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China's view on the US role in the Indo-Pacific

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The nature of international politics is anarchical. It means there is no central authority that controls the behaviour of individual states at the global level and they behave in accordance with their national interests. The anarchical nature has been minimised by the international law. International law protects the small nation-states of international society and politics from being overpowered by the powerful countries but law has always remained favourable towards dominant states. Hence, there are spaces which protect the interest of powerful countries. It would be interesting to study about the two states i.e., the US and China in the region called 'Indo Pacific'. Thus, this paper would highlight how, so far, policies of the US in Indo-Pacific and how China perceived them over the period of time.

Before understanding the policies, it would be appropriate to articulate about the concept of Indo-Pacific, because the region 'Indo-Pacific' was earlier known as 'Asia-Pacific'. So it can be argued that it is a substitute for Asia-Pacific. As Asia Pacific was narrowly defined and emphasized on economic domain of the region and did not include India, whereas the latter connects the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. Therefore, it also brings India and other countries that are sharing border with these two oceans. It can be viewed from both the strategic as well as economic domains, while it is associated with maritime security and cooperation and therefore highlights the issue of freedom of navigation.¹ Thus, it is to be argued that the concept of Indo-Pacific is still evolving.

How US perceived China?

When the administration of George W Bush assumed power in January 2001, it considered China, which it referred as a "strategic competitor"², to be its chief foreign policy concern. However, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, China became an ally of US in its war on terrorism as the menace of terrorism also bothered China in its Xinjiang Region where its terrorist outfit East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is based. The US then began to refer China as a "strategic partners".³

However, by mid-2005, the Bush administration had been accessing China's development of its long range missile capabilities and its military budget that was increasing by more than 10 percent annually which US perceived as a serious concern.⁴ Robert Zoellick, who was the US Deputy Secretary of state in his speech on US-China relations under the title, 'Wither

China: From Membership to responsibility?', where he acknowledged China's peaceful rise and suggested "it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China's membership into the international system: We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system".⁵

In September 2009, James Steinberg, then a Deputy Secretary of state, told an audience at the centre for the New American security that what he called 'strategic reassurance' should play a central role in strengthening US-China relations. The two countries must find ways to highlight and reinforce the areas of common interest," he explained, "which addressing the source of mistrust directly".⁶ In November 2009 President Obama on his visit to China offered a suggestion on the idea of 'Group of two' (G-2), where the US and China would lead the major decisions of the world. In other words, China was also acknowledged by the US as major power. However, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declined the offer and made two sharp arguments:

China is still a developing country with huge population; and

Global issues should be decided by all the nations in the world, rather than one or two countries.⁷

The offer of G-2 and its rejection by Chinese government also came in the background of global financial crisis. The US over the period of time has tried to make China a responsible stakeholder whereas China keeps arguing that it is a developing country.

When China declined the offer of G-2, it was evident that Chinese government did not wanted to feel second to any power especially at the time when its own economy was constantly growing and by year 2010 it also went on to replace Japan to become the second most powerful economy of the world.

In the same year, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a statement in ASEAN regional forum held in Hanoi, Vietnam that US, interest lies in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia Maritime commons and respect for international law in South China Sea (SCS). But, China made a tireless effort that the issue of SCS should not emerge in the Clinton's speech as China categorically claims SCS as its "core interest"⁸. However, China's move on SCS did not capitalise as some members of ASEAN are claimant in SCS region.

After the 2008, global financial crisis, the US administration tracing from its past followed the idea of its former Secretary of State John Hay⁹ who had predicted in 1900 that Pacific is going to be the ocean of future just like the Mediterranean remained the ocean of past and Atlantic at present. These Oceans reflect the trade and power maximisation space. Based on this analysis President Obama announced the 'Pivot to Asia Policy' which was questioned by China, and therefore, it was renamed as 'Rebalancing Asia Pacific'. Under this policy, the US wanted to strengthen its friends and allies in the Asia Pacific Region. Officially, President Obama announced Rebalancing Asia-Pacific from Australian Parliament in 2011. The purpose of this policy announcement was to strengthen the US economic, diplomatic, and security engagement throughout the region, both bilaterally and multilaterally.¹⁰ The idea military alliances in the region would encourage continued progress in upgrading

alliances with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Thailand and the Philippines.¹¹ This was the time period when President Obama's National Security Adviser, Thomas E. Donilon, said in November 2011 that the US-China relationship has element of both cooperation and competition."¹²

Donald Trump's concept of free and open Indo-Pacific, "a free and open Indo-Pacific ...where sovereign and independent nations with diverse culture and many different dreams can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace".¹³ "It also endorses the convention building blocks of US engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region building collective security through a network of regional allies and partners, promoting economic prosperity, and encouraging good governance and shared principles".¹⁴

Under President Biden the US has continued the position of previous government of free and open navigation and mentioned that the US would now keep an eye on each corner of the Indo-Pacific that includes Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania including Pacific Islands. The interest of the US lies in this region, so it would be necessary to strengthen the region along with the allies and partners. Here, the US view that the challenge in Indo-Pacific is coming from China as it has influence in different domains like economic, military, technological, and diplomatic. The US viewed that China is engaged in economic coercion of the friend and allies like economic coercion of Australia, border conflict with India, tension in Taiwan Strait and neighbours of East China Sea and South China Sea. In addition, China also undermines the international law, freedom of navigation and so on.

Chinese Perspective on US role in Indo Pacific

- The announcement of Maritime silk route announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Indonesian Parliament in 2013 came after US Obama had announcement of rebalancing of Asia Pacific in Australian Parliament in 2011. At the same time, Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has remained another institution where China successfully uses its soft power in bringing the allies of the US onto the table. There was a serious brain storming in the US administration after the England decided to join the
- On this issue no formal response has been released by Chinese government. However, there has been a rapid increase number of academic paper in China which can be gauged from the fact that in 2017 there were only 5 articles published however it arose to 47 articles by 2019?¹⁵
- During Media interaction on the question of Quad and Indo-Pacific the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi replied on Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and developing cooperation among QUAD members? "In your opinion is this containment against China?" The Minister replied by saying that these things come and go, just like the waves of the ocean. It is true that some scholars and media personal are exaggerating the so called Indo pacific strategy to contain China.¹⁶ In addition, he categorically mentioned that he is having faith on the statements made by the Quad members that Quad has no intention to target any specific country. He said, "I hope they mean what they say, and that their actions will match their rhetoric".¹⁷
- Over the period of time the discourse on 'China threat' has been endorsed by the

US. This China threat was considered as a primary threat to the US by the Trump administration. The US has been consistently showing its concern over the China's massive development project, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), technology warfare such as the Huawei 5G network. These developments are perceived in a way that China would overpower the US in coming future. Thus, the Trump administration strategically focussed on Indo-Pacific to check China's unhindered process. However, China is countering this narrative through the concept of cooperation among the Asian countries while it insists that its Indo-Pacific policy should not become as obstacle in its On 26th September 2018, the Vice President of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng of China, stated, "China welcomes regional initiatives, but we are firmly against any attempts to use the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the BRI or even contain China".¹⁸ On 6 May 2022, Le Yucheng, in a speech categorically mentioned the term 'turmoil' or 'war' in the context of Asia-Pacific. According to him, "it is important to stay committed to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific, and reject the attempt to allow turmoil and war to arise in the region. This indicates that this region is strategically important for China and it is ready to take any measures to protect it".¹⁹

The above reading highlights that the US continuously engaged in protecting its space of superpower whereas China is strategically busy in challenging the space of the US in Indo-Pacific Region. In addition, China is also strengthening itself in the arena of economic, infrastructure, diplomacy and technology. The Indo-Pacific region highlights the perfect example hegemonic stability theory. This region of Indo-Pacific also indicates that how US keep asking China to follow the international law especially when it comes to freedom of navigation in SCS.

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