



The Power in Transition: America and China's Struggle for Supremacy in the Indian Ocean Region and Its Impact on Littoral States

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Abstract

The world is witnessing an intriguing historic phenomenon: the rise of a homegrown maritime power against the backdrop of the USA's dominance. The driver of this irregularity in world order—China—has brought the rise of the Asian continent to the forefront of world politics. While Chinese aspirations for great power status are a natural outgrowth of impressive economic growth, their entry into the nautical world has also brought worrisome trends. Taking inspiration from Alfred Mahan's sea domination hypothesis, China has been focusing on its naval deployment in the region through multiple economic investments. As these developments challenge America's status quo role in the region, the phenomenon has taken a turn for an impending clash. As both stakeholders struggle to establish and maintain their status quo in the region, respectively, their dilemma has been affecting the world's littoral states and geopolitical economies. While many scientists of international relations discourse paint this historic phenomenon under the light of the balance of power system, this thesis aims to discuss the power relations between these major powers through the other side of the lens, namely, the power transition theory. With the ongoing situation of the Indian Ocean and its littoral states, this research outlines that the implications for the region may not be of peace and stability as the balance of power system predicts, but rather, in accordance with Organski and Kugler's theory, the situation could be quite the contrary.

Key Words: Indian Ocean Region, Power Politics, Power Transition Theory, Sino-American Relation.

Introduction

Literature enthusiasts often refer to Power Game as "power politics" due to its unique language, laws, and harsh logic (James, 1964). Power politics is a common catchword in the literature of international relations, but unlike its appearance, it has many diverse adaptations and meanings. However, in the realm of international relations, states primarily engage in political actions aimed at enhancing their power or influence. Nevertheless, power politics is also a political relationship between independent powers or simply the dominating states of the world (Wright, 1946; James, 1964). Power politics is also a struggle for power between states with the same immediate aim as power itself (Morgenthau, 1961; James, 1964). Over time, power politics has evolved into an umbrella discourse in international relations, under which different authors have put forward their theories to explain this power struggle between the "powerful" states of the world (Lemke, 2008). Such theorist Kenneth Waltz elaborated the Balance of Power System in his 1979 book *Theories of International Politics*, while A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler fashioned



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the Power Transition Theory in their 1980 book War Ledger. This research employs a thorough analysis and comparison of these two power politics theories to elucidate the relationship between the United States of America (USA) and the People's Republic of China (China), particularly their presence in the world's third largest ocean, the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this power struggle has significant implications for the littoral states of the ocean.

For the better part of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, America has retained its hegemony in the region and Indian Ocean. However, with China emerging as the new candidate for economic giant and actually becoming one through its multiple economic projects around the world, this has started a new debate. Who would be the new dominant power in the world? Organski and Kugler's 1980s theoretical concept divides the international world into dominant powers, middle powers, small powers, and the rest of the world (Hornat, 2015). Only a single state can be dominant in one-time zone, whereas the middle powers and even small powers always strive to become equal, or roughly equal, to the dominant power.

Considering the aforementioned perspective, the relationship between China and the United States in the Indian Ocean represents a power struggle. However, to understand this power relationship, it is also essential to understand the importance of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indian Ocean, the third-largest ocean in the world, is home to warm waters that provide exceptional conditions for trade all year around (Hassan, 2019). More so, the ocean connects the trade of both blocs of the world, East and West. Naturally, whoever has the largest fleet to control trade with their economic expertise and trade material will not only rule the international economy but will also have sea power (Mahan, 1890). The Indian Ocean Region and its maritime politics became hotspots for international arenas during the Cold War era, and since then, the Indian Ocean Region has become essentially the most politically active region on both land and sea (Karim, 2017). Hence, to rule the economic world and consistently dominate the political arena, controlling the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean has become a necessary evil for the major powers of the world (America and China).

Literature Review

In 1890, Alfred Mahan, an American Naval strategist, gave the theory of sea dominance. According to the theory, whoever could rule the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) of the Indian Ocean would be able to rule the entire region of Asia (Karim, 2017). Hence, the Great Game of Power Politics emerged in the Indian Ocean after the Cold War. Before moving on to the game of power politics in the Indian Ocean, it is imperative to understand why it was so important for Mahan to predict such a theory and what power politics entails in international relations discourse.

In international relations discourse, power politics is not a new term; one can't go far without coming across it. However, with time, this term has found many meanings and significance throughout the course, making it one of the phenomena of international relations (James, 1964). Literature enthusiasts often refer to Power Game as "Power Politics" due to its unique language, laws, and harsh logic. The most basic meaning of power politics in the world of international relations is a political action that makes use of or intends to increase power or influence.



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Nevertheless, power politics is also a political relationship between independent powers or simply the dominating states of the world (Wight, 1946; James, 1964). Power politics is also a struggle for power between states, with the same immediate aim as power itself (Morgenthau, 1961). In other words, power politics is the power play of the major stakeholder states of the world, whereas the other smaller stakeholder states are nothing but mere pawns of the major actors (states).

There are multiple “games” employed by the “power states” of the world to gain power and dominating status in the system, and it falls upon the entire international community to strive for situations where these power states would not engage in wars for this status. Power politics has introduced numerous theories, such as the balance of power and the theory of power transition (Lemke, 2008), to achieve this goal. Although the latter falls under the collection of world hegemonic theories, this research provides sound grounding for establishing China and America's relationship with each other and in the Indian Ocean Region. To verify the research hypothesis based on the theory of power transition, we will only compare the balance of power with the theory of power transition, given the research constraints.

In 1980, A.F.K. Organski (1958, 1980) and Jacek Kugler (1980, 2000) first published the theory in their combined work, *The War Ledger*. The theory enjoyed quite a bit of support for its understanding of the international system and for differentiating the actors by their evaluations of the status quo and relative capabilities. The theory divides the international power hierarchy as follows: the dominant state, the strongest actor (state) in the system; the great and middle powers, who often challenge the dominant state for its position; small powers; and the rest of the world (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Lemke, 2008; Hornat, 2015). The position of dominant is always desirable by the other states in the system, for it provides the privilege of establishing and structuring patterns of interaction between the states within the system. We refer to these patterns as the status quo. The power transition theory categorizes the states based on their inclination towards the dominant status quo. The main hypothesis of the theory claims that when the dissatisfied states acquire the capabilities (power) that can match the capabilities (power) of the dominant states, then the probability of war is highest (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Lemke, 2008; Hornat, 2015). When satisfied states have parity with the dominant in terms of their capabilities, the probability of war decreases because there isn't much that would cause discord among them. And naturally, a dissatisfied state will never challenge the dominant if its capabilities are not equal to those of the dominant, for its chances of loss will be greater (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Lemke, 2008; Hornat, 2015). Therefore, in contrast to the presumption of the Balance of Power System prior to the start of World Wars, a balance of capabilities, resources, and power among major states or blocs could potentially decrease the likelihood of war. Whereas Organski and Kugler provided a more acceptable hypothesis towards the end of the Cold War (which actually proved correct), it is the parity between major states that leads to war rather than the preponderance of power (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Lemke, 2008; Hornat, 2015; Tammen, 2008).



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China might be the natural and best candidate to uproot American hegemony in Asia, and many American observers perceive that China will experience a similar geopolitical trajectory as America did. For instance, as John Mearsheimer (2001) predicted, like America in the 19th century, China will also pursue regional hegemony in Asia with its own Monroe Doctrine, and this doctrine will push America out of Asia (Waltz, 2012; Pan, 2014). The most heightened anxiety-inducing factors for America are its loss of free passage and navigation in the South China Sea and China's A2/AD capabilities, which have also become a prism through which Washington now sees China's sea power rise—forceful, barbaric, and without freedom (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2010; Pan, 2014). Without a doubt, America has always adopted a balance of power system strategy against China (Kagan, 2010), after briefly pursuing a policy of strategic reassurance with China (Wei, 2013; Zhao, 2012). The idea was that America viewed China as an irresponsible and rogue state, a common perception of communist states, and therefore deemed China unfit to be a stakeholder in the world. The balance of power concept shaped the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership Framework, and the pivot towards Asia, all aimed at countering Chinese influence in the region (O'Hanlan, 2012; White, 2012; Buzan, 2012). Hence the ongoing tug-of-war for “power” between China and America emerged in the Indian Ocean Region, which includes the ocean and its littoral states. The purpose of this literature review is to verify the hypothesis; “China is striving to gain dominating status in Indian Ocean Region, where America is already enjoying hegemony for decades now, according to power transition if China is able to amass ‘power’ that could be considered equal to America’s, China will not only regain the dominant status but the probability of war between the two would be highest, moreover, China is gathering its power through economic investments with the littoral states and America is strengthening its hold by deploying 60% of its naval resources in Indo-Pacific, shall the war arise what consequences would Indian Ocean Region will bear then and who will be responsible for it; or is there a better option than this?”.

However, there are a few gaps in the literature review available. First, the role of littoral states and the right to have a choice between China and America. China is investing in littoral states in sectors of infrastructure, energy, and technology, but this investment comes with debts and certain political commitments. This certainly points towards economic imperialism and doesn't fall under China's favorite mantra of peace and development. Whereas America's strong hold in the Indo-Pacific and demands of free navigation are putting a strain on local markets, the idea of free trade is leading smaller states into debt crises, import inflation, export deficits, and relative deprivation. Moreover, it still remains unclear what will be the end result of China and America's power struggle; if the power transition from America to China is successful, what event will highlight it—a war, confrontation, or the launch of weapons of mass destruction like America did after World War II ended? The literature also fails to provide a comprehensive evaluation of China's peace and development initiatives with the littoral states, as well as America's preemptive measures against Chinese influence, based on past American interactions with its adversaries.

Significance of the Study



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The aim of this research is to explore Sino-American relations in the Indian Ocean Region under the context of power politics by using the theoretical concept of power transition given by Organski and Kugler in the 1980s and providing a brief comparison with the realist balance of power systems. The purpose of this research was to create a theoretical framework to understand the behavior of both states and situations, which are mostly treated through empirical evidence. The research aims to provide context that demonstrates that a balance of power will not foster results beneficial for the involved actors. Rather, the research takes a fresher outlook towards the study of politics around the Indian Ocean and what possible measures could be taken to avoid great repercussions. Furthermore, the research discusses the possible implications of Chinese and American strategies used to instill their influence in the region on the littoral states. Lastly, the research also studies all or any possible situations that could lead to war or warlike situations (as the theory of power transition predicts), what other possible outcomes should be adopted to overcome such situations, and where all the involved actors can benefit.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of this research are

- To identify the game of power politics in Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- To explore Sino-American relation in Indian Ocean Region through prism of power transition theory.
- To discuss the possibility of China emerging as the new “power” in Indian Ocean Region.
- To evaluate the impact of power transition in Indian Ocean Region on its littoral states.

Research Questions

- How does the theory of power transition reflect upon the Chinese and American involvement in Indian Ocean Region?
- How does Chinese political economic growth challenge American dominant role in Indian Ocean Region?
- How and through what means can America retain its power and status quo in Indian Ocean Region against China?
- How and what role can littoral states play in the power shift change in Indian Ocean Region?
- How does power transition process impact the littoral states of the region?
- What possible role can littoral states play in the power transition process?

Research Methodology

The nature of this research will be qualitative; a post-positivist approach will be adopted to collect data which will be historical, descriptive and analytical in nature. All the material for this research will be gathered from secondary sources. The methodology would utilize current media, think tank publications, and when available, peer-reviewed literature.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study



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The research will necessarily focus on the projects initiated by China in Indian Ocean to gain dominance in the region, and the counter measures America has been taking to stop this power shift. The data collected will be applied under the theory of power transition, to further explain the consequences Indian Ocean Region will bear from the power struggle of two major powers of the world.

AMERICA- THE DOMINANT OF IOR

While much focus in the discourse is on Chinese naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean, its rising influence in the region, and the destruction it will bring, America's control over the major choke points in the Indian Ocean to dominate the Indo-Pacific Region and its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) has always been overlooked or precisely never categorized for its original intent (Kumar, 2000). After the end of the Cold War, America aggressively used its role as the only major power in the world to control the sea lines of the Indian Ocean, to dominate, and to keep world trade under its control. However, this control was always based on the pursuit of a superpower trying to improve its global dominance by further galvanizing its role in the ocean. However, the unmerited following of the Pre-emption Policy (2000) finally compelled the Asian countries to strengthen their defense against America, which resulted in the rise of China above the others and its ultimate challenge to American supremacy.

Chinese critics view the pivot or rebalance as an aggressive strategy that aims to slow down the expansion of Chinese power (Silove, 2020). However, what some of the American, Chinese, and other scholars fail to understand is that the pivot towards Asia was already under way when China first rose in the ranks of the major powers of the world; the substance of the pivot was deliberately kept from public eyes to dissuade China from making bids for hegemony; and lastly, Chinese rise was already an accepted concept for America. That's why the strategy was formulated, yet it never was aimed at containing it, but rather effectively engaging and hedge around it.

This chapter examines America's regard for China, the challenges it poses to American supremacy, and the USA's new strategy of hedging. While hedging is a financial strategy, Tunsjo explains its relevance in international relations as the development and implementation of government strategies aimed at reconciliation or confrontation in order to remain well prepared regardless of future developments, whether international or domestic. States hedge by combining contradictory cooperation and confrontational strategies to produce balance in the face of uncertainties (Tunsjo, 2017, pp. 46). Moreover, the use of the policy of containment would be of zero benefit, primarily because it was formulated to be used to contain the spread of communism and the USSR; secondly, China's rise doesn't ring bells for the rise of communism or even Confucianism; besides, its rise could not be more similar to America's trends from the 1950s onwards.

This chapter will be dedicated to understanding America's stance on China's rise, with the most important question in this regard being: should America aim to preserve its superior power position in Asia Pacific against the engaging Chinese influence? This inquiry into American goals raises questions about the country's resources. For instance, what possible achievements



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will that goal require? Could we achieve the goal without engaging in direct confrontation with China?

These questions not only address the American perspective but rather also engage the hypothesis of Graham Allison: will America's acknowledgement of Chinese rise, develop its fear among them, and lead towards conflict (Thucydides Trap) or will America be able to hedge around China and eventually reorient the power spectrum of the region with America leading it?

Means to Ends: Pivot towards Asia-Pacific

During Bush's era, the pivot towards Asia-Pacific remained confidential to deter China from pursuing hegemony and maintain the existing power balance in the region, where America naturally holds the dominant position (Beckley, 2011; Yuen, 2014). However, the official launch of the strategy in 2011 gave America ample time to fortify its defenses against China. As a result, America adopted a strategy of expanding and enhancing diplomatic relations with China to counteract Chinese rises both internally and externally (Silove, 2016).

The internal balancing of the strategy compromised military accretion to enhance the American Navy's capacity to operate in the Asia Pacific, in which the strategy promised to shift 60% of American naval vessels to the Southern Pacific by 2020 to keep American influence concentrated in the Indo-Pacific (Asia-Pacific) Oceans (Gaddi, 2012). Moreover, in January 2012, America announced Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership, prioritizing twenty-first century defense. The formulation of this strategy, more precise in its goals and processes, aimed to balance China's economic and military opening with the potential to influence America's relations with like-minded states in the IOR, such as India (Kugler, 2013; Malik, 2016).

While Bush's administration rarely discussed a "pivot towards Asia," Silove's research, "The Pivot before Pivot, 2016," provides evidence to the contrary. The strategy was prevalent in the early 2000s, initially known as 'shift', but it evolved into 'pivot' and 'rebalance' during Obama's administration. Regardless of the names, the reoriented strategy formulated a significant relative reallocation of USA resources towards Asia-Pacific, aiming to match Chinese growth by enhancing the combined power of America, like-minded states, and America's allies and partners (Silove, 2016).

Despite the passage of years, China continues to perceive America as a threat, as evidenced by the Trump Administration's introduction of the ARIA-Asia Reassurance Initiative Act on December 31, 2018. The act makes Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania the focal points of America's foreign policy. Moreover, the law authorizes US\$1.5 billion for spending on USA-led programs in East and Southeast Asia (Saha, 2020; Panda, 2019).

However, has America been successful in encircling China geographically, isolating it diplomatically and economically, and countering its extra regional influence?

President Obama's Asia Pivot Policy

While Bush's administration paved the way for America into Asia-Pacific, the visible shift in America's response to Chinese rise took place in Obama's administration. Whether it was because of the Great Depression that America had to survive through or the potential doubt its allies, partners, and world at large seem to have developed against its hegemonic role, despite the



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reason, international political setup forced America to acknowledge Chinese rise and straighten its response to it. Expanding and strengthening America's dwindling alliances with committed allies in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, as well as forming new allies in Southeast Asia, were the main objectives of the pivot (later termed rebalance) to Asia (Saha, 2020). India assumed the central role in the second goal (Panda, 2019). For symbolic and strategic reasons, Australia increased the navy's deployment on the military front. America put considerable diplomatic effort into reiterating its commitment to security for its allies, Japan and the Philippines, while both are involved in territorial disputes with China. Later, India, also embroiled in a territorial dispute with China, received this commitment to security.

However, America's focus quickly shifted to other, more localized issues. The occupation of Crimea, the attack on eastern Ukraine by Russia, and the revival of terror groups around Iraq and Syria were threatening European, American, and some of the Asia-Pacific parts (Saha, 2020). While America was busy with drowning attacks, orchestrating proxy wars, and handling the old enemy, China was gradually increasing its strategic actions. Its strategic involvement and activities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea gained momentum. While its forces embarked on land reclamation projects and built pseudo-islands, Lastly, China was preparing to launch the largest economic project of the decade.

By the end of Obama's era, America's Asian allies and partners were once again doubtful and began to question America's commitment to them and the region (Fly, 2018).

While Trump's response to China could clear these doubts, it still left scholars divided on Trump's administration's response to the Chinese rise. With its withdrawal from international treaties and slogans for America first and protectionism, it has been hard to deduce what perception America aims to have towards China's rise that has extended beyond America's "pivot toward Asia-Pacific" strategy's predictions by 2017. Trump's Asian Strategy has solely focused on internal balancing, whereas the "Pivot (rebalance) toward Asia-Pacific" relied on expanded engagement and external balancing.

Trump's Asia Policy: Hoax or Horcurx?

Withdrawal from Alliance projects

While the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade deal with Pacific Rim nations, was considered a success against China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative, 2013), Trump's withdrawal from the treaty created a vacuum among the financial and administrative sectors of the countries China was all eager and ready to fill by offering fraught-ridden regions a boost in manufacturing that also trampled America's influence in Asia (Saha, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2017).

According to the report published in 2019, the current American President's decision to withdraw from TPP and reduce trade agreements for mutual deficits with nations has impacted America's relations with Southeast Asian states both politically and economically, while the latter consider the former an unreliable trade partner (Harding & Kim, 2019). Adding to the problems, America's strained relations with China and their trade tensions also contributed to



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America's interests being neglected while Asian countries moved ahead with their regional trade cooperation policies as scheduled (Harding & Kim, 2019).

Despite the withdrawal from TPP, Southeast Asia holds significant value for America in its strategy of hedging China. Geographically, Southeast Asia connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans; economically, it is one of the largest and fastest-growing markets in the world; while five of its states are under treaty alliance with America, a few of the region's states are already involved in long-standing claim conflicts over the South China Sea against China. Simply put, ASEAN states act as the best weapons against China.

Economic Relations

The USA's economic dependency on Indo-Pacific countries, especially the ASEAN states, remains a hope for both parties involved. Southeast Asia, working towards becoming the world's largest business market, has the ability to cater to American companies for massive opportunities. The region already generates a five percent growth rate annually and is expected to collectively become the 4th largest economy in the world, overtaking Japan and the European Union by 2050 (Harding & Kim, 2019). The ASEAN states are already the 4th largest export markets for America.

While Trump might be changing all of the rules of strategy, hedging is still very much part of it. As of July 2018, China was the largest USA trading partner, accounting for 15.4 percent of American trade. Whereas Japan, South Korea, and India are among the top 10 trading partners of America (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019).

Strategic Component

Probably more than economic relations, Southeast Asia holds much importance in America's 'external balancing' because of its borders with the Indo-Pacific Oceans. The sub-region is also home to America's five treaty allies: Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Parameswaran, 2018).

Geographically, Southeast Asia connects the Indo-Pacific Oceans. The sub-region earns its importance from the vital sea lanes that cross through it, including the South China Sea, where the world's 1/3 of trade passes through; the Malacca Strait, a conflicted zone and active waterway; and the Sulu Sea, boiling with transitional crimes and emerging interregional cooperation to tackle those crimes (Parameswaran, 2018).

Geopolitically, the sub-region bears the brunt of Indian and Pacific Oceans' conflicts, where the 'freeness' and 'openness' of the FOIP strategy are and will be tested. Without any strings attached, they are equally vulnerable to China's growing influence and investments. They are equally vulnerable to China's growing influence and investments, without any strings attached.

The China Factor and America's Threatened Role

China's actions in its conflict with Taiwan and over the South China Sea with Southeast Asian countries attest to its rise and growing hegemonic influence. While it is a natural growth process for the state that has become the economic giant of the world, with more money and influence than the world's supposedly superpower state, America, However, keeping in mind the research questions at the beginning of this chapter, it is essential to understand why America is struggling



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to maintain its position and influence in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions and the world at large. Whereas China's strategies seek to or can replace America as the dominant nation of the world remains to be seen, yet with current dynamics, it is evident that the Chinese sphere of influence is gaining effect on the Asian continent. Well, America has truly remained a prominent power in the Pacific and Indian Ocean Region, and China is assertively challenging America and its allies in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean (Saha, 2020).

In the Indo-Pacific region, the dominant role of China threatens the autonomy of regional states. And it is these states throughout the region that are calling upon America's leadership to uphold regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence (Storey & Cook, 2018).

While America's response to limiting or hedging China may be partially based on maintaining the peace order in the region, which is home to natural resources, the world's most vital waterways for trade, and geostrategic locations, the other half of America's reasons are its own personal interests. China is not only threatening the peace of the region by reordering the world system to its whims (from an American perspective); it is also threatening America's influence in the region and its supremacy and hegemony around the world. However, Chinese influence has gone beyond expectations simply because of a lack of internal balance in America. While the Bush and Obama administrations were determined to hedge China and engage it in an already existing order, Trump's era started with the termination of all the policies and strategies its predecessors had set in the process to 'contain' China. The new strategy proposed was the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA).

The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA)

ARIA consists of policies that ensure America's allies and strategic partners' commitment and loyalty to the region that America calls its own. The Indo-Pacific region challenges the security of international order and threatens America's interests and global peace. Lastly, America's status quo is threatened and challenged by China, North Korea, and international groups. The initiative further highlights human rights violations across the world, especially in the smaller states. Hence, it was deemed important for the United States of America to engage in the affairs of the region and ensure peace and stability. The Act has been divided into three sections, as below (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

Support American security interests in the region.

The ARIA aims to formulate policies that ensure the securitization of America's national security interests, its allies, and alliances. The act was formulated to promote America's commitment towards freedom of navigation under international law and peaceful resolution of maritime and territorial disputes, and to enhance security and defense cooperation with its allies and partners to maintain a strong military presence in the Indo-Pacific region (Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, 2018). In order to achieve such freedom, ARIA proposed the initiation of the "Joint Indo-Pacific Diplomatic Strategy."

Promoting America's economic interests

Upon assuming power, Trump withdrew from numerous economic and trade agreements, although ARIA actively promoted numerous others. A 'comprehensive economic engagement'



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with the collaboration of ASEAN was formulated. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, East Asia Summit, and Group of 20 were reenergized and set out to pursue 'America's' economic objectives, i.e., protect American economic influence in the region against the rising influence of the new economic giant, China. Under the ARIA, America provided full support to the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement with Indo-Pacific countries. Among other economic provisions, an annual report (five years) would be published on the efforts done by America to fight the cybercrimes of property violations and commercial theft that have compromised the security of the region, and alternate means would be provided to provide a more professional, comprehensive, and cohesive strategy for multiple years to encourage the regional countries to implement power strategies.

Promoting America's values in the region

The one major difference between the two is approach. While Obama's approach was 'non-confrontational', Trump's has remained 'confrontational' from the start until now. However, it was this non-confrontational approach that spoke of 'mutual trust' between the powers, encouraging China to cooperate in the International Order and utilizing its rise in active efforts for global problem-solving (Fly, 2018). The approach was carefully constructed in order to not antagonize the rising China, which would escalate the conflict. However, Trump's confrontational approach has brought China and America more than twice on the brink of war within the time span of 1.5 years.

In other words, even though America had been strategizing against China's rise since Bush's era and certainly during Obama's era, it remained under the radar. As the presidency changed, Trump's administration not only acknowledged China's rise but also acknowledged its own confrontational response to China and initiated strategy applications to protect its interests and strengthen its influence across the Indo-Pacific region.

Washington might have a chance at overshadowing Chinese influence and growth in the region. With its efforts to convince the regional partners to strengthen their abilities to stabilize the region, India has grown to be a leading actor on security and economic fronts, possibly for all personal reasons, yet they are aiding in America's quest, hence they are tolerable.

America's Rising Influence in Asia: Again

While America has increased US-led initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, Washington has always considered itself a part of the region. From the US West Coast through the Bay of Bengal, America considers it the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, when America speaks for the region, it speaks as an Indo-Pacific nation itself, and from a security point of view, it has the longest maritime border, several long-standing treaty allies, and the largest Pacific fleet in the Indo-Pacific Oceans.

As China is focused on increasing its influence horizontally across Asia towards Africa, Europe, and Russia, America has also been trying to engage with its long-standing allies, Australia, Japan, South Korea, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other countries, to strengthen its foothold against Chinese influence. So far, Trump's administration has been working on three fronts: economic, defense, and diplomatic engagements to renew its diminishing influence,



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including new alliances with countries that are willing to support American perspectives. However, due to America's aggressive anti-Chinese stance, its success in gaining contenders against China and reestablishing its influence in the region has been stalled. The reasons behind America's small yet piling failures lie behind irresponsible administration, its domestic affairs, and its overall arrogant behavior, which have put many countries off it.

Diplomatic Engagements

The US's diplomacy remains the most important facet of America's strategy. It has operated across the Pacific, importantly, Australia and Japan, for years now. Therefore, as stressed by the State Department Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the strengthening of US partnerships in the Indo-Pacific was the need of the hour as Chinese investments across the region gained momentum. The alliance formed against the USSR further strengthened China's rise (Saha, 2020). The traditional alliance soon gained new eastward security partnerships with Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and India (Scott, 2018).

Its arrangements with India were the new addition to America's traditional alliances and introduction into the Indo-Pacific security system. The joint statement drawn up between the leaders of the States in June 2017 marked a new era of cooperation between Washington and Delhi, ready to collaborate as the responsables of the Indo-Pacific region. The Maritime Security Dialogue (2018) between the two states discussed the possible developments in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific on the backdrop of growing Chinese dominance in the Western Pacific for America and in the Indian Ocean for India (Scott, 2018; Saha, 2020).

The strategic intentions of America behind these alliances were to renew the Quad between the USA, Australia, India, and Japan that was originally proposed in 2007. The Quad was under preparation to counter the Chinese influence in the region, provide more economic benefits to the littoral states to win their loyalty against China, ensure the status quo, and retain the supremacy of America in the power play. However, the success rate depends so highly on various variables that their constant change makes the prediction of results a complicated task.

Opportunities and challenges to American strategies

While Trump's strategies might work in America's favor, for them to yield productive results, the regional states need to be on the same wavelength as America. Though some major regional states do align their interests and international affairs loyalty to the USA, there are other states, the smaller littoral states, that are apprehensive of America and the ultimate power game they will have to suffer through. So far, America's Free and Open Indo-Pacific has received positive responses from certain regional states. Japan's version of Free and Open Indo-Pacific, according to the Japanese PM, is that the confluence of the two seas will be 'common ground' for all the countries, bringing stability and prosperity to all by maintaining and strengthening the free and open maritime routes governed under the rules of law of the region. Moreover, an open Indo-Pacific Sea route ensures a dramatic fall in China's rising influence across the blue belt, which undoubtedly benefits Japan greatly.

India's foreign policy is based on becoming the regional hegemon, and while it does have the second largest GDP and rising political relations after China in the region, an Indian Ocean under



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Chinese command still doesn't bode well for Delhi's aspirations. To strengthen its stance, India incorporated the Indo-Pacific concept in 2012 to exhibit itself as a regional power that wants the region to be free, open, rules-based, and inclusive.

Australia remains the only regional country whose vision includes a fully engaged United States. Its foreign policies depict that Canberra is determined to ensure a secure, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific that will guarantee the stability of the balance of power in the region, which fully aligns with American policy. Lastly, Indonesia's outlook on Indo-Pacific collaboration also rests on the principles of candidness, pellucidity, comprehensiveness, and honoring international law (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019).

Yet as small and medium-sized countries, including a few major powers caught between America and China's power play, ARIA could provide the Trump administration with the golden opportunity to engage them with interests convergent to the interests of America. While the regional states are apprehensive of the changing regional order resulting from the Chinese rise, they also do not want to lose their share of the dividends brought by China's investments (Chen, 2018).

However, it would be a difficult task to remain neutral should Washington decide to pursue a zero-sum game as it did during the Cold War and the War on Terrorism (Samaan, 2019).

Conclusion

Currently, Trump's absence from the Annual ASEAN Summit for two years straight has raised lingering regional suspicions about the focus and intent of America's 'famous strategy to counter China'. The withdrawal of America has been a very symbolic act, and the trend continues. America has either lost interest in or is incapable of countering China's influence, which has allowed China to advance its influence in the region (Freeman, 2019).

According to some analysts, China-America rivalry will take center stage in Asia and increase with time as America's commitment to the region intensifies. While the gradual impinging effects of the act on the Sino-American rivalry are nowhere to be seen, rather, the situation has been escalating in Southeast Asia as America has been sending its war marines across the South China Sea, the disputed waters claimed by China. Aptly explained, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned that ASEAN countries will soon have time upon them where a choice between the Liberal Statusquo Power and the New Neo-Challenging Power would be inevitable, while the best option for the middle powers would be to hedge around China and America. The future of the Indo-Pacific remains vague and more uncertain, which was previously accustomed to more principled and mostly predictable US leadership. Allies and rivals alike do not rely on Washington or have learned to have their backup. While the Indo-Pacific region is going through strategic landscape diplomatic relations across the region as a way of hedging against the rising China, America might not be at the center of the new era. It remains to be seen whether America's own leadership will lead to the USA's fall, while his ancestors, despite their flaws, sought to demonstrate to the world that China's rise will not be America's fall. Trump's indecisiveness and "America first" foreign policy is convincing the Asian states to give up on Washington (Rapp-Hooper, 2016).



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