

EMERGING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN ASIA PACIFIC: IMPACT ON PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The evolving security paradigm in the Asia-Pacific is closely tied to the intensification of great power rivalry. Many nations are pursuing hedging strategies to protect their interests and guard against the fallout of the competition between major powers. A new equation has emerged with China's ascent on the world stage, positioning Asia to become the hub of geopolitics. The United States (US) views China's rise and Russia's resurgence as challenges to its dominance in a unipolar world. Washington is establishing a security arc, evident in initiatives such as AUKUS, QUAD, Squad, and others, across the Asia-Pacific and beyond, in partnership with its Asian and Oceanian/Pacific allies to counter Beijing's rise. The US Strategic Defence documents (National Security Strategy 2017, National Defense Strategy 2018, and Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022) have already emphasised the containment of China through the militarisation of the Asia-Pacific. It also alluded to the transfer of critical technologies and growth in foreign alliances and regional partnerships. Washington's repositioning in the region and its support for India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond, through defence cooperation, have heightened concerns for Pakistan, given its already challenging geostrategic neighbourhood. Moreover, the US has accorded India a prominent position at the regional and global level to enforce its great power ambitions in the future. This will have far-reaching implications for Pakistan. The paper employs a qualitative research method based on a secondary assessment of academic sources. A critical examination of how the US-led emerging security architecture seeks cooperation from allies to maximise their security in managing emerging threats is conducted. The paper also analyses the Indo-US strategic partnership and its impact on Pakistan's security calculus.

Keywords: Asia-Pacific, Oceania, China, United States, Pakistan, India.

Introduction

The Asia-Pacific's power structure, security arrangement, and organisational structure changed significantly in the post-Cold War era. The Asia-Pacific has emerged as a driving force behind the global geopolitical and geoeconomic shift, aligning with the emergence of the Asian Century and displacing the existing international order as the world's core. The accumulation of military power, which has inescapably ensued Asia-Pacific's economic development, is redefining power dynamics both within Asia and in its relations with the West.¹

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The conflicting stakes and competing interests of Beijing and Washington, along with the US, Asian and Oceanian allies, including Japan, India, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and other extra-regional powers like the United Kingdom (UK), are the hallmark of the emerging global geopolitics of Asia-Pacific. These countries are the major actors struggling to create a politico-economic and security space to protect their interests.

The region has garnered considerable attention for its growing political significance, economic development, and strategic location along major maritime trade routes.² Over half of the global population, 4.3 billion people out of eight billion, reside in the region.³ Seven of the ten countries with the greatest global standing militaries are located in the Asia-Pacific, and six of those possess nuclear weapons, according to the US Department of Defense's 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy report.⁴ World Economics data estimates that Asia-Pacific countries contributed over 70 percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth from the 1990s to 2023.⁵ The region is the center of economic might that presently competes with the West. It has four sub-regions: Oceania, Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.⁶ Its waters control the essential and busiest shipping channels. The region's three most significant straits, including the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, facilitate the shipping of goods and energy, which are essential to the East and the West.⁷ The Asia-Pacific region hosts 9 of the major global shipping hubs. Approximately one-third of all shipping vessels navigate across the South China Sea, while Asia accounts for sixty per cent of worldwide maritime trade.⁸

The rise of China has added a new dimension to the geostrategic significance of the Asia-Pacific region, which is considered a primary strategic concern by the US and its Asian allies, as well as its Oceanian allies. Beijing claims that its rise is peaceful and it has no territorial designs, whereas the US and its allies suspect it. They believe that Beijing would establish its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, which could lead to hostility with the US and its regional allies. Japan's economic downturn, resulting in a relative loss of regional influence, is another factor that has helped China maintain a power balance favourable to itself in the Asia-Pacific. China is expanding its military capabilities primarily in Asia, rather than elsewhere. The Asian allies of the US are concerned about China's growing military strength; as a result, they are becoming increasingly reliant on the US for security.

To address a potential security gap, Asian allies of the US are strengthening their defence and diplomatic ties, increasing intraregional and bilateral trade, selling and buying military hardware, and holding joint military drills in collaboration with the US, which raises concerns about Beijing's rapid development. The US strategy of rebalancing Asia-Pacific and deploying the Pacific Fleet, whose two hundred ships and one hundred and fifty thousand (150,000) sailors, along with civilians, make up sixty percent of the entire US Navy, did not come as a surprise.⁹ By fostering collaboration with Asian and Oceanian allies, Washington has created a network of powerful alliances on China's perimeter.

Under such partnerships, India serves as a key US partner and maintains a longstanding enmity toward Islamabad, which remains central to New Delhi's security calculus.

Contrary to the US alliance system, Beijing's competing approach is based on a shared future and inclusivity to attract regional states towards its global initiatives like 'the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilisation Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Belt and Road Initiative'.¹⁰ The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a case in point, positioning Pakistan at the center of China's economic and regional connectivity efforts. China aims to leverage its commercial dominance to establish diplomatic alignment with the world through these initiatives, which Western scholars perceive as China's alternative to the US-led unipolar order. Beijing's model revolves around development, comprehensive security, respect for all civilisations, and economic relations that exhibit its soft power. To add to the Chinese muscles are the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus-3 forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and several other bilateral initiatives.¹¹

Ultimately, new ties are being built in the region against the backdrop of Beijing's peaceful rise. US seeks to safeguard and promote its global agenda of a 'free, open and rules-based world order in the region'.¹² Washington's proactive presence in Asia-Pacific and its unwavering strategic collaboration with Delhi, perceived as a form of counterweight against the Chinese influence, are commonly interpreted as part of its China containment policy. The intention behind the defence dialogue between Washington and Delhi is to evaluate the regional threat environment, identify capability gaps of the Indian forces, and enhance their capabilities. This requires holistic cooperation in areas such as maritime security, data sharing, cyberspace security, critical technologies, and other relevant fields.¹³

The US objective, nonetheless, is its inherent desire to find a reliable ally in South Asia (SA) by fostering closer alignment with India that may serve as a US proxy, notably in the Indian Ocean. It is a worrisome development for Pakistan's security and academic circles. The military alliance with the US helps India maintain its status quo by ensuring the protection of its territorial integrity and serving as a counterbalance to regional hegemonic powers. The emergence of a US-led security framework in Asia-Pacific impacts the security calculus of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, particularly Pakistan, the only country in SA having a territorial dispute with India.

Emerging Security Architecture in Asia-Pacific

Power dynamics among major powers, including competition, continue to play out in the Asia-Pacific region. The region is witnessing the emergence of security pluralism based on principles such as interdependence, balance of power, and an institutional imperative to ensure cooperative security within a multilateral framework.

However, terminologies like ‘alliances and alignments’ were used during the Cold War security models, now illustrated by new ones such as ‘Mini lateral and strategic partnership’.¹⁴ New security models are primarily based on cooperation, as exemplified in the US Hub-and-Spokes security system in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.¹⁵ The US has been systematically expanding its united hub-and-spoke systems into Mini lateral spokes under the Asia Pivot Strategy. AUKUS (Australia, US and UK), Squad (US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines), ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and the US Security Treaty), QUAD (India, Japan and Australia), Trilateral Security Cooperation (Japan, South Korea and the US) and Partners in the Blue Pacific (US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the UK) are cases in point. The US has been steadfastly pursuing its security strategy for the past 15 years. It has utilised key strategic documents, especially the 2017 National Security Strategy,¹⁶ the 2018 National Defense Strategy,¹⁷ and the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy,¹⁸ to reshape its presence in the Asia-Pacific region in response to the rise of China and other emerging powers. It also adopted an integrated deterrence strategy, a concept outlined in the 2022 National Defense Strategy. This approach involves combining all aspects of its national power with its allies to counter any aggression from rival states.¹⁹

The US-led security model is a chief concern for Beijing, as it perceives it as a threat from the West. Beijing seeks a pluralistic world order in which power is distributed among multiple major actors as an alternative to the US-led unipolar system.²⁰ It, nonetheless, desires to augment its influence in the Asia-Pacific security mosaic. However, Beijing does not match Washington’s ability to establish a traditional security framework based on bloc politics in the region, nor does it have a desire to do so. This leads China to adopt a flexible approach in response to US influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Beijing is more focused on restructuring the Asia-Pacific. It is introducing its security and development initiatives, as well as long-term cooperation among regional states, based on its vision of cooperative, standard, comprehensive, and sustainable security under a shared future and destiny.²¹

China claims that its security vision aligns with the principles outlined in Article 1 of the UN Charter, focusing on global security through collective measures, respect, equal rights, and the self-determination of peoples, as well as human rights and socioeconomic, political, and cultural cooperation.²² The core of the Chinese security perspective is to promote a common security mechanism that respects and protects the security of each nation. It is an all-encompassing approach that addresses both traditional and non-traditional security challenges while enhancing coordinated and effective security governance. It also contributes to security through peaceful negotiations and political discourse, pursuing sustainable security by resolving conflicts resulting from development and eliminating conditions that foster insecurity.²³

In the Asia-Pacific region, China is seeking to create more avenues for regional integration. Launching BRI (2013) in Central Asia, as part of China's global infrastructure development strategy, followed by the 2015 White Paper on China's military strategy, is a case in point that demonstrates China's commitment to defending its territorial integrity and interests at the regional and global level. The White Paper outlines China's active defence in all specific domains, including oceans, outer space, cyberspace, and nuclear.²⁴ China aims to modernise its armed forces by 2035 and become a world-class military force by 2050.²⁵ A group of George Washington University students and professors has discovered that China, under its modernisation policy, has already built a three-thousand-mile underground Great Wall that features interconnected tunnels for missile deployment.²⁶ China's pursuit of a Blue Water Navy, in the backdrop of the Strait of Malacca dilemma, and its efforts to safeguard international routes vital to trade, are yet another attempt to counter the US-led security architecture in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

On June 2, 2024, during the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue, Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun firmly stated that "China is committed to preventing hegemonic influence and power-driven agendas from disrupting the Asia-Pacific and stands against regional disorder".²⁷ A day earlier, in his speech, the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin spoke of a shared vision, mutual obligation, transparency, and a rules-based global order.²⁸ However, he also emphasised terms like deterrence, fighting, exercises, and strengthening the US-led security architecture, signaling the US show of force in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁹ His statement, "The US military continues to be the most capable fighting force in the world, with the Indo-Pacific remaining our primary theater of operations", clearly reflects this stance.³⁰ The US, along with its allies, is marshalling integrated deterrence against Beijing's increasing military power in the Asia-Pacific. This effort is reflected in its security architecture, including AUKUS, ANZUS, SQUAD, QUAD, PBP, and US-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation as instruments of strategic alignment.

AUKUS: A Trilateral Security Cooperation

The US, Australia, and the UK formed the strategic defence partnership known as AUKUS on September 15, 2021.³¹ This security alliance aims to uphold the principles of regional security, openness, and stability in the Asia-Pacific.³² The pact includes cooperation on 'cyber capabilities, Artificial Intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea capabilities, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare capabilities and deep space advanced radar capability programme',³³ thereby enhancing the defence capabilities of the member states, particularly Australia. AUKUS aims to enhance Australia's defence capabilities by collaborating with the US and the UK on security matters.³⁴ For the US, drawing closer to Australia offers the advantage of having a massive country as a military base and a significant Oceania territory from which to project US power throughout the region. The US Marine units have already established a training base in Darwin, a city in the Northern Territory of Australia.³⁵

Australia has become closely involved in the US maritime exercises, such as the 'Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC)', the largest global maritime warfare exercise.³⁶

The trilateral decision to assist Australia in procuring conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) was the first critical measure of AUKUS, aimed at offsetting China's security outlook in the North and Southeast Asia, as well as Oceania. Australia will join Russia, France, the US, China, India, and the UK as the seventh country worldwide to deploy nuclear-powered submarines. AUKUS officially unveiled a comprehensive plan for Canberra to acquire a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine on 13 March 2023.³⁷ This commitment marks the first instance of the US transferring nuclear propulsion technology with an ally besides the UK.³⁸ Under AUKUS, Australia is projected to develop the industry, infrastructure, technical expertise, and human resource required to build, maintain, and operate a sovereign fleet of nuclear-powered and conventionally armed submarines by 2030.³⁹ Equipped with nuclear propulsion, advanced weaponry, and enhanced stealth capabilities, the AUKUS submarines will provide Australia with a state-of-the-art platform capable of addressing emerging challenges.⁴⁰ This development will substantially strengthen both theatre defence and collective deterrence efforts of the AUKUS member states. Additionally, AUKUS will enable the US and UK submarines to operate as a joint submarine force from Australian ports.⁴¹

Although no country has been named in the pact, Australia believes the action is not against China. Nonetheless, it is inferred that the pact will be shaped to counter China's strategic influence and growing power in North and Southeast Asia, the surrounding waterways, and the Oceanian region. The threat perception among AUKUS member states has intensified due to China's assertive stance on Taiwan, territorial claims in the South China Sea, and its growing strategic presence beyond the region. It appears that the goal of AUKUS is to provide an integrated response to any future crisis in the Asia-Pacific by fostering the development and sharing of advanced defence technologies among the three member states.

The pact demonstrates a desire to relax export restrictions and tariffs on the transfer of nuclear and defence technologies among the member states.⁴² This will lead to potential nuclear proliferation and buoy Chinese concerns about the regional arms escalation. AUKUS would provide the member states with significant operational leverage to patrol the sea lanes and prevent enemy states' nuclear submarines in the event of any misadventure in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in the Oceania region. The pact enables the swift development of a comprehensive deterrent for potential scenarios (including Taiwan). The treaty reflects the shared view among member states regarding China as a collective threat, underscoring the rapidly expanding operations of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) across the Asia-Pacific. The US, therefore, is also collaborating with other Asia-Pacific states — the Philippines, Japan, and the Republic of Korea — to get more access to naval ports, intelligence collaboration, and expanded basing access in the region.

AUKUS is a portent of a new international order and serves as a security alliance aimed at countering Beijing's regional clout. While Russia is no longer an existential threat, the US views China as its principal adversary. China, therefore, accuses the AUKUS framework of being an Asia-Pacific version of NATO.⁴³

Washington's resolve to maintain the status quo, along with solidifying its position as the sole superpower, and Beijing's aspiration to play a pivotal role in transforming the global order, are creating a landscape of intense competition among major powers, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. While the US is busy cobbling various minilateral partnerships, China has expanded its influence through soft power. Unlike the US, China is not involved in making partnerships with military connotations. Through bolstering its military presence and placing counterbalances in the region, the US Asia-Pacific strategy aims to maintain and enhance Washington's influence in the political and security affairs against Beijing. The primary objectives of Beijing's grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific include maintaining control of the adjacent seas to ensure the safety of merchant ships and facilitate smooth trade, promoting regional integration, fostering economic collaboration, and defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁴ China denounces AUKUS for engaging in a hegemonic practice and claims that the agreement reflects an intention to restrain China at the expense of regional security, thereby undermining the efforts of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.⁴⁵ Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian warned that the alliance could seriously undermine regional peace and escalate the arms race.⁴⁶

Given the dynamics of great power competition, the deployment and patrolling of nuclear-powered submarines by China, AUKUS member states, and potentially India is poised to heighten strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. This development is likely to exacerbate regional security dilemmas and contribute to an increasingly volatile maritime environment.

PLAN's nuclear submarine presence in the Indian Ocean is already recurrent and could push India to speed up defence technology exchange with the US. There is a probability that India may strike a nuclear submarine deal like Australia with the US. Militarisation, along with the nuclearisation of the oceans, can occur in any unseen incident. Under the AUKUS, the Asia-Pacific, particularly its part of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean, would be further nuclearised. The portents are rife with potential accidents in these areas, which need to be recognised by the great powers. A more substantial Western presence in the Asia Pacific would intensify the US-China military rivalry. It seems that AUKUS, which provides space for expanding military influence, is a signal of a new world security order that might lay the groundwork for an Asian NATO.

United States, Japan, Philippines, Australia (SQUAD)

In light of the increasing significance of strategic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced SQUAD, which underscores a shift toward an adaptable and agile security architecture to tackle maritime challenges, counter China's assertiveness, and boost US influence in the region.⁴⁷ The US, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines are members of the US-led minilateral initiative. The inaugural gathering of SQUAD defence chiefs was held in June 2023 in Singapore, coinciding with the Shangri-La security conference.⁴⁸ The SQUAD's goal is to manage the tension, coercion, and hostility, particularly in the Western Pacific Ocean. The chances of conflict are high in this region, given China's involvement in the Taiwan issue and the territorial dispute in the South China Sea.⁴⁹ Joint patrols, maritime security, intelligence sharing, modernisation of the Philippines' military, and enhancing the interoperability of defence capabilities among member states are the primary areas within this security architecture's domain.⁵⁰

Establishing the SQUAD alliance is evidence of the partnerships' enduring significance in managing the intricacies of international power dynamics, as well as politics. Given the ongoing conflicts between China and the Philippines, the joint naval patrols by SQUAD inside the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in April 2024 marked a significant development. It conveyed a message to Beijing regarding their collective response in the event of any Chinese naval incursion or aggression in the region.⁵¹

The South China Sea remains one of the most volatile and contentious regions in the world. Tensions over contested waters between China and the Philippines increased as the latter's maritime research vessel, along with its escort, was blocked by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel from 35 nautical miles off the coast of the Philippines on April 13, 2024.⁵² The incident occurred within China's Nine-Dash Line, which it uses to claim territory over its waters, including islands, shores, and reefs, such as Spratly Island and Paracel Island, as shown in Map 1.⁵³ The Philippines' assertion of jurisdiction over China's historical claims in the contested waters of the South China Sea, upheld by the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) under Annex VII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),⁵⁴ has further escalated tensions between the two states. Despite the tribunal's decision, China rejected the ruling and continued its activities in the disputed areas, including fishing operations and the construction of artificial islands.

Map 1: China's 9-Dash Line

Source: China's 9-Dash Line Policy, Launch Pad, accessed on June 21, 2024

The four-party security mechanism, aimed at strengthening defence cooperation, is an attempt to enhance the defence capabilities of Manila through security collaboration with the other three members: the US, Australia, and Japan. SQUAD prioritises traditional security concerns, like defence and military, particularly cooperation in marine security. It can be seen as a classic framework for quadrilateral coordination in the security field. Since the Philippines is the weakest among the US treaty partners in the region, working with the US against China entails actively participating in the strategic contest between the two nations. The quadrilateral security mechanism will be utilised as an instrument to balance Beijing and protect US security interests in the region, which could impact regional stability.

Australia, New Zealand, and the United States Security Treaty (ANZUS)

The US, Australia, and New Zealand entered into the ANZUS Treaty on September 1, 1951, in San Francisco, and it came into force in 1952.⁵⁵ The treaty aimed at a collective defence alliance for stability and protection within the Oceania region and beyond.⁵⁶ Although Australians and New Zealanders at that time were more concerned about the resurgence of Japan, the US remained committed to its goal of containing Communism. However, China has been a central focus of the ANZUS Treaty due to its full engagement in the civil war (Korean Peninsula) against the member countries of the ANZUS, followed by its significant advancements in economic, military, and technological domains.

The treaty focuses on regular joint exercises and the enhancement of interoperability among the US regional allies in defence capabilities, in addition to plans for developing joint platforms, such as the Lombrum naval port in Manus, Papua New Guinea.⁵⁷

The relevance of ANZUS was underscored as New Zealand participated in significant joint exercises with the UK, Japan, and the US forces near Guam (Western Pacific) in 2021, highlighting the ongoing strategic importance of the alliance amid rising tensions with China. It reinforced the necessity of their partnership in addressing regional security risks.⁵⁸ Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia, and Chris Luxon, Prime Minister of New Zealand, reaffirmed the treaty in 2024, stating that any potential cyberattack on either country would trigger a collective response under the ANZUS Treaty. They also reiterate that Article 4 of the treaty commits both nations to act in the event of armed attacks in the Oceania region.⁵⁹

Australia has become a pivotal partner in the US drive to resist Beijing's security strategy in the region. It is evident in their Enhanced Force Posture Cooperation initiative under which Canberra hosts the US Marine Corps, Air Force, and Navy. This initiative aims to enhance military preparedness through joint exercises, training programmes, and surveillance operations.⁶⁰ Both countries are working together to upgrade infrastructure to enable Taiwan's defence operations, including the amelioration of Australian northern bases for long-range bomber deployments and operations.⁶¹ Additionally, Canberra is enhancing its military capabilities, including plans for buying more F-35 aircraft and a potential expansion of its surface fleet. This would align with ANZUS's objectives of collective security and regional deterrence.⁶² ANZUS is crucial to the US security strategy in the prevalent geopolitical competition in Asia-Pacific and beyond. Therefore, Australia and New Zealand are enhancing their defence capabilities to further integrate their militaries with the US for collective defence against any future contingencies.

US, Japan, and Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)

Trilateral security cooperation among the US, Japan, and Australia began to develop in the 1990s. It was formalised in the early 2000s.⁶³ In July 2001, during a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer proposed establishing a trilateral dialogue, which was subsequently named the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD). This proposal was endorsed by Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, and Makiko Tanaka, Foreign Minister of Japan, leading to the inaugural TSD meeting at the subcabinet level in July 2002.⁶⁴ On November 16, 2014, Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan; Barack Obama, President of the US; and Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia, convened a trilateral summit on the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Meeting in Brisbane. They reiterated their resolve to deepen their collaboration as a stabilising force in the Asia-Pacific and emphasised the global scope of their cooperation.⁶⁵

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Japan was concerned about China's rising defence spending and maritime activities. It bolstered its defence posture and engagement in the US-led strategic dialogues, reflecting its broader regional strategy. In the 2000s, Japan strengthened its defence posture in response to Beijing's growing military activities and alleged territorial intrusions. Tokyo cited a rise in Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) scrambles and a 2005 incident in which a Chinese warship reportedly aimed its gun at a Japanese patrol aircraft.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Japan is increasing defence spending and improving military preparedness. It has undertaken a comprehensive review of its security policies and frameworks. This process culminated in 2022 with the release of three key documents: the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Programme.⁶⁷ These documents aim to strengthen Japan's defence posture and national security.

The formation of the emerging global order, particularly the future composition of the Security Council following its reforms, as well as economic competition, are other concerns between Tokyo and Beijing. Japan focuses primarily on the US, Australia, and India to enhance its military position in the Asia-Pacific. Under the US hub-and-spoke approach, the TSD serves as a strategic tool to contain China by integrating into the regional security framework and leveraging trilateral collaboration among Australia, Japan, and the US. The US aims to retain stability and balance in the region.⁶⁸

Conversely, China has intensified its outreach to ASEAN countries. It hosted Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto shortly after he was elected to ensure the continuation of his predecessor, Joko Widodo's, friendly policy in 2024.⁶⁹ Similarly, back-to-back talks with Laos and Timor-Leste at the foreign minister level were held. The Chinese Foreign Minister's visits to Indonesia, Cambodia, and Papua New Guinea were also planned. These visits aimed to maintain China's influence within ASEAN and beyond as a countermeasure to US-led minilateral initiatives in the region.⁷⁰

Partners in Blue Pacific (PBP)

The US, in conjunction with the UK, New Zealand, Japan, and Australia, announced the Pacific Blue Partnership (PBP) initiative on June 24, 2022.⁷¹ The primary focus of this informal mechanism was to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of cooperation within the Asia-Pacific region.⁷² Although the pact was purported to focus on issues such as maritime security and protection, health, education, climate crisis, connectivity, and transportation, its underlying objective is the curtailment of China's growing foothold in the Asia-Pacific region. The US has formed various minilateral coalitions (AUKUS and others) to advance its Asia-Pacific strategy, with each cooperation focusing on overlapping aspects, including military cooperation, intelligence sharing, economy, and security collaboration. PBP is directed at the comprehensive security dimension of the US strategy.⁷³

The PBP was announced two months later, after China concluded a security agreement with the Solomon Islands (2022), located near the US territory of Guam and approximately 1,200 nautical miles from Australia.⁷⁴ The agreement permitted the stationing of Chinese forces in the Solomon Islands and consequently altered the geopolitical dynamics of the South Pacific region.⁷⁵ Furthermore, China and Fiji's cooperation in providing training to Fijian police officers in China, and vice versa, has further heightened concerns in the US and Australia in the Asia-Pacific region.⁷⁶ It is believed that the formation of the PBP was partly driven by China's Common Development Vision, which seeks endorsement from ten South Pacific nations, including Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Niue, and the Federated States of Micronesia.⁷⁷ The proposed partnership agreement covers areas ranging from security and fisheries to law enforcement and has raised concerns in Washington about Beijing's growing influence in the region.

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)

The QUAD was initiated in 2007, reflecting Washington's preference for the term 'Indo-Pacific' over 'Asia-Pacific,' as a single strategic space where emerging threats and opportunities are interrelated.⁷⁸ The member states of QUAD are Australia, India, Japan, and the US. Multilateral cooperation aims to secure a rules-based global order, ensure unimpeded maritime movement and commerce by strengthening maritime security, promote economic connectivity, and establish security-based cooperation among member states.⁷⁹ It focuses more on economic collaboration, infrastructure development, the impact of COVID-19, environmental threat mitigation, education, cyber and digital concerns, and reliable supply chains.⁸⁰ China's border dispute with India, island building in the South China Sea, and increased diplomatic efforts for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in regions surrounding the Indian Ocean have enticed the QUAD to revive itself after 2017, when the first-ever official talks took place in Manila, Philippines.⁸¹

QUAD is not similar to military cooperation like NATO, AUKUS, and other minilateral military alliances, and does not commit to collective security. Security collaboration among individual QUAD members existed before the formation of the QUAD, remains limited, and often takes place bilaterally through a '2+2' framework involving meetings between defence and foreign ministers.⁸² However, the participation of QUAD members in the annual QUAD joint Malabar naval exercises, attended by all member states, demonstrates its military component.⁸³ The 2022 Malabar maritime exercise, in which Australia participated for the first time, was conducted amid rising tensions in Northeast Asia, fueled by the China-Taiwan dispute and strained relations between South and North Korea. In this naval exercise, more ballistic missile tests were conducted than ever before. It conveyed a collective threat perception of the member countries and their intent to balance power in the region. Although cooperation among QUAD member states is not new, efforts to realign their priorities under a new minilateral security framework send a strong signal to the area.

The member states, therefore, seek to enhance their military exchanges and security cooperation with the Quadruple Alliance, considering their ongoing tensions with China.

The QUAD is emerging as a formidable force against China, which is considered an adversary by all the major competitors in global politics. Its member states are endeavouring to bolster maritime security in the face of piracy and terrorism-related security issues. Nevertheless, China's exclusion from the QUAD highlights the paradox of excluding the region's most potent navy from a maritime security mechanism. China is at the receiving end of the US-led geopolitical realignments driven by a Cold War mentality.⁸⁴ Such arrangements are part of a hostile strategic effort whose ulterior motive is to divide the Asia-Pacific region into a theatre of bloc politics.

India's importance under the overall US-led security framework has further complicated the geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region. Delhi serves as a crucial geopolitical ally in restricting Beijing's political and economic outreach. The US recognises India's capacity to advance its strategic objectives as a Net Security Provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Japan (to attend the QUAD summit alongside the G7 Meetings), Australia, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2023 also indicates New Delhi's proactive approach to the Asia-Pacific region. The intention is to counter, compete with, and somewhat neutralise Beijing's regional clout. This is why New Delhi now has no qualms in making it public that Beijing is its political adversary and a real competitor in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

India, which has overtaken China in terms of population, is eager to position itself as a strategic competitor to China.⁸⁵ In the same vein, India's defence deal with Australia in 2022 (Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement) is a sign of New Delhi's uneasiness, as China has a massive presence in the South China Sea and navigates with authority from Japan to Australia. Modi's visit to the tiny but strategic PNG in May 2023 is a case in point. Modi's PNG visit is aimed at expanding India's outreach from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, where the small island states hold strategic significance due to their potential as naval bases. Arun Parakash, retired Indian Navy Chief, argued that the Pacific Island States hold strategic value for India's potential establishment of a naval base.⁸⁶ Similarly, during his visit to Australia (May 2023), Modi categorically expressed his desire to take the strategic partnership with Canberra to the next level, which includes deepening defence and security collaboration to bolster Indian assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

India is perceived as a counterweight to China, with its increasing engagement in regional security through participation in naval exercises and involvement in the QUAD. Such outcomes would have huge security ramifications for Pakistan. The country may be viewed as a power contender in the Asia-Pacific due to its economic collaboration with Beijing and the Indo-US premeditated cooperation.⁸⁷

The Pakistan-China partnership will pose a security challenge for India, as it may struggle to face a two-front situation. India was unable to save the Galwan Valley and lost 1,000 km² in the Ladakh region,⁸⁸ despite issuing a map after August 2009 that depicted Aksai Chin as an Indian territory.⁸⁹

India's Ambitions in the Indian Ocean and beyond

India is an appealing partner for the US because of its rising prominence on the global stage, its status as the largest democracy, and shared values. With its sizable and growing middle class, favourable demographics, and expanding economy, India has the potential to become a vital actor internationally. India's relevance in the US foreign policy calculations is further increased by its strategic location in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, like any other sovereign nation, New Delhi also pursues its national interests, which may not always align fully with those of the US, especially in the context of encircling China. Even though New Delhi and Beijing continue to have complex relations marked by geopolitical rivalry and economic collaboration,⁹⁰ the bilateral trade between India and China (\$135 billion in 2022) is a notable example.⁹¹ India will avoid any confrontation with China or engage in a fight with China, given its status as a frontline state of the US. However, India will continue to project China as a significant threat to its existence. Simultaneously, it will continue its competition with China and project the latter as a common enemy of Washington and Delhi. Within the context of this strategy, India will be trying to enhance its military power with US assistance. It will derive maximum benefits from the US by transferring technology, including high-tech defence technology, while showcasing its power potential in all socioeconomic spheres.

Despite India's territorial disputes with China, animosity towards Pakistan remains a central component of India's security calculus in South Asia. Whereas, rising Chinese influence has been a central element in the US security calculus in the Asia-Pacific. It shows a distinct approach in the US and Indian security paradigms. Ultimately, for India, military collaboration with the US, a greater role in the Asia-Pacific region, global power aspirations, and enmity with Pakistan are the primary causes behind Delhi's military expansion in South Asia, which has led to a stability-instability paradox in the regional strategic landscape.

India is mindful of its image. It seeks to open avenues for acquiring military hardware from Russia while also strengthening military cooperation with the US; however, it denies being a proxy for US interests in the region or beyond. It pursues all the privileges from the US while projecting the Chinese threat. It aims to enhance its unparalleled military capability in the region and beyond. This would ensure the continuation of its belligerent designs in the area. Nonetheless, China does not view India as a significant threat or refer to India as a threat in its strategic documents and discourses.

Indo-US Military Cooperation and Its Impact on Pakistan

Today, India is a chief defence ally of the US. This association has evolved from a partnership to a threshold alliance, as evidenced by the QUAD and bilateral agreements (LEMOA, COMCASA, and BECA). All the bilateral agreements between the US and India in the security field increase the latter's military capability and intensify Pakistan's security dilemma. Both India's and the US's Indo-Pacific strategy, under the umbrella of the Indo-US strategic or threshold alliance, are threatening Pakistan.

Fear of Manipulation of Indo-US Nuclear Deal

Pakistan has expressed its concerns over the US collaboration with India on civil nuclear development and the granting of a special waiver by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which it considers a breach of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). According to Article 1 of the NPT, nuclear-weapon states are prohibited from assisting non-nuclear states in developing nuclear weapons⁹² — a provision that is being undermined, thereby weakening the NPT's core principles. Moreover, India is not a signatory to the NPT, and the US has also not ratified it. This, unfortunately, highlights the double principles in the international system and encourages the horizontal proliferation of nuclear technology. The NPT's spirit and articles are further endangered by the US-India partnership. Islamabad seeks to join the NSG through a criterion-based approach for new members to maintain strategic stability in SA. India's acquisition of nuclear fuel from America is a concern for Pakistan, as it may allow India to divert its indigenous resources toward nuclear weapons development while looking at its misguided history of nuclear programme. The transformation from a peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974 to a nuclear weapons programme in 1998 is a case in point. Ultimately, this capacity-building and military modernisation would lead to Indian superiority in conventional and non-conventional weapons.

Pakistan's Security Calculus under Indo-US Military Agreements — Threat to the Deterrence Stability

South Asia's geostrategic balance is in a critical transition, shaped by ongoing power politics. A fragile peace continues to hold between Pakistan and India, maintained through the framework of minimum credible nuclear deterrence. The US policies and interference in the region will significantly contribute to the destabilisation of the regional balance of power. The Indian and military forces formalised the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) to establish a framework for mutual logistics support, supplies, and services aimed at enhancing close military cooperation.⁹³ The Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), which was retitled the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), is another one that India has signed with the US.⁹⁴

This deal enables Delhi to acquire advanced encrypted communication technology for the militaries of both states, allowing their militaries to undertake joint operations using a shared communications network.

Following the signing of LEMOA and COMCASA, Washington and Delhi signed a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) to solidify further the foundation of their enduring military and strategic alliance.⁹⁵ India's ability to access the American Geospatial-Intelligence System in real-time will enhance the precision of automated Indian military systems, such as missiles and drones. The exchange of data about maps and satellite images would enable India to get geospatial and aeronautical data, enhancing its movement and targeting strategies against its rivals. Particularly, intelligence sharing about the real data of Pakistan's army movements and installations from the US would make India capable of deploying its military and weapons against Pakistan, accordingly. This would provide additional advantage and leverage to the Indian army against Pakistan's army. A fundamental aspect of the Asia-Pacific security landscape is the sharing of emerging technologies by the US with allies, as exemplified by the US-India signing of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET) agreement in January 2023.⁹⁶ They agreed to share critical technologies, particularly in the areas of artificial intelligence and cyber-autonomous systems. The initiative would enhance India's indigenous technological capabilities. It would enable the development of advanced drones, improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems, as well as sophisticated missile guidance technologies.⁹⁷ These advancements would provide India with a technological edge over Pakistan. As a result, a growing technological disparity may emerge, contributing to a widening military imbalance between the two states. LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA, and ICET are all alarming developments that could undermine South Asia's nuclear stability. The Indo-US military partnership is impacting Pakistan's security by widening the conventional and non-conventional gap between Pakistan and India.⁹⁸ The agreements would disturb the balance of power and ultimately disrupt the equilibrium between two neighbours who are archrivals.

India's Military Build-Up Leading to Conventional Asymmetries

India receives advanced weapons systems and technology as the pivotal component of the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Pakistan has expressed apprehensions that Delhi's involvement in the competition among great powers could destabilise the region. It views Delhi's military expansion as a destabilising element, primarily aimed at Pakistan, and supported mainly by the US. It created asymmetry in the conventional domain that may lower the nuclear threshold in South Asia. The accelerating military modernisation, the establishment of Forward Operating Bases, and the Cold Start Doctrine as an offensive strategy are strategies employed by India to shape a 'new normal' of heightened military posture under the nuclear overhang, which could have serious consequences for Pakistan. Ultimately, India will have the capability to project military force against Pakistan from any part of its territory.⁹⁹

To achieve its objectives in Asia, the US would possibly deepen its military cooperation with India. This collaboration would enable the latter to upgrade conventional military hardware and forces, build a variety of nuclear-capable missiles—from tactical to ballistic missiles—and establish a nuclear triad. Additionally, India may enhance its aircraft carrier fleet and develop plans for Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) and nuclear submarines. These developments are concerning and would further destabilise South Asia.

Arms Race

The military cooperation between Delhi and Washington, particularly in the exchange of nuclear and other technologies, could fuel an arms race between Delhi and Islamabad. Both are nuclear-armed states. The foundations of the military agreements stem from the reality of Indian exceptionalism, which the US supports for its strategic interests. The increased unhealthy arms race and armament proliferation have the worst economic implications for Pakistan. The acquisition of armaments by India with the US assistance would also compel Pakistan to equip its military with modern weapons, while adding to the already corrosive atmosphere of the region.

India's Regional Behaviour and Security Dynamics

While building new strategic partnerships, including with the US, India continues to maintain hostile relations with Pakistan. With political and economic support, and as a strong military bulwark of the US in South Asia, Delhi's long-held goal is to establish its hegemony in the region. India's approach of maintaining tense and strained relations with Pakistan while attempting to forge good ties with the US, Australia, and Japan is paradoxical, while contributing to the already existing instability. Ignoring immediate neighbours, while hoping to maintain long-term relations with distant nations, is unrealistic and unsustainable, particularly in terms of regional stability.¹⁰⁰ Enhanced military cooperation between the US and India has contributed to India's greater regional influence and has made Pakistan more vulnerable. Delhi's present trajectory appears to neglect the importance of keeping friendly relations with its neighbours.¹⁰¹

India's hubris has further increased because of the several defence accords it has signed with the US, along with the latter's acknowledgement of India as a key defence partner. These measures will further expand Indian hegemonic designs. The Indo-US military cooperation provides India with a legal justification to validate its hegemonic behaviour in South Asia.

Indian Belligerence Undermining Pakistan's Attempts to Combat Terrorism

The US rewarding India with significant benefits in the form of military pacts while undermining Pakistan's efforts to combat terrorism could exacerbate already unfavourable conditions in the region, potentially leading to conflict between belligerent New Delhi and Islamabad. Washington's backing for New Delhi would enhance the latter's pressure on Islamabad, as India unjustifiably continues to accuse Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism in India. Consequently, the world opinion gets smogged and hinders any support for Pakistan in settling unresolved disputes between the two rivals, particularly the Kashmir dispute.

Indo-US Military Cooperation Enhanced Indian Desire for Permanent Membership in the UNSC

India is trying to capitalise on the Indo-US strategic partnership to garner support for its candidacy for UNSC permanent membership. The issues of gross human rights violations in Kashmir and the UN Security Council resolutions are being swept under the carpet in the smokescreen of economic development and military might. On the other hand, if India becomes a permanent member of the UN Security Council, this will likely encourage the US to take multilateral measures to further its military objectives in the Indian Ocean region. This would assist India in getting formal recognition as a nuclear-armed state and legitimising any measure it undertakes in the area to further New Delhi's interests. Confrontations and territorial disputes with Pakistan would likely be more effectively addressed if India were to secure permanent membership in the UNSC. With a right to veto, India would be given a position to lawfully snub any resolution on Kashmir proposed by Pakistan, while exacerbating dismal security and peace in the region. Chances of settling the long-standing disputes in the area will also be affected. Historically, Pakistan has always held a reactive policy to defend its security and position. Under the circumstances, Pakistan would likely adopt this position as well, albeit to the displeasure of the US, further deepening the mistrust between Islamabad and Washington.¹⁰² Nonetheless, the chances of India securing its seat in the UNSC are also contingent upon Chinese acceptance, as well as the non-acceptance of any new member by the other five permanent members. Pakistan may focus on the following recommendations:

- Pakistan ought to maintain balance rather than parity, continuing to deter the enemy within the bounds of credible minimum deterrence.
- A regional/collective approach by Pakistan to encourage strategic stability and avert the probability of a primary arms race in SA is recommended.
- Pakistan should further modernise its defence capability, given the South Asian security environment, by augmenting its cyber and artificial intelligence and drone warfare capabilities.

Conclusion

The Asia-Pacific region remains a dynamic theatre for world politics, owing to its geostrategic importance and geoeconomic significance. The security equilibrium and strategic stability of the area are undergoing a precarious phase due to the prevalence of great power competition. The US-led minilateral security architecture has further complicated the security dynamics of the region. This minilateral mechanism is transforming as China gradually becomes more assertive in the region. The functions, objectives, and focus areas of AUKUS, QUAD, SQUAD, ANZUS, TSD, and PBP are essentially the same, with overlapping regional allies concentrating on the Asia-Pacific, with North and Southeast Asia serving as the central region. They all stress enhanced security, collaboration, and an integrated response against China.

The US engagement in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in promoting India as a Net Security Provider in the region, brings far-reaching implications for Pakistan's security domain. India portrays Beijing as a significant challenge to the international order. Yet, its Cold Start doctrine and considerable deployment of military forces along with weapons on the Pakistani side reflect its duplicity. India continues to benefit from the intensification of great power competition, as evident in the Indo-US foundational agreements, which directly undermine Pakistan's security calculus. The military collaboration between Delhi and Washington harms the South Asian security landscape by creating regional instability, disturbing the geostrategic equilibrium of the region, fueling an arms race, and exacerbating India's belligerent attitude. In this backdrop, Pakistan needs to assess Delhi's behaviour and policies carefully.

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