

Article

Biden Administration and the Indo-Pacific Axis

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Abstract

More than ten years since the "Indo-Pacific" was added to the geopolitical lexicon, the region has continued to receive elevated global attention while also witnessing a transformed relationship between the US and India. The Trump administration reconstructed US strategy in the Indian Ocean region, broadening both its scope and concept, and positioned the Quad countries and especially India at the centre of its plans. The change in US leadership has raised questions about continued American commitment. Biden administration, however, has positively signalled not only towards building and maintaining the momentum vis-à-vis the Indo Pacific but also coordinating closely with its regional allies/ key partners like India. This paper analyses the evolution of the US' Indo Pacific Strategy, its approach towards China as it moved from an 'engage but hedge' to 'compete, counter and confront' policy and the possible motivations of US engagement towards a strategic alignment that will consolidate momentum on an Indo-Pacific Axis.

India and the US entered the twenty first century as engaged democracies and 'enduring strategic global partners' riding a transformed relationship that had historically been estranged due to the Cold War. The end of the Clinton years and that of George W. Bush led to major convergences in security resulting in a robust defence partnership that continues till date. Apart from the signing of the nuclear deal, the four major foundational agreements in defence, i.e., General Security of Military Information Agreement 2002 (GSMIOA), the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement 2016 (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement 2018 (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and

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Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation 2020 (BECA) -- have enhanced the value of their strategic congruence in building a new security architecture in Asia and beyond. Significantly, they recalibrated their security partnership amidst China's assertive behavior in the East/South China Sea, the broader Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and US' debatable 'engage but hedge' China policy.

Rising Significance of India

Since 2010, US articulation that India was important to its interests found special expression in the Obama vision and strategy towards the Indo-Pacific. President Trump vitalized the "Indo Pacific Strategy" further with a series of actions that boldly emphasized the centrality of India in that approach. The Biden administration too has signaled continuity with this approach suggesting that the US would consistently work with India on several issues, especially in dealing with the Indo-Pacific. At the root of Biden's characterization of China as America's "most serious competitor" that will "face extreme competition" from the US, is his belief that in a vastly changed world of 2021, facing the China challenge must be based on a multilateral, issue-based approach with allies and key partners¹. While he has stated that he would restore, repeal, or even reverse some of Trump's policies regarding allies, climate change and international institutions, ties with India and the focus on the Indo-Pacific would witness continuity and renewal.

While US Presidents have prominently alluded to the importance of the Asia Pacific for their security and prosperity, Obama's "re-balance/ pivot to Asia" reflected a belief that global power was shifting from the West to the East with China's rise. Trump's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" built on that understanding as policy developments under him built momentum in the Indo-Pacific strategy aiming at deterring and managing China. Will the Biden administration continue to pursue a course of maintaining momentum by building an Indo-Pacific axis in its response to China? The indications are positive as both State and Defense Departments announced that India is a "critical partner", especially "within the context of challenges in the Indo-Pacific region"². This is relevant as there were concerns about Biden's attention on Indo-Pacific given India's heightened interests.

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through which over 50% of sea trade in energy flows, feeding major economies like China, India, Japan, and South Korea, along with the rise of regional nuclear capable nations and their strategic rivalry, has grown since 2007³. The security of IOR was outlined in the US' maritime strategy document in 2007 (later revised in 2015) as 'Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea-power'⁴ as a new doctrine of operations that defined and improved core capabilities of the navy as

part of maritime domain awareness. Under George Bush, US' multilateralism in the Asia Pacific advocated collective use of Sea lanes of communication beyond disaster relief and anti-piracy cooperation with allies and strategic partners like India⁵. Maritime security took centre stage as these waters are used by commercial and naval ships of China, Iran and India, alerting US to the possibility of strategic conflicts and challenges to its dominance. Indian Ocean was emerging as a theatre of global rebalancing. The "US Strategic Guidance 2012"⁶ linked US economy and security to developments in the Indian Ocean and proposed India as a long-term strategic partner and regional anchor in the region.

Even as US foreign policy shifted focus to the Middle East after 9/11 with Bush Jr.'s Global War on Terror, an optimistic vision of a shared future with India based on common interests and values encompassing security, trade and investment remained amidst differences over trade, and nuclear liability law. A large part of this was due to the bipartisan consensus that supported close ties between both countries, in sharp contrast to China, linking strong domestic support to a foreign policy goal. According to Pew Research Center "...negative views of China increased by 26% between 2006 and 2016. And American negativity towards China has been higher than former in every year since 2014.... Chinese unfavorable views of the U.S. remained below 50% for most of Obama's presidency"⁷. It was also fuelled by political willingness of leaders of India and the US that set the Indo-Pacific vision in Joint statements after summit meetings since 2010. Implicit allusions regarding the rise of China, recognition of the threat it posed and coining a joint strategy to combat the challenge provided strategic glue that informed the long-term calibration of policy towards this region. Inauguration of the strategic dialogue in 2010 followed by annual meetings thereafter enabled it to go forward. A distinct 'Pacific region' and 'Indian Ocean Region' in 2010⁸ became by 2016 the 'Indo-Pacific', which encompassed open, balanced, and inclusive security architecture for the region⁹. Continuing the focus on maritime domain, US welcomed India as a rising regional and global power and a "priority partner" for a maritime security dialogue¹⁰, underlining India as a net security provider.

The Indo-US Joint statements released in 2012, 2015 and 2016 placed India at the centre of the strategy that basically aimed to counter China with a regional security architecture designed to hold the Chinese accountable to any transgressions vis-à-vis free and open sea lanes of navigation and communication in the Indo-Pacific. It was demonstrably a long-term undertaking of deterrence based regional security scaffolding with not just India but also with Japan and Australia. Thus, the US backed the Quadrilateral Security Grouping (QUAD) proposed by Japan for being better equipped to deal with prickly autonomy issues as well as voluntary defence planning and collective showcasing of joint capabilities to deter China. Given the sensitivities of countries that preferred not to be mired

in the binary of US vs. China and the Chinese rancour of this grouping as “Asian NATO”, the QUAD for the next ten years did little.

With India designated as a ‘Major Defense Partner’, the US signalled a nuanced broadening of its Asia policy: from a predominantly East Asia focused, fundamentally alliance driven, it shifted to a “whole of the Indo-Pacific approach” based on shared interests to achieve shared objectives with India. However, the inability to offer specific actions through the policy or to let it be a standalone policy was a weakness that Ratner and Campbell noted:

*“...at the end of Obama’s time in office, budgets and personnel remained focused on other regions-there were, for example, three times as many National Security Council staffers working on the Middle East as on all of East and Southeast Asia”.*¹¹

Under Biden, the current National Security Council (NSC) Directorate on Indo-Pacific and China is the largest, putting to rest the doubt that his policy would be “Obama 2.0”.

Indo-Pacific Strategy

During the Trump years, America’s “Indo-Pacific Strategy” gained stridency amidst the backdrop of a blistering trade war with China. References to common geopolitical interests and importance of India as a stable democracy appeared in several US security strategy documents such as the National Security Strategy 2017 and the National Defense Strategy 2018. Trump’s disregard for settled practices and norms of US foreign policy, his agendas of “America First” and “Making America Great Again”, tweets about policy and

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personnel impacted his approach on foreign policy. Despite intermittent cordiality to China, gradual hardening towards its actions centered Trump’s “Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy”.¹² The vast array of trade and economic disputes with China and North Korea’s growing nuclear/missile capability to reach American shores structured Trump’s China policy adjustments, falling “in line with conventional

Republican congressional views on the importance of Asian allies and partners, nuclear nonproliferation and greater US pressure on China to influence North Korea.”¹³ His conversations with President Xi on North Korea reflected this understanding¹⁴.

His preoccupation on trade deficit with China, for which he blamed previous American governments, moved the needle to focus on China’s growing economic heft,

trade deficits, multitude of investments leading to trade war. Yet, China's military ambitions and its intentions to create a "Sino centric order" continued to suffuse US response.¹⁵ By 2019, Secretary Pompeo's explicit allegation that the Communist party of China sought "international domination" coupled with the National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien accusing China of "intimidating Southeast Asian nations over South China Sea",¹⁶ illustrated the changed "compete, counter and confront" strategy.¹⁷

By 2020 further confrontations occurred, especially after the Covid 19 pandemic engulfed the world. According to an estimate, 210 actions were taken by the Trump administration during this period covering the USTR, Commerce Department, Homeland Security Department, amongst others, demonstrating a "whole-of-government" strategy. As per the Trump administration's 2020 policy document *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China*¹⁸ the response "has to be a whole-of-government approach that combines diplomacy, economic leverage, information operations and military partnerships"¹⁹. The full impact of these actions taken will be felt during the Biden administration²⁰.

As trade formed the "confront and compete" part, mounting a credible and sustainable counter sharpened the resetting of substance and style of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The emphasis on the new term first delivered in a speech by then Secretary of State Tillerson at CSIS was followed by President Trump on November 10, 2017 during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit in Vietnam. Calling for a return to freedom of navigation, the president defined the "Free and Open Indo Pacific" (FOIP) strategy as "a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace".²¹ However, he reminded the world of his "America First" policy as he pledged that the "US will make bilateral trade agreements with any Indo-Pacific nation that wants to be our partner and that will abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade".

Security and commerce were linked in the 2017 National Security Strategy where China and Russia were described as "revisionist powers" challenging "American power, influence, and interests in an attempt to erode American security and prosperity."²² It specifically pointed out that "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor".²³ National Defense Strategy, 2018, went further:

"China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region. As China continues asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will

continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future ²⁴

The US warning of predatory economics and identification of debilitating debt traps laid by China's infrastructure lending was not powerful as China responded strongly that it had used standard clauses. Further, the US had withdrawn from the Transatlantic Pacific Partnership (TPP), and showed a preference for bilateral deals and managed trade. Even friendly Asian countries could get tariff exemptions only via bilateral means despite sharing concerns about China. The issue that struck an answering chord for the QUAD was about China seeking to militarize Indo-Pacific to gain regional hegemony. Both Japan and India (later Australia) were particularly receptive as they shared conflicts with China. Thus, US' articulation of *"strengthened alliances and partnerships by deepening interoperability, expanding deterrent networks, and executing maritime security and awareness operations that reinforce a rules-based international order"* was well received.

To assure key allies and stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific of the US' multipronged strategy, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Alex Wong explained that "free and open" were essentially the Trump administration's **strategic modifiers** to the Pivot policy and elaborated both concepts: 1) nations to be free from coercion; 2) nations to be free in terms of good governance, fundamental rights, transparency, anti-corruption and; 3) open in terms of sea lines of communications airways and infrastructure.²⁵

This formulation was meant to reassure critics from within and amongst allies regarding the commitment of the US beyond military aspects in the Indo-Pacific. For India, former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Alice Wells made it clear that the Trump administration's concerted policy change towards India by offering advanced defense technology was to support India's readiness in the Indian Ocean²⁶. The US also incorporated under the FOIP strategy "maritime space/commons; interoperability with the network of allies; rule of law; private sector led economic development; and the centrality of multilateral forums in the region, like ASEAN, EAS and APEC".²⁷

Accommodating India

Secretary Mike Pompeo pointed to America's modified geographic interpretation of the Indo-Pacific stretching from the "west coast of the US to the west coast of India" as clearly accommodating Indian views. He further stressed that America's Indo-Pacific economic vision of an inclusive "free" and "open" region would require *"peaceful resolution to maritime and territorial disputes, fair and reciprocal trade, transparent agreements and open*

investment environment”.²⁸ The Pentagon renaming the Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command underscored the strategic importance of India and the interconnectivity of the two oceans.²⁹

India has attached importance to maritime security and Indo-Pacific Theater as an opportunity “to expand its footprints” and “increased its military capacity from operating only in the neighborhood to operating in the entire region—from the Malacca Strait to the waters off the African coasts,” according to a CSIS study³⁰. To mitigate capacity constraints, India has worked with strategic partners like the US and France with logistical arrangements without overtly being anti-China. India has envisaged enhancing stronger maritime cooperation with states that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific and secured “the eastern Indian Ocean in partnership with Southeast Asian littorals like Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand”, strengthening the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific³¹. The deepening Indo-US maritime cooperation in all aspects including intelligence sharing is thus built on the understanding that India continues to strengthen its presence in the region in the face of grey zone threats from a growing Chinese presence in the IOR.

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The US Congress’ support for the administration’s FOIP initiative is one of the most consequential components of this strategy. During hearings and debates, the prevalence of a clear bipartisan consensus on “China threat” to the American leadership in the world and the region, the need to respond by strengthening traditional US alliances and building strategic partnership with India has revealed an across the government, non-partisan thinking on US response to the China challenge. Trump and the Congressional Republicans adjusted their approach on China to pass the “The Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act or the BUILD Act of 2018”³². This expanded US’ overseas financial activities executed by USAID and OPIC, (it created a new agency called US International Development Finance Corporation) granting greater flexibility in providing foreign investment and technical support in response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The aim is to influence developing countries by challenging Beijing’s state led investment model with the US’ private sector investment model on the matters of infrastructure.

The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) of 2018 provided financial support for the enforcement of FOIP strategy. The act was divided into three components: security (commitment to alliances/partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and the ASEAN countries), economic (heightened engagement with APEC, EAS and Group of 20)

and promoting American values (efforts to protect rule of law and civil liberties).³³ In 2019, the Congress unanimously supported President Trump's "Indo-Pacific strategy" by passing the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Act.³⁴ The act acknowledged the findings on China mentioned in National Security Strategy 2017 and National Defense Strategy 2018 and supported ARIA as a long-term vision of the United States towards the region.

These Congressional actions were aimed at providing strategic depth to the 'Indo-Pacific strategy'. Notably, the passage of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative as part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2021 in December 2020, amidst the chaos of the presidential elections, further demonstrated the widely held belief across the US government that China remains a major source of concern, but most importantly, it was time to recommit to American leadership in the region. Though the amount committed under ARIA was only US \$2.2 billion of the US \$740.5 billion defence package, it is significant in terms of sustaining US commitments to regional security. Reports of latest bills introduced by Congressional Republicans that aim at countering the influence of China in the US signal that Biden faces a more determined challenge domestically to continue a harsh response to China. These bills indicate that the current evenly divided US Congress between the two political parties could shape China policy intricately.

The question is whether the rhetoric, policy actions and a pan American assessment of the China threat has set a definitive moment for the Biden administration to seal America's commitment towards furthering an Indo-Pacific axis. US statements in the QUAD Foreign ministerial meet in February this year have publicly affirmed the Biden administration's commitment to continuity.

The Revival of Quad

The revival and rebooting of QUAD (originating in 2007) and the Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe's concept of "broader Asia" took almost a decade to move ahead. Notwithstanding China's criticism of the QUAD being a new age US led "containment" policy or an "Asian NATO" since 2016, a series of important government documents produced by the QUAD countries signaled a gradual convergence of opinion on the relevance of an Indo-Pacific strategy. Japan launching "Free and Open Indo Pacific" strategy, US embracing Indo-Pacific strategy, the Australian Defense White Paper, and India's dedicated Indo-Pacific desk at the MEA have decisively shaped their engagement. Subsequently, the QUAD meeting in September 2020 conveyed a combined sense that China's behaviour posed a strategic threat to the rules based international order. The US warning of Chinese strategic revisionism in NSS 2017 in the wake of China's militarisation of the South China

Sea by “building artificial islands, sending coast guards, maritime militia and survey vessels to contested waterways to exert control over vital trade routes in the region” ignited a broad agreement amongst the QUAD on the need to preserve freedom of navigation, democratic values, stability, and openness in the Indo-Pacific. The China factor influenced the resurrection of QUAD by expanding the possibility of cooperation in not just military, but also in the economic, and technological fields.

The QUAD is a result of years of bilateral and trilateral relations built amongst the member states. The Malabar exercises between India and the US, AUSINDEX between US-Australia and JIMEX between Japan-India has solidified years of military-to-military relations between the states. The officials of the four countries have met often since 2017 and have sparked the possibility of QUAD plus arrangement. In 2020, apart from the said members, South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand joined to discuss the handling of Covid 19 pandemic. Australia rejoined (it had participated once in 2007) US, India, and Japan for the Malabar exercise after long deliberations. Given the long history of missteps in handling China, it is to this initiative that the Biden administration has begun to focus

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on. Aiding it is an earlier Department of Defense’ “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region” (2019) that stressed how Indo-Pacific was a “Priority Theater”³⁵ where the US would address challenges presented by countries like China, Russia and North Korea in the region by joining forces with allies/partners (QUAD). To ensure that the strategy endures and flourishes beyond the transition, the Trump administration declassified sections of it in January 2021 that reiterated US consensus on India’s strengthened abilities to counterbalance China and heightened Quad’s role in the region.³⁶

Biden’s Secretaries of State, Defence, USTR and Homeland Security along with director and advisor level officials have notably been hawkish on China, whether on security or trade. The contours of Biden’s foreign policy are based on the belief in liberal internationalism as a superior strategy to populist nationalism while also holding a belief that foreign policy should benefit the US middle class. His CIA appointee William J. Burns wrote that US needs “*to organize wisely for geopolitical competition with China*”³⁷.

According to Ely Ratner, Special Assistant to Secretary of Defense, “there’s a technology competition, a military competition, an economic competition, an ideological competition and a diplomatic competition”. Ratner, along with Kurt Campbell, who is the coordinator for the Indo-Pacific in the NSC, has published widely on US-China relations

reassuring skeptics that Biden will not be soft on China. Former Trump official Randy Shriver welcomed his addition to the DOD which augurs well for the twin objective of pushing China policy both at home and abroad. These Asia experts consider managing “extreme competition” with China as the most pressing challenge for the US and have begun networking Asian allies to build an effective counter. As Campbell and Ratner point out, China has defied US expectations for decades initiating a need to “interrogate past assumptions in US strategy”. They also argued that Trump’s limited focus on trade deficits, sidelining multilateral trade deals, weakening the alliance system and ignoring human rights issues have threatened US supremacy. To them “*Washington (is) at risk of adopting an approach that is confrontational without being competitive...meanwhile China has managed to be increasingly competitive without being confrontational*”.³⁸

Thus, though Biden’s “whole of the government approach” on China is different from Trump’s as it means standing “shoulder to shoulder with our allies and key partners,”³⁹ it reassures strategic partners like India. Calls to India from the President and Secretaries of State, Defence, amongst others, have also stressed the importance of India and the Indo-Pacific with ongoing consultations on other regional and global issues. Biden’s conversation with Chinese President expressing “fundamental concerns” over China’s “coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuse in Xinjiang and increasingly assertive actions”, including towards Taiwan, along with the announcement of a task force on China during his visit to the Pentagon has been noted across the world. Biden’s biggest challenge is thus finding the balance between demonstrating deterrence and commitment, and unnecessary escalation. This reality is evident as in January 2021 more than two dozen Chinese combat aircrafts flew near Taiwan while Beijing passed a law allowing its coast guard to fire on foreign vessels. The US Navy sent an aircraft carrier strike group into the South China Sea in response. Seemingly, there would be an uneasy relationship in the Indo-Pacific as there is a long history of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) measures by the US in these waters.

Importantly, domestic dimensions of US-China relations continue to impact the future policy as trade, intellectual property, unfair economic practices, human rights, and threat to America’s critical infrastructure issues remain unresolved. Biden has emphasized that engagement would characterize the approach on issues of mutual interest (a position supported by China) but has continued Trump administration’s tariff policy vis-a-vis China and is leveraging QUAD meets to make China accountable to maritime and territorial disputes.

Conclusion

For India, the change in administration provides opportunity to upgrade its overall consultative mechanisms beyond official dialogue mechanisms. Indian political will to overcome “hesitations of history”⁴⁰ with America amidst the narrative of strategic autonomy has brought renewed sense of realism in the relationship, triggered by China’s behaviour in recent times. India’s position in the latest QUAD meeting in February this year has shown that it is committed to the Indo-Pacific axis to confront China and sharpen the focus on a rule based international order.

India can also reach out to the largest NSC directorate on the Indo-Pacific under Biden which is prioritizing China and Indo-Pacific policy. Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishanker and Secretary of State Blinken have worked together in the past, which can be an asset in forming habits of cooperation. Various members of this directorate have written earlier that the US would need to “compete” rather than engage or be patient with China. They have agreed on a common diagnosis that places technology at the core of strategic competition with China. This augurs well for democratic value-based Indo-US cooperation in defence, technology, health, and regional security facets. However, as the US rigorously emphasizes “competitive advantage of democratic values and human rights” in its strategy, India would also need to understand how issues of human rights can play out in this mosaic.

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