partnership and Principle”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 1 (January/February 2004), pp. 22-34.

protect unilateralism in the global arena.³⁴ In a bid to gain global recognition for its efforts, America saw China's (which is a veto wielding power at the UNSC) support to be essential. In return for China's support, or at least acquiescence, Washington subdued criticism towards China's human rights violations and even adopted a pro-Beijing posture in dealing with Taiwan.³⁵ Meanwhile, Washington's preoccupation with terrorism gave China the necessary "breathing space" to build its comprehensive national power without any unwanted external scrutiny. The huge drain of military and economic resources on anti-terrorism efforts and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has meant less investment in capacities that are more likely to be useful in a 21st century great power rivalry. Neither was sufficient energy devoted to formulating and implementing an accurate policy response to China's rapid rise, at a time when both its soft power and hard power were waxing. The net result of these developments was that America took its eye off the ball and China took maximum advantage of it by building for itself a robust economy and military. In the words of a retired American air force officer—"as China rose, a distracted America atrophied, typified by the depletion of more than 2,000 diplomats, 40 per cent of Air Force fighters and 15 per cent of Navy ships."³⁶

- *U.S. Pivot to Asia and the Chinese response*

In 2012 the Department of Defence Strategic Guidance stated that the US "will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region" and singled out "China and Iran" as threats which will "continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities."³⁷ The rebalance in the military realm took the shape of

34. Peter Van Ness, "China's response to the Bush doctrine", *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 4 (2004): 38-47.

35. Jacques deLisle, "9/11 and U.S.-China Relations", Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2011, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/150643/2011_09_911Cjoma.pdf. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

36. Col. Wesley Hallman, "How China Won the Global War on Terror", *Defense News*, September 16, 2020, at <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2018/11/09/how-china-won-the-global-war-on-terror/>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

37. Leon Panetta and Barack Obama, "Sustaining US global leadership: Priorities for 21st century defense", Washington, D.C.: US Department of Defense 1 (2012), at <https://cryptome.wikileaks.org/2013/07/cyber-war-racket-0041.pdf>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

redeployment of more military assets to Asia and the Western Pacific, gaining capabilities better suited to address the unique conditions in this region, increased flexibility of deployments to make them smaller and more agile and most importantly strengthening the military capabilities of partners in the region, etc.³⁸ New troops were deployed to Australia, new naval deployments in Singapore and a 10-year defence agreement with the Philippines was announced. In tune with its efforts to shift defence resources to Asia, the United States expanded missile defence cooperation with Japan and South Korea³⁹—both US treaty allies. In 2012, Washington announced that it would install a second missile tracking X-band-radar in Japan⁴⁰ which was strongly opposed by China. Beijing saw this as revival of the Cold War era containment mentality and an attempt to create divisions between China and her neighbours. Besides strengthening relations with South Korea, Japan, Australia, Washington's specific targeting of countries like India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam—all of which have some form of territorial or maritime dispute with China—created anxiety about the East Asian security environment. Moreover, with these strategic moves, America got itself directly involved in the maritime disputes in the region between China and its neighbours. Fearing that a 'soft' response to Washington's moves would embolden regional countries to become aggressive, China became more provocative and less compromising in maritime disputes, especially with US allies such as the Philippines in South China Sea and Japan in East China Sea.

MILITARISATION OF INDO-PACIFIC AND INDIA'S OPTIONS

As it stands now, Indo-Pacific is emerging as the theatre where US-China military competition is playing out most prominently. The 2017 US National Strategy makes it unequivocally clear that

38. Mark E. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia", Congressional Research Service, March 28, 2012, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

39. Tom Z. Collina, "U.S. Pushes Missile Defense Globally", Arms Control Association, at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012-11/us-pushes-missile-defense-globally>. Accessed on May 15, 2021.

40. Chris Carroll, "US, Japan Announce Expanded Missile Defense System", *Stars and Stripes*, September 7, 2012, at <https://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/us-japan-announce-expanded-missile-defense-system-1.189603>. Accessed on March 4, 2021.

Washington views the Indo-Pacific region as its topmost priority and identifies “revisionist” China as seeking to “displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region ... reorder the region in its favour.”⁴¹ The National Defence Strategy issued the following year noted “China is leveraging military modernisation, influence operations ... to coerce neighbouring countries ... reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage.”⁴² Although the Trump administration’s approach towards countering China’s ‘military expansion’ was not fundamentally different from his predecessors, the overtly confrontational rhetoric, coupled with the shrinking of channels of communication due to overall downturn in relations, has made the security situation particularly volatile.

As the “great game” in the region is playing out, the actions of one powerful state will invariably affect the interests and actions of the other. Even though the region’s immediate geopolitical challenge may be China-centric—the fate of the region will not be shaped by China, or even the US alone, but a spate of actors who have vital stakes and interests in the region. An important actor in this multipolar setting is India, which has a consequential voice in the region. India believes in a multipolar world, with a multipolar Asia at the core. New Delhi views its role in the international arena as a stabilising power looking to promote the global good. Even in the Indo-Pacific—as highlighted in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech at the QUAD summit—India vision is premised on the ancient philosophy of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”, which roughly translates to “the world is one family”.⁴³ India strongly supports a “rules-based international system” but is also pragmatically aware

41. Executive Office of the President, *National security strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. Accessed on August 23, 2021.

42. Department of Defence, *Summary of the 2018 National Defence Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, at www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf. Accessed on August 23, 2021.

43. Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Modi of India, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Suga of Japan in the Virtual Quad Leaders’ Summit, The White House, March 12, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/12/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-modi-of-india-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-suga-of-japan-in-virtual-meeting-of-the-quad/>. Accessed on August 23, 2021.

that “rule of force underwrites the rule of law”.⁴⁴ It is abundantly clear that China’s military might cannot be met by any one country alone, and by increasing its aggressions, Beijing is incentivising New Delhi’s tilt towards Washington. This does not imply that India will overhaul its policy and become a US ally, but that it will continue with issue-based multi-alignments and coalitions to achieve its national interests. Therefore, New Delhi is building security cooperation networks with all relevant stakeholders, which include not only the United States, but also Japan, Australia, ASEAN countries, France and the European Union.

44. Titli Basu, “India’s Indo-Pacific Reckoning”, *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*, December 2020, at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/06/2002546900/-1/-1/1/BASU.PDF>. Accessed on August 23, 2021.