

Focus
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**The US Security Leadership in Asia-Pacific and China's
Countermeasures**

(This study sheds lights on China's attempts to neutralize the
Security Leadership of the US in Asia-Pacific through its
Economic Coup).

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Introduction

The advent of the 21st century brought with itself a shift from the "American Century" towards the "Asian Century" and it enhanced the significance of Asia-Pacific region by manifolds. The region of Asia-Pacific has emerged as the central playing field for the strategic competition between the United States and China. Both the great powers are employing different strategies in the power struggle to counter the influence of each other, and they have their own reasons to do so. The US is increasing its footprints in the region to contain China in its neighborhood and not to allow it to expand its sphere of influence. The US feels threatened, due to China's increasing economic and military influence. They are aware of the fact, that China has the potential to cripple the superpower status of America and to deal with China they have adopted a hegemonic approach to topple the increasing influence of China in international system in general and particularly in Asia-Pacific region. They have devised a full-blown China containment policy to prevent it from dominating the US sphere of influence and impeding the Geo-political interests of

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the US. That is evident from the US “Pivot to Asia” policy developed back in 2011, that has guided American maneuvers and policy in a region extending from the United States Pacific coast all the way to India.

The US accelerated its efforts towards China’s containment under the Donald Trump administration. Surprisingly, the National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) in Trump’s era which was, initially set to be released to the public at the end of 2022,¹ revealed rare insights into how the US perceives its opponents and allies in the region. The strategy focused on ways, how to maintain the US strategic edge and promote a liberal economic order. While, preventing China from establishing new and so called ‘new-illiberal sphere of influence’. The Declassifying of National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) before time, was a symbolic effort by the President Trump to put more pressure on China and to accelerate its anti-China efforts in the form of an ongoing trade war, US commitment to defense of Taiwan and accusing it of the censorship of the outbreak of Covid-19. The US leadership currently, is employing the hegemonic and hard military approach to challenge the rise of China. They are exploiting the volatile situation in Asia-Pacific due to competing claims over issue of East and South China Sea. The US raised the level of hostility through the revival of Quad, by approving large defense deals with Taiwan including military capacity building, security alliances in the region, multilateral exercises, and deployment of sophisticated military hardware. China perceives the Security leadership role of the US against its sovereignty and core national interests. To neutralize the Security leadership of the US, they are focusing on soft balancing approach based on their economic prowess and diplomatic tools. China is seeking ways to

attract the US allies to counter the US containment policy through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), economic initiatives such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The success of Chinese efforts can be measured in terms of its success in attracting the regional allies of the US and they consider that after the integration of these states in these economic ventures, it would neutralize an all-out anti-China military alliance in the region. It is with this regard, this paper sheds light on the broader context of the China's attempt to neutralize the Security leadership of the US in Asia-Pacific and to secure its core national interests.

South China Sea a Bone of Contention Between Major Powers

The South China Sea spans from Singapore to Taiwan Strait and it covers an area of 1.4 million square miles and composed of several islands, reefs, and rocks, which are part of Parcel and Spratly islands. The South China Sea is critical for economic, military, and strategic purpose and is rich in resources like oil and gas reserves. The competing claims of the regional states like China, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia over this territory and waters of the South China Sea is - making it one of the most controversial and contested regions in the world. China has asserted it as a core national interest and says that it has irrefutable sovereignty over it. The region is extremely important for the regional powers including China, Japan, and the US due to its strategic location. This region has much importance because it is the hub of economic maritime passage from West to East. Around \$5 trillion worth of goods flow

through these waters² and the seabed contain 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.³ Other than that, 80% of Asian trade passes through this region and that is nearly the one-third part of all worlds maritime trade.

The South China has not always been in a conflict situation however, the tensions occurred when China started building artificial islands in this region and inside the Exclusive Economic Zone of Philippines and Malaysia according to its nine-dash line plan. This claim was made by China because of the number of lines on the original map made by a Chinese geographer Yang Hua rein.⁴ However, this claim was rejected because it does not fall under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Since most of the Asian region was ruled by Chinese emperors hence China still considers the South China Sea as its part because of its geopolitical importance. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) issued its judgement and upheld the rights of the ASEAN claimants to their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), noting that the Chinese claims had no legal basis. China, however, neglected lawfulness during this dispute and signaled to claim it with military power. However, China is not considering a war as an option and itself wishes to avoid military dimension. China is probably going to achieve enough influence within the region to challenge and force the US utterly from the South China Sea. Beijing does not attempt to provoke a war with its neighbors because it would be too costly and harmful. This can be especially because of the value of a war with America and its East Asian allies would not be worth the potential territorial gains. Instead, China is working from a rational viewpoint and conducts its actions with the well-thought-out results. At a similar time, it is progressively evident that China is

not content about maintaining the North American nation current status quo within the regional balance of power.

China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region created vacuum for the US to play a major security leadership role. The US denounced the unilateral actions by China and termed it against the established norms, to impose its will on the region. Many regional countries contesting over the South China Sea intended to become the US allies. They welcomed the engagement of the US to ward off over whelming Chinese influence in the region. They preferred a dynamic equilibrium to deter coercion and conflict. The involvement of the US in Asia-Pacific to keep a close eye on the maritime status, navigational freedom, and its commitments to regional countries infuriated China. They consider it as an effort against their core national interests and international stakes. To deal with the growing influence of the US, China is currently pursuing soft approach to counter the alliance led by the US. They are monitoring the regional developments carefully and are working on long term policies aimed at dealing with the imminent security threat posed by the US and its allies in the region.

New Pressing Developments and Challenges for China

The new pressing developments in the Asia-Pacific region suggests that all is not well for China as the US is preparing a playing field, to challenge the regional influence of China. They both are the new players of geo-strategic chessboard and are challenging the influence of each other through different means. Both the states are moving towards hostile mode and their

strategic competition is driving the region towards the chaos, hostility, and instability.

Revival of Quad

The revival of Quad poses a serious challenge to the growing influence of China both at regional and international level. The Quad basically is an informal security alliance of Australia, Japan, India, and the US aimed at creating a rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific region. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Confluence of the Two Seas gave the idea of Security Diamond that would ensure the interests of like-minded democracies.⁵ The main reason behind the formation of the Quad is to make a security partnership against China, the Quad countries are taking special measures such as joint exercises for advancing military interoperability and to improve their capacity building in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent development of first Quad Summit under President Biden on March 12, 2021 along with Prime Minister Modi of India, Japanese Premier Yoshihide Suga and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison emphasized the need for an open and free Indo-Pacific region.⁶ They signaled China that they will not accept the China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region and the security alliance led by the US aims to balance the Chinese threat and maintain a balance of power. The Quad members have their own unique set of strategic imperatives to revive the Quad and to send out a signal to China that the Quad is serious about its China containment policy. If we look at India, they will benefit in term of security dividend and to take care of the more severe threats to its security, as is evident from Doklam and Ladakh crisis. They will also benefit from bilateral US arms transfers, sharing of intelligence, military

exercises, logistics, trade and investment relationship and their status as a major power that played a major role in the making of a redesigned world order less susceptible to Chinese power. Japan on the other hand consider the revival of Quad to secure its maritime security and to balance the China's advancement of its military capacity. They are also actively working with the Quad members to safeguard their national interests related to Senkaku islands. Australia consider itself as anchor of peaceful, rule-based order in the Asia-Pacific and they have ramped up their efforts to challenge Chinese actions in the South China Sea. China perceives the revival of Quad led by the US against its economic, military, trade, and maritime interests. China accused the US of stoking tensions in the region to achieve their vested interests and to maintain its global primacy.

Multilateral Exercises

The second most destabilizing factor and challenge faced by China is the multilateral exercises in the Asia-Pacific region. The Malabar exercise is one of the most important multilateral exercise that began in 1992 as a bilateral exercise between the Indian Navy and the US Navy. Japan became its permanent member in 2015 and now Australia has also been included in it in 2020.⁷ There is now a consensus among Quad states that China is a major threat to open societies, economic self-reliance, rule-based regime and to liberal democracy. The Malabar exercise strengthened the cooperation and resolve of these states to act against any Chinese attempts to impose its hegemony under the leadership of the US.

The other important development in the region in term of multilateral exercise was France led multination exercise called

'Le Perouse' commenced in the Bay of Bengal on April 5, 2021. All Quad countries participated in it along with France. China considers the Joint military exercise as a publicity stunt to draw more NATO members into its Indo-Pacific military framework and to invite them to cooperate with the future military operations in the region led by the US. The other important pressing development was the two-week joint military exercise between the US and Philippines in the South China sea from April 12, 2021.⁸ The annual Balikatan exercise come amid the rising China-US tensions in the South China Sea. China in a response to the US provocation deployed a carrier task group led by the aircraft carrier "Liaoning", accompanied by the latest Type 055 destroyer for the first time this year in the region.⁹ These all developments and gathering of many rival warships in proximity suggest a worrying trend in the region. The situation is highly volatile and has the potential to lead the US and China towards Armed conflict.

Arm Sales to Taiwan

China considers Taiwan as their sovereign part and since 1949, they have never diplomatically recognized the democratically ruled Taiwan. When the US and China first established diplomatic relations in the 1970s the US pledged to engage only in economic and unofficial relations with Taiwan. Under the government's One China principle, any country that maintains relations with China is not allowed to recognize Taiwan diplomatically. But in recent years tensions are running high over Taiwan between the US and China. The US is deepening the relationship with self-ruled Taiwan due to China's military activity around the island. The US is supporting Taiwan through arm sales

to modernize its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability. The US planned sale of armed MQ-9 reaper drones, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, air-launched SLAM and mobile light rocket launcher.¹⁰ Recently, the head of Taiwan's defense ministry's strategic planning section announced that they are looking forward to procure air to surface missiles with a possible range of 925km from the US.¹¹ The purpose is to bolster the defense capability and to give Taiwanese aircraft the capability to hit targets far inside China over the South China Sea. China strongly opposes the plans of arms sales to Taiwan and urged the US to cease US-Taiwan military contacts. The President Biden sent former US senator Chris Dodd and former deputy secretaries of state Richard Armitage to Taipei which further raised the level of hostility between the US and China. The American side described the trip as a personal signal aimed at their commitment to Taiwan and its democracy. China reacted by holding live-fire drills off Taiwan Strait¹² and it acts as a clear warning to foreign powers not to intervene in their internal matter. These developments indicates that Taiwan is one of the major sources of tension between the US and China. China considers it as meddling in its internal affairs and effort by the US to play a major security leadership role in the region.

US-Japan First Summit under Biden Administration

The US and Japan have renewed their alliance in all domains in first Summit under the US Biden administration. The US president Joe Biden and Japan's Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide vowed to maintain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Both sides exchanged views regarding China's

activities in the region, conflicts in the East and South China Sea, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. They also discussed ways to boost their defense capabilities to further their alliance to maintain regional security. They also issued the Joint statement, where we can see that the Biden administration has shown more inclination towards promoting Japan's role in enhancing the regional security. They also discussed the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and publicly mentioned Taiwan since 1969.¹³ Their Joint statement irked China and they have shown opposition to it. China in a response reiterated its "One-China Principle" and supreme sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the waters around them.

Strategic Competition Act

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the US approved the Strategic Competition Act of 2021. It is a recipe for a New-Cold War and depicts China as the most serious current and future threat to the US, its allies, and global interests in multiple areas including technology, economics, and military security. The overall thrust of the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 is that China is an adversary that cannot be negotiated with and the act also specifies that it does not promote military solutions to the US-China conflicts. But it does promote the US cooperation with allies as well as reinforcement of the US capabilities to counter China. It is basically exaggerated depiction of the threats China poses to the US and the World. In a nutshell, the Strategic Competition Act has the potential to further complicate the troubled relation between the US and China.

These all-pressing developments in the Asia-Pacific regions shows that the US is playing a major security leadership

role one way or another way. They are collaborating with the regional countries to form an alliance against China to challenge its assertiveness. On the other hand, they have deployed their finest maritime war assets in the region including USS Ronald Reagan, USS Theodore Roosevelt Super carriers, B-52 bombers, F-35 aircrafts, USS Montgomery littoral combat ships, and an amphibious assault warship.¹⁴ China perceive these developments as a threat to its national security and they are working on counter measures to neutralize the security leadership of the US through soft balanced approach.

Countermeasures by China

China is concerned about the growing regional influence of the US and they are trying hard to counter it through soft balanced approach.

China's Economic Initiatives

As military conflict will be costly China is seeking other ways to counter the US led security and containment efforts in the Asia-Pacific region. They understand that their real strength is their economic prowess and strong economic ties with the neighboring small and middle powers. They are working on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), economic initiatives such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and recently signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to counter an all-out anti-China military alliance in the region. Through the BRI they aim to invest more than \$1 trillion in 72 countries. Beside the investment in the infrastructure development sector, they also emerged as the world's largest creditor, having lent more than \$1.5 trillion around the globe.¹⁵ Similarly, they also planned

two economic corridors, China-Indochina Peninsula corridor and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor under the BRI projects for regional integration. Primarily, the BRI was a domestic development strategy to fix the imbalance between various industries and regions. Now, the BRI is a top-level design to open China and its economic diplomacy. The US side perceive it as a political and economic threat to their interests. They are worried about the new type of globalization that China has initiated, to counterbalance the US hegemony in geopolitics and the global economy.

The success of Chinese efforts can be measured in terms of its success in attracting the US regional allies to join their economic initiatives. It is visible from the fact that Australia, India, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam are the members of AIIB. The other most important development in the region was the signing of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between the 15 Asia-Pacific countries. It was the biggest free trade deal between 10 Southeast Asian economies along with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and China.¹⁶ The RCEP solidifies China's regional geopolitical ambitions around the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and will help them to draft the rules of trade in the region. It also provides a major signal to investors that the Asia-Pacific region is still committed to multilateral trade integration. RCEP is considered as a victory over US leadership in Asia. China become the leading protector of regional free trade, as the US pulled itself out of Trans-Pacific-Partnership (TPP) under President Trump leadership. The success of China is visible as some of the US closest partners like Australia and Japan joined RCEP. These economic initiatives will help China and other regional countries

to lower their level of hostility. Their close cooperation related to economic and trade links will help them to avert the major conflict in the region.

China and regional countries of Pacific coast have political and military disputes, but they do not allow their divergent interests in any area of interaction to deter the convergent ones in others. They are rather inclined to preserving and creating space for cooperation in economic sector. Today, Japan is China's third-largest source of foreign investment and third largest trading partner. The trade volume has increased from \$1 billion to some \$317 billion over the past 45 years.¹⁷ China is Japan's largest export market and trading partner, and it represents more than 20% of Japan's total trade. The success of China is visible from the fact that, Japan had refused to join Trump's trade war with China and later joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which is dominated by China. The other important country in the Asia-Pacific is Australia. The Australia-China bilateral relationship is based on strong economic and trade complementarities. The relationship between the two powers is considered as a comprehensive strategic partnership. China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner in goods and services and their two-way trade reached \$251 billion in 2019-2020.¹⁸ China remained Australia's biggest services export market particularly in education and tourism. On the other hand, China is the sixth-largest foreign direct investor in Australia. They invested around \$46 billion in 2019 accounting for 4.5 per cent of total foreign direct investment. So, China can utilize their economic prowess to press Australia to move away from zero-sum mentality and to seek cooperation without abusing the concept of national security to pressure cooperation with China.

The other most important economic relation in the region is between China and ASEAN. China has officially claimed to interact with Southeast Asian counterparts in accordance with its 2+7 cooperation framework, which covers economics, security, and development issues. China's primary focus is to advance cooperation on finance, development, and trade. They also focus on non-traditional security, economics, and development cooperation, which are the elements of China's enhanced engagement in the region. The other most important development was that, that ASEAN becomes China's largest trading partner in 2020, with 7% growth and the trade volume hitting \$731.9 billion.¹⁹ China and ASEAN have enjoyed strong regional economic reciprocity, which have played a significant part in the growth of bilateral trade and economic cooperation. The other most important development is that recently, Chinese firms, banks and government bodies have increasingly invested in large hydropower projects in the Mekong sub-region. Chinese institutions turn to Southeast Asia, where they are involved in more than 50 on going large hydropower projects in Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos. These Chinese institutions maintained strong influence on environmental and social practices as well as on trade and diplomatic relations. These all developments gave China leverage to counter the Security leadership of the US in the region and to achieve its own political, economic, security, and trade interests.

Vaccine Diplomacy

The Second most important policy option for China is to conduct Vaccine diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region to counter the US influence. At present moment, the US and their regional

allies like India are facing crisis from Covid-19. The latest surge has driven India's fragile health systems to the breaking point, and we can assume that they are not able to help other regional states. Surprisingly, China offered help to India by saying that "China is willing to provide the necessary support and help" to fight Covid-19.²⁰ On the other hand, the recent meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister and counterparts from Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in China was a positive step to discuss vaccine distribution and help with post pandemic recovery. This move will improve the trust level between China and Southeast Asia. It also provided China rare opportunity to improve its soft image and to neutralize the leadership role of the US.

Diplomatic Engagement

The third policy option for China is to utilize the Diplomatic tools to ease the tension in the East and South China Sea. China can address the concerns of regional states through diplomatic engagements and Confidence Building Measures. As the continuous tensions will make the US relevant to the security assurances of the states in the Pacific. It is an opportunity for China to work with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for an effective and substantive code of conduct for all activities in the South China Sea. As any military conflict in the region will lead them towards the chaos, instability, and destruction therefore China by using its economic clout can redress the threat perceptions of the neighbors and can reduce their dependence on the US security commitments in the region. It is understood that the US military activities in the Asia-Pacific are aimed against China. Therefore, neutralizing the stances of

allies in the Pacific region will question the undue security leadership of the US in the region.

Defensive Capabilities

The fourth policy option for China is to develop its defensive capabilities to deal with the emerging threat from the US led Quad. As China's prominence has risen in international arena, so too has its global interests. To protect their geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geostrategic goals they should develop strong power projection capabilities. They should understand that the regional strategic landscape is going through profound changes. The US and its regional allies have adjusted its national security and defense strategies in a way that provoked the strategic competition. The US is engaging in technological and institutional innovation in pursuit of absolute military superiority. These developments are raising alarm bells for China, they should focus on defensive capabilities to protect their national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, maritime rights, and interests. On the other hand, they can improve their soft image through actively participating in the UN peacekeeping operations, international humanitarian assistance, and by maintaining the security of international passages. It will help them to counter the growing influence of the US and to safeguard their own core national interests.

Key Takeaways

The overall developments in the Asia-Pacific region shows that the US is playing the major security leadership role and they are pursuing their policy to contain the rise of China. The US greater engagement in the Asia-Pacific region shows their quest

to dominate the region because they believe that the future of world politics would be decided in Asia. The once neglected region emerged as the central playing field between the major powers and gained popularity due to its tremendous economic growth. The region in recent years have experienced greater hostility due the contention of sovereignty over disputed areas. These disputes forced the regional states to heavily invest in their defense sector and to modernize their armies. The region's significance has also increased due to the rise of potential rival in the shape of China and the US is trying hard to contain this potential rival in its neighborhood. They are adopting a rebalancing political and military strategy in the region to contain the influence of China. On the other hand, China is focusing on soft balanced approach and still adheres to its policy of peaceful development. But in recent years the developments show that, they are more assertive in stabilizing the external environment necessary for its economic development.

Now, China is very much concerned about the developments in the region like revival of Quad, Multilateral exercises aimed against it, the US arms supplies to Taiwan and close collaboration between Japan and the US. China to neutralize the influence of the US is focusing on trade links through BRI, AIIB, and RCEP. They consider that economic Joint ventures, trade links, diplomatic engagement and their soft approach towards the regional countries will counter an all-out anti-China alliance in the region. The regional countries of Southeast Asia are feeling the heat of tussle between the US and China. They are trapped in uneasy situation and are trying hard to balance their relations with both great powers. They do not support the element of competition in the region and advocates

reliance on rule-based regimes and mechanisms to ensure the settlement of long pending disputes and to avert major military clash in the region. They also tried to encourage the claimant states to address various security challenges ahead without becoming embroiled in existing territorial, political and strategic rivalries that have the potential to undermine regional stability and security apparatus. Therefore, all regional, extra-regional and major powers should work together to resolve their key issues through peaceful means. They should increase their diplomatic engagements to build trust level to seek comprehensive solutions of all existing problems in the domain of politics, economics, and military.

The other important aspect is a shift in the US policy from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific which renders India the leading partner role to contain China. India being an important country of the US led Quad fully supports the freedom of navigation policy, over flight, and unimpeded commerce based on the principles of international law. China perceives the role of India against its national interests and consider it as a security threat to its regional and international ambitions. India is desperately working on a single-point agenda to counter the Chinese influence in its neighborhood and to achieve that goal they are looking for enhanced cooperation with the US. In recent years, the growing defense cooperation between India and the US raised alarm bells not only for China but also for Pakistan. They both consider it as a security threat to their political, economic, and security interests. China is concerned about Malacca dilemma; India has naval capabilities near the Indian Ocean chokepoints especially around the Malacca strait which connects the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. These waters hold a lot of importance for China

since it is crucial route for trade and energy. Eighty per cent of China's oil import come through the Malacca strait and China is concerned about their maritime interests as India has been strengthening its maritime cooperation with the Quad countries. China to counter the regional hegemony of India, started China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it gave China another route to secure their trade, economic, and maritime interests. On the other hand, Pakistan considers its strategic partnership with China as a counter force against the Indian regional aspirations. China through its economic initiatives, Vaccine diplomacy, Diplomatic engagement and defensive capabilities is successfully countering the US leadership role in the Asia-Pacific region. The study shows that, China has successfully lured the Pacific countries into its economic orbit through BRI, AIIB, RCEP, ASEAN 2+7 cooperation framework and its hydro power projects in Mekong regions.

Conclusion

The developments discussed in the study shows that the US has shifted its focus from the European affairs into Asian affairs and it is playing a greater Security role in the region. The region of Asia-Pacific has emerged as the playing field for the strategic competition between the US and China. They both are employing different strategies to undermine the influence of each other. The US is employing hard military approach and to counter it China is using its economic prowess. At present moment, both the great powers are locked in a conflict to exert their influence in the region. Their efforts have the potential to lead the region towards uncertainty and instability. To avoid any major conflict, they should focus on ways to resolve their differences and to move

towards the sustainable peace. It will be a great favor to the regional stability and development.

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