

Sino-US Disorder: Power and Policy in Post-COVID Indo- Pacific

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Abstract

Great powers have invested in order-building projects with competing vision of political values and ideologies. How the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic shapes the balance of power and order are debated. The pandemic arrived in the midst of Sino-US strategic contestation, a crumbling European project, de-globalisation and contested economic governance architecture. While the pandemic exacerbated Washington abdicating leadership role, Beijing also has alienated itself from the followers of rules based order. It has sharpened the clash of rhetoric, narratives, and perceptions. The pandemic will reorganise the international system and power structures. Situating the Indo-Pacific project in this backdrop, this article critically analyses the debates, discourses and nuanced divergences that are shaping the Indo-Pacific puzzle in the power corridors of Washington, Tokyo and Delhi, in addition to mapping Beijing's approach to Indo-Pacific. The article evaluates the contrast in their respective visions of order, China strategy, ASEAN centrality and multilateral free-trade regimes. But these subtle departures have not restricted major Indo-Pacific powers to weave a strategic web of democracies and pursue a win-win issue-based multi-alignment on matters of mutual strategic interests. With new realities in play, the India-US-Japan triangle will feature as one of the key building blocks of Indo-Pacific to deliver on the shared responsibility of providing global public goods.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific strategy, Sino-US relations, India-US-Japan, China policy, world order

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Introduction

The pandemic is going to reorganise the international system and power structures. At this inflection point, how the pandemic shapes the balance of power, order, ideologies, interests and narratives are debated. The pandemic arrived in the midst of Sino-US strategic contest, driven by the quest for technological supremacy and leading the fourth Industrial Revolution. Also, there was the crumbling European project, de-globalisation and contested economic governance architecture before the pandemic. Post-COVID conversation dominating international relations evolves around the potency of the US-led international order (Nye, 2020). Some argue that the pandemic has presented a 'reordering moment' (Blackwill & Wright, 2020, p. 25). Yet others articulate that the pandemic will only accelerate rather than alter the basic direction of international history (Haass, 2020).

Nevertheless, the erosion of the post-war liberal world order, anchored on economic openness, security alliances, multilateral institutions and universal values, is a pre-pandemic feature. In the post-World War II era, American primacy in the world order has been nurtured through a regime of interlocking norms, rules, institutions and its capacity to deliver global public goods. However, with relative rise in comprehensive national power, China has embraced a more confident posture in shaping the order through the narrative of 'Peaceful Rise' and the 'China Dream'. There is an emerging discourse on a new Cold War in international relations literature. Debates on rise of China is framed in the template of 'revisionist' and the 'status quo' power.

China makes distinction between 'world order' and 'international order'. For Beijing, Pax-Americana is anchored on three poles: Western values, military alliances and the United Nations (UN) institutions. China favours 'international order', which refers to the UN-led order system and principles of international law (Ying, 2016). When China refers to international order, it does not imply the US-led world order. It implies the UN, its institutions and international law.

Chinese scholars have argued that China is a reform-minded status quo power (Xiao, 2015, p. 2040). One school of thought argues that China struggles between 'modifying by leading' and 'modifying by working together with others'. China wants 'only piecemeal modification of the existing order', and not a radical alteration (Tang, 2018, pp. 31–43). Over the years, China has evolved from a 'revolutionary order-challenger' to a 'reformist order-shaper' (Chen & Zhang, 2020, p. 440). China has progressively evolved its understanding as regards the positive elements of the order worthy of retaining and the flawed components that need reform. There are arguments suggesting Beijing is a 'revisionist stakeholder"', discontented not necessarily with the central rules but its own status within the hierarchy of the order (Zhao, 2018, p. 655). President Xi Jinping seeks to reshape the system in such a way that it manifests both Chinese values and interests, aligning institutions and norms to serve its own purposes, drawing from traditional Chinese philosophy and thoughts. Chinese thinkers have analysed China's strength through 'moral realism' and 'humane authority' underpinned in ancient Chinese philosophy and statecraft (Xuetong, 2019, pp. 1–23).

In the post-1945 period, US primacy in East Asia has faced the rise of Japan in 1970s–1980s and the rise of China since the 2000s (Foot, 2017, pp. 830–835). While Washington supported Tokyo's, and later Beijing's, integration into the global economic and financial system with the objective of determining their future course within the US-led world order, each country responded differently. The rise of Japan constituted an economic challenge to US primacy, but unlike China, Japan did not translate its economic clout into global strategic ambitions. Japan's grand strategy has remained embedded in its alliance with the US. However, as China returns to regional primacy, following the 'century of humiliation', it is reshaping global governance by contesting the core elements of the US-led order.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) perceives the US-led order as unsatisfactory (Zhang, 2018b, pp. 13–18) as Washington's liberalism exports democracy and human rights, and the hub-and-spoke alliance architecture, rooted in Cold War beliefs, is aimed at containing China (Fangyin, 2016, pp. 207–218). As Beijing remains dissatisfied, it is seeking change in the US-led order, which is founded on norms that are antagonistic to organising principles of the CCP and threatens regime's legitimacy (Rolland, 2020). Thus, China is expanding its geopolitical influence by employing geo-economic instruments. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is manoeuvred to advance the Pax-Sinica grand designs aimed at shaping a Sino-centric order by offering Chinese solutions to global governance employing Chinese wisdom.

The pandemic has sharpened the clash of rhetoric, narratives and perceptions. Chinese discourse following the pandemic suggests that the US has diluted the foundation of international order, and the system is falling apart (Bo, 2020) or manifesting a failed state (Wen, 2020). Twin pillars of American hegemony, military muscle and economic clout have a limited role in fighting the pandemic (Yi, 2020). The post-COVID new normal, marked by President Xi Jinping's 'bottom-line thinking', indicates that China will not stand down (Panyue, 2020) as its credibility, foreign policy and economy navigate colossal challenges (Huaying, 2020). Meanwhile, others have suggested that the idea of 'de-sinicisation' is an absolute delusion' since China is deeply integrated into the global economy. Meanwhile, de-Americanisation is also an impossibility, given American dominance in international security affairs (Yin, 2020).

As the pandemic exacerbated the US abdicating leadership role in the current world order, China also has alienated itself from the followers of the rules-based order. Even though the mismanagement of the pandemic led to China's Chernobyl moment, it also demonstrated erosion in American leadership. Both Beijing and Washington's power will be considerably diminished, both domestically and internationally, by this crisis. While the Fang Fang phenomenon has challenged China's larger legitimacy-building project, America's scapegoating of the WHO to divert attention from failed governance does not augur well for these great powers. There is a view emerging that 'neither a new Pax Sinica nor a renewed Pax Americana will rise from the ruins' (Rudd, 2020).

Great powers have invested in order-building projects with competing vision of political values, ideologies, norms and systems. Leading Chinese intellectuals

argue that China's ascendancy will redesign the US-dominated unipolarity and lead to a China–US-led bipolarity (Xuetong, 2018, p. 1). Whether this will churn a bipolar or a multiplex, or a multipolar order, is fiercely debated in international relations. The era of uneasy peace had set in even before the pandemic. With the Chinese challenge to American primacy, the Indo-Pacific project was launched.

This article, in the following sections, critically analyses fragmented power and perceptions on the Sino-US strategic rivalry. It decodes the shifts in the strategic thinking and traditional underpinnings of both Washington's China policy and Beijing's US policy. Furthermore, it sieves through Chinese narratives, cautiously devised to ease global mistrust captured by the China threat arguments, and evaluates how Chinese ideas have evolved over time in keeping with Beijing's grand strategic ambitions. It culls out how Chinese political elites perceive the US threat vis-à-vis communist party's political core and the state system. Situating the Indo-Pacific project in this backdrop, the article charts Washington's strategic manoeuvring from 'Pivot to Asia', to 'Rebalance to Asia-Pacific', to the latest 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). Subsequently, it decodes the policy debates, discourses and nuanced divergences in the major world capitals, including Washington, Tokyo and Delhi, on the Indo-Pacific, besides mapping the Chinese approach to Indo-Pacific. Successively, one of the emerging Indo-Pacific triangles—India–US–Japan—is evaluated as these Indo-Pacific powers navigate the risks and rewards that this unified strategic theatre has to offer.

Sino-US Strategic Contestation Pre-pandemic: Fragmented Power and Perception

China is framed as a 'strategic competitor' by the US and a 'systemic rival' by the European Union (EU). Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China and Washington's subsequent pro-engagement policies have failed US expectations (Campbell & Ratner, 2018, pp. 60–70). Today, Chinese realities have distraught fundamental assumptions in America's China strategy. Washington engaged China, especially, economically, while preserving a positive power balance in the Asia-Pacific. The strategic thinking behind engagement was to influence Beijing to be a 'responsible stakeholder' in the existing international system and also support spread of liberal ideas, and eventually to democratising political reforms (Friedberg, 2018, p. 11). Meanwhile, traditional underpinnings of China's US policy were guided by three factors: pursue economic modernisation to participate in the world economic system and global governance architecture; categorically outline sovereignty and 'core interest'; and respond to the US concerns to stabilise bilateral relations (Chengqiu, 2020, p. 38). Bilateral relations have followed the trajectory of forming an anti-Soviet alignment up until the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. Subsequently, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was 'unsettled accommodation', guided by pragmatic calculation, up until the Global Financial Crisis, which eventually paved the way for confrontation (Scobell, 2020, pp. 1–16).

Geostrategic realities and the domestic imperatives in both Beijing and Washington played a critical role in reassessing Sino-US relations. Erosion of US primacy and the unfolding power transition in Asia have led China to pursue great power ambitions with not only military modernisation and economic statecraft but also soft and sharp power instruments. In pursuit of core interests, Beijing is advancing its continental and maritime power. Chinese maritime behaviour is guided by the desire to promote a maritime order, which is founded on Chinese historical representation of the Sea. BRI encompasses maritime 'roads' and continental 'belts'. It has reinforced sea power in addition to its continental power. Thus, China double downed at sea denial and control within the first island chain and further invests in projecting maritime and air superiority in the second island chain. Meanwhile, with Chinese maritime assertiveness in western Pacific and potency of Anti-Access/Area Denial coupled with economic threats inflicted by theft of technology, predatory economics and influence operations, American policy discourse on China threat gained traction.

As China is returning, not rising, to pre-eminence, it is investing in reorienting the rules, norms, structures and institutions. Today, the competition is positioned on not just the trade and technology verticals but more so the competition for leadership in global governance and provision of global public goods. As the Sino-US strategic equilibrium takes shape, Chinese literature underscores diverging ideological, political and value systems, structural contradictions between a hegemon and a rising power, and conflicts of policy agenda as primary determining factors of Sino-US strategic rivalry (Zhao, 2019, pp. 371–394).

As great power competition has intensified, Chinese leaders have employed normative power, drawing from philosophical underpinnings to craft their narrative on China's 'Peaceful Rise'. To counter the 'China threat' discourses, China has carefully crafted narratives to persuade the international community that Beijing has no intent to change the global structure. Zheng Bijian designed the concept of China's 'Peaceful Rise', which later evolved into 'Peaceful Development' and dominates Chinese political lexicon. President Xi has built on the successes of former leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and pursued the 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation with the objective of reconfiguring the order to its advantage. The BRI and building a 'Community of Common Destiny' are Xi's two most prominent proposals in this regard (Ming, 2020, pp. 13–23).

One school of thought has defined Chinese foreign policy behaviour under President Xi as 'Peaceful Rise 2.0' (Zhang, 2015, pp. 5–19). This is underpinned by greater resolve to assertively protect national interests; continued commitment to 'Peaceful Development', contingent on reciprocity; and a proactive and coordinated approach in shaping a stable external environment to advance China's domestic development. President Xi demonstrates confidence in employing China's burgeoning power in pursuit of national interests and design a favourable external environment.

Similarly, Beijing's idea of a 'Community of Common Destiny' characterises its intent to advance a win-win cooperative model replacing the zero-sum template

in international relations (Zeng, 2016, pp. 517–541). ‘Community of Common Destiny’ is a major element in ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’. The objective remains to ease strategic mistrust concerning Beijing’s peaceful development model and thereby design a positive external setting to pursue economic advancement. There are divergences between ‘Peaceful Development’ concept and ‘Community of Common Destiny’. While China preferred to project a low posture when President Hu Jintao endorsed ‘Peaceful Development’, President Xi’s China is prepared to lead in global governance (Zhang, 2018a, pp. 196–207).

China’s global strategic ambitions manifested in various formulations including ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’ and ‘New Model of International Relations’, underpinned by win-win cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, 2013). Similarly, to the Chinese, Xi’s ‘Asia for Asians’ concept, critiqued by the West as China’s version of the ‘Monroe Doctrine’, advocates multilateral security and collective security in Asia (Wang & Meng, 2020, pp. 497–519). However, managing the US–China strategic equilibrium through a G2 or Dai Bingguo’s C2 model has failed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, 2012). Scholars have suggested to pursue the model of ‘co-ruling’ in order to avoid the ‘Thucydides trap’ as well as the ‘Churchill trap’ (Yuan, 2018, pp. 193–235) in the Sino-US stratagem.

Chinese discourse on Sino-US rivalry argues that political mainstream in Washington projects China as the ‘ideal enemy’ with pronounced ideological and cultural fault lines. As global terrorism has ceased to be a grave threat to homeland security, majority in the US have branded Beijing as the ‘next enemy’ (Jisi & Ran, 2019, pp. 1–10). Political elites in China are conditioned to think that Washington harbours ideas to disrupt Chinese political system, thereby undermine domestic politics and economy, which will have adverse impact on the ‘China Dream’. Chinese mainstream argue in favour of strengthening ideology against foreign intervention. Primary motivations behind Beijing’s foreign policy include ‘CPC’s political preservation, China’s economic prosperity and more Chinese power and prestige’ (Wang, 2005 pp. 669–694). China’s core interests are defined as ‘preserving China’s basic state system and state security; national sovereignty and territorial integrity; sustain stable development of the economy and society’ (Tsang, 2020, pp. 304–318). Document 9 categorically laid out that Party must decisively battle any attempt to encourage Western models of constitutional democracy or universal values.

In post-Cold War years, Washington is not accustomed to being tested by competitors. Fundamental shift in Sino-US relations started unfolding with the 2008 global financial crisis, which exposed the flaws of neoliberal policies and the ‘Washington Consensus’ model. Subsequently, President Obama’s Pivot to Asia policy and President Trump’s embracing a confrontational China policy defined in terms of ‘strategic competition’ marked a departure from the US engagement policy. With the aim of countering Beijing’s rising influence, Washington’s regional strategy is experiencing a shift from Rebalancing to Asia-Pacific to the FOIP (Liu, 2020, pp. 9–27).

Pivot to Indo-Pacific: Decoding Debates, Discourses and Divergences

Trump's Indo-Pacific Puzzle: Between 'America First' and a 'Repressive' Vision of Order

China's arrival as an important actor in the international system influenced American strategic manoeuvring from 'Pivot to Asia', to 'Rebalance to Asia-Pacific' to the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. The Indo-Pacific has arrived as unified strategic theatre anchoring the geopolitical and geo-economic balance of power. Strategic rivalry with China, underscored by competing 'free' as opposed to 'repressive' systems, is the defining feature of President Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy. The US has identified two modifiers to define the Indo-Pacific strategy: 'free' and 'open', essentially implying free from coercion on the one hand, and open sea lanes, logistics, infrastructure, investments and trade on the other. Washington's concern about the freedom of the seas and protecting the global commons led to the embracing of the FOIP. The US perception of China threat on its power and interests manifested not just in Trump's rhetoric, but matched by key policy documents, including the National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy. There is a notable bipartisan congressional-executive toughening in Washington's China policy since the Cold War (Sutter, 2019, pp. 519–537).

Policy debates in Washington suggest that the Pivot to Asia or Rebalance to Asia-Pacific gave way to FOIP in the national security lexicon primarily because this unified strategic plank lays emphasis on the maritime character of the region by coupling the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. In addition to normative significance, it firmly positions India, an emerging continental and maritime power, in US grand strategy. Gen. McMaster enunciated that Indo-Pacific 'captures the importance of India's rise'. Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy co-opts India as a rising democratic power to help manage China's rise, as Washington is experiencing relative erosion of power (Scott, 2018, p. 36). The strategy also underpins the importance of nurturing a web of regional powers, including Japan, India and Australia, to stand with the US in addressing the challenge of China. Bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral networks with India, Australia and Japan is one of the key pillars of Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Meanwhile, scholarly debates in China on Indo-Pacific have suggested that the US FOIP is premised against China's BRI, as the West debates Beijing's strategic intent towards shaping the order on the verticals of global governance standards. The leadership has raised doubts about the effectiveness of this strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, March 2018). One school of thought has framed Chinese 'nonchalance' (Zhang, 2019, pp. 187–212) towards the Indo-Pacific, primarily being shaped by Beijing's confidence in its robust financial resources to pursue mega-regional economic designs and its ability to tap the strategic leverage to manage emerging challenges. There is a growing confidence in Beijing that Washington is constrained in terms of serving a new

'Marshall Plan' while competing with China. Moreover, China is also acutely aware that Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a key component of the Indo-Pacific strategy, would refuse to accept a predominantly China-focused design and opt sides as great powers compete in this maritime super-region. There are apprehensions that the Indo-Pacific strategy may dilute ASEAN's centrality. Some have argued ASEAN as the weak spot in the Indo-Pacific strategy that Beijing can leverage. China should support ASEAN's Indo-Pacific vision, which strikes a balance between Sino-US competition, in order to manage the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Chinese strategic and academic community has engaged in a debate on Trump's FOIP. Some have argued in favour of embracing a greater neighbourhood strategy with robust diplomatic investments, augmenting coordination with great powers, for example, Russia, and charm regional middle powers in reaction to US Indo-Pacific strategy (Wang & Meng, 2020, pp. 497–519). Meanwhile, others do not perceive a zero-sum equation between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific strategy and refuse the idea of rejecting Indo-Pacific altogether as they see compatibilities between BRI and the Indo-Pacific strategy, which present opportunities for selective cooperation. Others have argued that Beijing must deliberate on the Indo-Pacific as a means to make further inroads into the Indian Ocean Region.

Meanwhile, scholarly debates in the US have presented a wide range of analyses. The key question remains: Will Trump's strategic competition with China be successful in accomplishing a free and open Indo-pacific or will it unleash a new Cold War? One school of thought articulated that President Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy is founded on a zero-sum competition, which will aggravate China and alarm allies. Moreover, Indo-Pacific strategy advocates pursuing a robust network of regional democracies to restrict China from diluting the rules-based order and universal liberal values. However, reliance on a concert of like-minded democratic states, including India and Japan, are 'poorly suited to serve as the anchor of an Indo-Pacific strategic domain antagonistic to Beijing' (Swaine, 2018), which other Asian powers would refrain from taking a position in a Sino-US strategic contest. Accentuating the ideological fault lines and adopting an adversarial stance towards Beijing risk a futile Cold War with Beijing.

Between Obama's Rebalance to Asia-Pacific and Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, the key difference is the latter's zero-sum confrontational approach towards China even though both are premised on China's rise and its impact on regional power balance. Moreover, there is a marked departure in weaving the regional trade architecture and preserving the core tenets of the liberal economic order. Unlike Rebalance strategy, Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy has eroded traditional foundation of free and open regional trade and investment system. Critiques have argued that while President Trump acted on the need to revisit Washington's China policy at a time when Beijing's destabilising approach has undermined American leadership and strategic interests, the incongruities between his 'America First', driven by nationalism and an insular transactional approach on the one hand, and the Indo-Pacific strategy premised on Sino-US strategic competition on the other, have weakened US management of narratives, perceptions and influence. Trump's threat-oriented protectionist policy choices

demonstrate that Washington's preference on promoting collective good is hijacked by narrow unilateral aims (Ford, 2020). The triumph of Trump's policy choices will be contingent on the degree to which its fiercely competitive strategic posturing will deliver in advancing the goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Abe's 'Confluence of the Two Seas': Managing Interests in the US–China–Japan Triangle

With China's rise, Indo-Pacific has become the key anchor of strategic thinking in Japan, India, Australia, France and ASEAN. Japan's Indo-Pacific vision is founded on Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's conceptualisation of 'Confluence of the Two Seas', as articulated in his landmark speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [MOFA], 2007). Tokyo has embedded its strategic thinking in the primacy of universal value-oriented frameworks. Influential Japanese thinkers argued that twenty-first century Japan must refrain from pursuing power alone but seek justice founded on universal values (Kanehara, 2017). Gradually, the debate on Japan's grand strategy suggested that universal values must constitute the underlying principle of Japanese interaction with the world. Thus, Japan innovated a few value-based designs even before conceptualising the FOIP. This includes the 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity', 'Confluence of the Two Seas', 'Quadrilateral Initiative' and 'Democratic Security Diamond'.

The primary objective of Tokyo's Indo-Pacific policy is to maintain strategic stability in the US-led international system. Tokyo has serious reservations on a Sino-centric regional order. It has postured as a stabiliser of US-led order (Taniguchi, 2019, pp. 172–176) and an ardent champion of international norms and rules and custodian of global commons in the Indo-Pacific (MOFA, 2013). Japan is demonstrating its strategic intent by reorienting the post-war security posture, bolstering its alliance with the US and knitting a network of universal values-based allies and strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific. Following the War, US–Japan alliance constitutes the fundamental pillar of Japan's security policy. Tokyo has functioned as a key pillar in the American hub-and-spokes San Francisco system of alliances, which fortified the regional balance of power through forward deployment of American forces. Japan continues to invest in the alliance as a matter of highest policy significance, with the intent of determining a regional order conducive to Tokyo's national interests.

The year 2020 commemorates six decades of the 'US–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security'. Conception of this alliance was guided by American post-war priority to design a conducive strategic order by way of forward deployment and make the best use of US power to restrict communism and control Tokyo's absorption into the international system (Cha, 2009/2010), pp. 158–196). American presidents Truman and Eisenhower grasped that Tokyo may aim for great power status at a later date, and therefore their goal was to convert Japan as an ally so that the US could wield influence over its evolution as a status quo power supportive of US interests. With assurance of American extended deterrence

and alignment with the 'free world', Tokyo's disarmament and pacification was attained through Article 9 of the constitution. The pragmatists in Tokyo perceived Article 9 as a decisive instrument to protect Tokyo's interests within the alliance. Meanwhile, Beijing's analysis of the US–Japan alliance has evolved since the post-Cold War period. China's discourse has made a marked departure from this alliance being a potent constraint on Japan's remilitarisation during the 1990s, to the argument that US–Japan security nexus adversely affects Beijing's interest in the mid-2000s (Xinbo, 2005, pp. 117–130).

Since inception, the US–Japan alliance has functioned as a public good, securing strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific. But alliance management has not always been an easy task. Through the Cold War and post-Cold War years, Tokyo has made adjustments in its role within the alliance framework. Being the secondary power dependent on the system leader for its security, Tokyo has navigated the alliance dilemma in the form of fear of abandonment and entrapment. There are fears of 'entrapment' for the US and 'abandonment' for Japan. Moreover, burden sharing has remained a heated debate not just in bilateral relations but also in domestic political debates in Tokyo and Washington. Two schools of thought drove the discussion on burden sharing. The debate was between a straight build-up/specific reciprocity method and a division of labour/diffused reciprocity method, which recognises contributions to non-defence-related verticals, for instance, peacekeeping and strategically oriented development assistance (Committee on Armed Services House of Representatives, 1989, pp. 4–5). In the Cold War years, the US policy discussions evaluated Tokyo's role through the prism of a 'free-rider' or 'buck-passing' narrative. Post-war Japan's robust economic foundation led Washington to demand a more equitable distribution of burden sharing. The US urged Japan to shoulder greater responsibility within the alliance and spend about 3 per cent of its GNP each year on defence (Library of Congress, 1987–1988). But encouraging Tokyo's military build-up was intensely debated with reference its repercussions for regional security in East Asia.

For Tokyo, managing the alliance and hedging against American abandonment continues to pose a colossal challenge under Trump's 'America First' template. Navigating the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges within the US–China–Japan triangle is a litmus test for Prime Minister Abe (Basu, 2020). Thus, over the years, Tokyo has pragmatically attuned its approach to Indo-Pacific concept from a 'strategy' into a 'vision', touted as FOIP 1.0 and FOIP 2.0, respectively (Hosoya, 2019, pp. 18–28). The Indo-Pacific strategy or FOIP 1.0 of 2016 was primarily crafted as a China-centric strategy. However, impulsiveness in President Trump's attitude vis-à-vis traditional allies and hedging against US abandonment, and securing geo-economic interests in the middle of the Sino-US trade war, compelled Abe to adjust policy choices. With American departure from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Abe had to lead the way, compelled by apprehensions that if Tokyo refrained from assuming a positive role in influencing the regional trade architecture, Beijing's path to establishing primacy will be smoother. Geo-economically, Japan has no other choice but to continue to champion free trade.

In addition to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Abe concluded Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU following Brexit. Also, Japan is leading the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) debate to include its special strategic partner India with the goal of offsetting Beijing's influence.

Abe's strategic calculations are influenced by policy deliberations on whether President Trump, lacking nuanced perspective on alliance politics, risks US retrenchment from East Asia (Basu, 2019). Trump's impulsiveness has compelled Abe to reorient Tokyo's China policy. Thus, Tokyo's Indo-Pacific vision or FOIP 2.0 attuned as a relatively more cooperative construct, predominantly guided by some hesitations in Tokyo on embracing a purely confrontational stance towards China as regards economic issues (Kawashima et al., 2019). Policy debates on Abe's China strategy reflects deep fault lines between policy elites. This manifested with Nikai Toshihiro and Imai Takaya taking the lead in China policy over Yachi Shotaro and Kanehara Nobukatsu. Abe's goal is to avoid framing FOIP as a divisive scheme so that it can garner ASEAN support. It is important to note that the seeming calm in Sino-Japanese relations since 2017 is superficial and shaped by tactical calculations (Akita, 2018) instead of fundamental attitudinal changes, since disputed sovereignty and contested history issues continue to remain unresolved. Unilateral and coercive endeavours of Beijing to alter the status quo in the maritime domain in the South and East China Sea by way of carefully calculated grey-zone tactics constitute a key corner for Tokyo.

In case Sino-US strategic contest intensifies into conflict, Japan will be required to play a bigger role within the US–Japan alliance framework. To secure the Indo-Pacific from unilateral coercion in the maritime domain, the US and Japan have broadly aligned and integrated their respective strategies to manage common challenges and preserve the international order. But as outlined, Japan's alliance with the US has its own predicaments, particularly under Trump's 'America First' model. In the immediate future, alliance managers' skills will be tested as they discuss Host Nation Support under the 'cost plus 50' template besides Japanese local politics around US base relocation. At the same time, US–Japan alliance is instituted on shared universal values, robust democracies, strong economies and potent defence capabilities. The US–Japan alliance will endure as the fulcrum of Indo-Pacific security architecture in the coming decades.

Beyond the US alliance and China, Japan's Indo-Pacific vision accords priority to bolstering strategic partnerships with other like-minded democracies with the aim of advancing rules-based order, universal political values and securing maritime global commons. Japan's maiden National Security Strategy in 2013 argued in favour of 'cooperation with countries with which it shares universal values and strategic interests, such as the ROK, Australia, the countries of ASEAN, and India'. Japan has aligned its FOIP vision with key allies and strategic partners and is working together in robust bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral frameworks with Australia and India to deliver public goods in the Indo-Pacific.

Modi's Free, Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific: Leading Power in a Multi-polar Order

Indo-Pacific dominates New Delhi's policy parlance. While there was initial reticence about espousing the idea of the Indo-Pacific, Prime Minister Modi has demonstrated confidence in articulating India's own vision of a 'free, open, inclusive' Indo-Pacific. Domestic debate dwelled between perceiving it as an opportunity to advance India's global influence and others who analysed it as a US project to pull India into a containment ploy against China. While some dissected ideological problems, others were wary about the concrete utility of the concept. India's Indo-Pacific vision is situated within Modi's larger goals of empowering India as a leading power, rather than a balancer, in a multi-polar world order, defined by many centres of influence and stability (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019a).

Policy articulations from Delhi have advocated an open, inclusive and balanced Indo-Pacific defined by open sea lanes and rule of law, trade liberalisation and stressed the need to anchor the strategy in ASEAN unity. Unlike the US, India's Indo-Pacific encompasses the latitude between Africa and the Americas. The Indo-Pacific strategy draws from Modi's 'Act East' policy and the Indian Ocean vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Prime Minister Modi's speech at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue stressed that 'Competition is normal. But, contests must not turn into conflict; differences must not be allowed to become disputes'. India's template is pegged on a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, which is neither a 'club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). In the same speech, India has underscored the need to support rules-based order underpinned by freedom of the seas, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, rule of law and pursue infrastructure projects based on good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability.

The idea of Indo-Pacific has gained currency with the rise of China and its expanding interests in the Indian Ocean and the subcontinent on the one hand, and India's increasing footprint in the Pacific Ocean on the other (Raja Mohan, 2017). Some argued that India's Indo-Pacific reflects 'evasive balancing' approach since it manifests 'contradictory elements of balancing China by building partnerships with the United States as well as with regional powers, while simultaneously pursuing a reassurance strategy to convince Beijing that India is not really balancing China' (Rajagopalan, 2020, pp. 75–93). India's Indo-Pacific is essentially a subset of New Delhi's China policy. Indo-Pacific is to counter China's growing power and naval ventures in the Indian Ocean, which is perceived through the prism of strategic encirclement of India (Singh et al., 2018, p. 11) and concerns on the subject of freedom of the sea and protecting global commons, including the South China Sea. Meanwhile, India has stepped up in the Indian Ocean with its own humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations, maritime security and defence diplomacy, and infrastructure projects. Moreover, India has proposed the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) in November 2019. Yet others have articulated that India's approach to the Indo-Pacific seeks a leadership role

in cooperation with Southeast Asia, while ‘balancing’ its relations with Washington and Beijing (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018). While there is greater strategic depth in India–US relations founded on very similar value system of plurality and democracy, the rhetoric about containing China misses the complexity and the fact that China is too big to be contained.

New Delhi’s attitude towards geopolitical power play is shaped by a balance between autonomy and engagement (Basu, 2016). Fundamentals of Indian foreign policy has been guided by the pursuit of strategic autonomy, which has been the advanced avatar of non-alignment. The basic objective remains keeping independence (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019b) in decision-making, issue-based multi-alignments instead of alliances, and harnessing India’s material power while working with strategic partners. A view is emerging that the more India consolidates its power, the more Delhi must anticipate Beijing’s adverse reaction (Menon, 2020, p. 16), and thus India has to advance cooperation with other powers to pursue its interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Under Prime Minister Modi’s leadership, India has articulated greater strategic coordination where there is mutuality of interests. Modi pursues India’s quest for multi-polarity and leading power identity. To this end, India will pragmatically engage with not just great powers but also middle powers to ensure Indo-Pacific stability, which is critical for facilitating development. Indian policymakers’ primary responsibility is to bolster the nation’s economic foundation, technological potency and strategic leverage, in order to position India as a leading power in the multi-polar order. Currently, India’s power to craft global rules and regional architectures is limited (Gupta, 2020, p. 26). Former Foreign Secretary and now Foreign Minister Jaishankar rightly enunciated that as India pursues modernisation, it strives for resources and technology from major powers. ‘Both the United States and China—and indeed the ASEAN, Japan, Republic of Korea and Europe—can contribute to this transformation. The centrality of this commitment ensures that India will set a positive and inter-active agenda with other major powers and groupings’ (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015).

New Delhi is anticipated to confidently engage, but definitely not make formal alliances, with key regional powers to leverage strategic partnerships. This position is demonstrated in Delhi’s relations with Washington, Beijing, Moscow and other middle powers. Thus, while India has engaged in issue-based multi-alignments within India–Japan–US and India–Japan–Australia frameworks, it also values other frameworks like India–China–Russia, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Balance of interest has motivated policy choices since India does not conceive a zero-sum game in the Indo-Pacific.

India–US–Japan: Emerging Indo-Pacific Consensus

The objective of realising a ‘free’ and ‘open’ Indo-Pacific has paved the way for alignment of strategic interests, involving a web of democracies in an array of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral frames. India is positioned as a key variable in the unfolding power play in the Indo-Pacific. The India factor is dominating the

geopolitical dynamics that is shaping the Indo-Pacific debate in both the US and Japan. This has led to several Indo-Pacific triangular formulations involving India. One that has gained most attention is the India–US–Japan triangle. Despite huge asymmetry in normative and material power between these three democracies, India–US–Japan are committed to upholding rules-based order and international law, given the high geopolitical and geo-economic stakes each have in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing from the depth and scope of the strategic congruence in their respective bilateral relations with elevated 2+2 and ministerial-level trilateral meeting, they have invested political, economic and diplomatic capital in forward thinking while navigating the challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific.

All three—India, the US and Japan—have individually articulated their respective approach to the Indo-Pacific. Following the discussion in the previous section, it is evident that there are nuanced divergences in India, the US and Japan's Indo-Pacific understanding, in terms of perception of order, China strategy, approach towards Quadrilateral Consultations, ASEAN centrality and trade multilateralism. While critically analysing this Indo-Pacific triangle, one of the key features remain that two of the three nations are formal treaty alliance partners since the post-war decades. Thus, the primary objective for the US–Japan alliance remains advocating a US-led order, while the power balance shifts in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, India's policy choices were guided by the notion of strategic autonomy and the vision of a multi-polar order. Irrefutably, the relative primacy of each of these powers in the eyes of the others have elevated over decades; however, each power in this triangular frame are merely steered by its national interests. For instance, the China strategy of Washington, Tokyo and Delhi remains fragmented as Tokyo and Delhi have reservations in adopting a purely zero-sum approach towards Beijing, given its significance in the Asian calculus. There are differences on the issue of strategic utility of Quad and its future potential as a military alliance.

Japan is anchoring free trade and open markets, defending trade liberalisation and fighting protectionism. The US lost its leadership role in multilateral trading system by politicising trade under the 'America First' policy. The US under President Trump has snubbed international trade rules, whereas Tokyo has steered the negotiations both for CPTPP and the RCEP, crucial economic tools for geopolitical games. Washington's departure from the TPP and Delhi's unsettled concerns with RCEP have elevated doubts on trade multilateralism. There is no clarity on the economic pillar for the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Tokyo's Indo-Pacific bet is hinged on 'quality' infrastructure financing, while the US so far demonstrated an underwhelming engagement in this area. On infrastructure financing, though India upholds the principles of global governance standards along with the US and Japan, Delhi espoused a different line pertaining to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as compared to Washington and Tokyo.

Despite ASEAN's centrality featuring as the key anchor in each of these three power's Indo-Pacific discourse, President Trump has not prioritised ASEAN-centred multilateral frameworks. He neglected ASEAN and East Asia summits, raising doubts on Washington's commitment to ASEAN's centrality. Meanwhile, Japan and India have carefully nurtured ASEAN through their Vientiane Vision

and Act East policy, respectively. Departure between ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which avoids great power competition, and US Indo-Pacific strategy is well articulated. ASEAN has emphasised on "open" and "inclusive" template that is close to Delhi's approach.

But these nuanced departures have not restricted major Indo-Pacific powers and economies to pursue a win-win partnership on issues of mutual strategic interests. India-US-Japan, underpinned by universal values, have combined capacities, in order to provide global public goods in the Indo-Pacific. There are a few key verticals on which these three Indo-Pacific economies are working on shared responsibility of advancing quality infrastructure and connectivity projects among the critical sub-regions such as the Bay of Bengal, Mekong region and the Indian Ocean. The primary objective is to advance inter-regional and intra-regional economic integration between the growth centres and cultivate regional production networks and value chains.

Japan is a global leader when it comes to advancing 'quality' infrastructure, regional connectivity and economic corridors. Prime Minister Abe, through the Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI), has chased two objectives of propelling Japan's national economic engine on one the hand, and strengthening regional strategic partnerships to balance Beijing's clout on the other (Yoshimatsu, 2017, pp. 494–512). Japan has rather boldly pitched its infrastructure export on 'quality', justifying cost-effectiveness in the long term and further emphasised the advantages of public-private partnership vis-à-vis BRI projects, which buttress Chinese state-owned enterprises.

However, recent developments in Sino-Japanese relations led to a discussion on third-party market cooperation. The potential for cooperation in the Eastern Economic Corridor in Thailand was explored, which did not fructify. In addition, reports suggested that Nippon Express used the Eurasian railroad to transit cargo from China's east coast through Central Asia to Europe. These led to a larger discussion on whether Tokyo's attitude on BRI shifted. It is important to note that Tokyo's conditional approach to the BRI is contingent on economic viability, fiscal soundness, openness, transparency and fairness. This has been repeatedly stressed in National Diet speeches and also business forums. Leading Japanese Sinologists argue that Tokyo's approach to BRI has not transformed. The tactics, however, became smarter. Previously, apprehensions over global governance standards limited Tokyo's involvement in Beijing's ventures, but now Tokyo is using the exact same variables as prerequisites for its involvement in BRI.¹

To foster infrastructure and regional connectivity in the Indo-Pacific, Japan has joined forces with both India and the US, bilaterally and trilaterally. Besides third-country infrastructure cooperation in South Asia, Tokyo and Delhi has conceptualised the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). Furthermore, Tokyo and Washington have pushed for infrastructure development through Japan-US-Australia MoU. There is already a Japan-US-India Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group. This should be activated to explore potential connectivity projects in the Indo-Pacific sub-regions. With the Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Forum, Washington's BUILD Act, Blue Dot Network, International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC) and Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network

(ITAN), the time for trilateral projects has come. Furthermore, it can be synergised with Modi's SAGAR vision and line of credit to the Indian Ocean littorals.

Given that the host countries rather have numerous financing choices, including China's BRI, trilateral projects must be defined by consultatory processes comprising local stakeholders. The projects will be more acceptable if they are synergised with multilateral initiatives, such as the ASEAN Master Plan for Connectivity (AMPC) 2025. Quality infrastructure financing must be kept free and open instead of politicisation of projects in relation to BRI. In addition to hard infrastructure, possibility of trilateral cooperation in new technologies and digital infrastructure must be explored to reduce dependence on Chinese technological solutions.

Post-pandemic as the decoupling debate gains momentum in Indo-Pacific capitals, reducing reliance on Chinese supply chains has become imperative. While total decoupling may be unrealistic in the near-term, potential of partial decoupling is also debated. For instance, in Japan, the discussion on 'China Plus One' model is an old one. As economies explore opportunities to ease dependence on China, there is a need for greater discussion between India-US-Japan on diversification of supply chains and potential alternatives. Southeast Asian economies have remained a preferred choice. But in the recent Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) annual survey, Japanese manufacturing companies have preferred India as top destination over China since 2016.

Also, India-US-Japan would do well in joining forces to deal with Chinese institutional statecraft. China has done well in building alternative institutions in the wake of lack of reforms in the traditional institutions. Bretton Woods system is in need of urgent reforms but often fell victim of great power politics. American unwillingness to give space to rising economic powers has degenerated institutional structures, for instance, WTO. Meanwhile, China, over the years, has become a master in institutional statecraft, employing its economic clout and buying influence in institutions, be it the United Nations or AIIB. The most recent instance is politicisation of the WHO. Therefore, there is a need for better coordination and strategising between the three to steer the much-needed reforms to address institutional weaknesses.

In addition, India-US-Japan, being a concert of maritime democracies, upholds the law of the sea and advances a rules-based international maritime order. There is a sense of collective responsibility to secure the critical sea lanes as global commons and public goods so that these maritime highways, through unimpeded trade and energy transit, can fuel the economic engines of the Indo-Pacific. Strategic depth in US-Japan, India-US and India-Japan security relations have buttressed a robust India-US-Japan maritime cooperation agenda, aimed at capacity building and advancing maritime domain awareness. With Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with Washington and almost finalised Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with Tokyo, Delhi has mutual support with reference to logistics, supplies and improved operational ability in the course of joint exercises and disaster relief operations. Besides, trilateral interoperability exercises such as Malabar exercise and others have focused on

Aircraft Carrier operations, Air Defence, Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Surface Warfare, Visit Board Search and Seizure (VBSS) and Mine Warfare Exercises. With Prime Minister Modi's proposed IPOI aimed at a safe, secure and stable maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific, India–US–Japan should explore further avenues to work collaboratively in areas such as preserving marine environment and resources, and advance marine science and technology, in addition to maritime security and transport.

Moving Forward

The pandemic will reorder the power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. But as discussed in this article, the unfolding changes in the world order are not solely an outcome of COVID-19 but largely a product of a broader ordering project that was unleashed before the pandemic. The China challenge has become sharper with aggressive pursuit of contested territorial claims, coercive economic intimidation and bargain hunting, in addition to stepped up rhetoric by 'wolf warriors' echoing the Party propaganda during a global pandemic. With new realities in play, the building blocks of the Indo-Pacific strategy need a stronger foundation. As brought out, FOIP is not a one-size-fits-all frame. The article has traced the fault lines in key Indo-Pacific power's perceptions, strategies and policy choices. However, divergences are not a deterrent but a product of robust democratic processes. Charting the nuanced divergences and convergences offer greater scope to mutually support each other in the quest for a 'free' and 'open' Indo-Pacific order. Going ahead, major Indo-Pacific powers and economies—India, the US and Japan—must work independently, and together, in bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral formations to make China positively engage in maintaining the liberal order fortified by universal values.

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