



## Decoupling US and China's Grand Strategy in Asia-Pacific Region

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**Abstract:** Since the end of the second world war, the Asia-Pacific region has remained the center of global attention due to US presence, hot spot issues, and unresolved territorial disputes. There is no denying the fact that US presence has contributed enormously towards regional security and stability, which also enabled China to rise peacefully, despite tremors in other regions of the world. This region alone contains 60% of the world's population and half of the world's economic and trade volume. The framework of extensive and robust engagement is the recipe for future progress, and no single country or alliance system can shape the future security and economic architecture of this region, therefore, necessitating the network of partnerships and comprehensive engagements by all the countries. While there are competing and complementary paradigms pursued by the US and China, however, the pragmatic assessment demands strong cooperation and mutual accommodation to overcome the challenges of evolving strategic landscape. This research paper argues that the US policies indicate hegemonic behaviour and cold war mentality of containment, while China is pursuing a strategy of common development through win-win cooperation.

**Key Words:** Common Development, Shared Future, Win-Win Cooperation

### Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region is considered as most dynamic, fast-developing, and relatively economically more integrated, despite unresolved territorial issues, hot spot issues, and geopolitics of major power's competition. The landmass of the Asia-Pacific region comprises several countries with almost 60% of the world's population, and its trade volume covers nearly half of the entire global trade. Located at the congruence of very important international trade routes along the Pacific Ocean, Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean, it is regarded as the region of global strategic significance. With the evolving global order, the pattern of international relations is witnessing steady transition, whereby the regional condition of the Asia-Pacific is also experiencing profound changes and adjusting to new geostrategic, geo-economic, and geopolitical realities. The competing paradigm of the USA's

Pivot to Asia ([Ishaque, Anjum, et al., 2017a](#)), Indo-Pacific strategy ([Mehra, 2021](#)), Quadrilateral (QUAD) military dialogue ([Smith, 2021](#)), and alliance obligations are creating intense geopolitical tension with China, which is pursuing more gentle approach by way of shelving the disputes for common development, creating community with shared destiny through win-win cooperation and contributing towards transforming the usual pattern of interstate relations from zero-sum to the positive-sum game. China has pledged to foster regional peace and stability by following the path of peaceful development and the mutually valuable approach of opening up and follows the foreign policy of "Panchasheel" ([Panda, 2014](#)), the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," friendly relations and cooperation with all countries of the world. China actively participates in all regional multilateral

forums and coordinates joint efforts for response against both traditional and nontraditional security challenges, economic development, and increasing cooperation for enduring peace, stability, and common prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region. The article has been developed by applying the theory of Interdependence, using qualitative research method and case study design.

### **Evolving Dynamics of Asia-Pacific Region**

In spite of the instability in the global system, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 incidents and resultant US invasion of Afghanistan Iraq, and transformation in the entire Middle East due to evolving Arab Spring in the last two decades, and the recent Russia -Ukraine conflict, it is significant to note that China's peripheral areas have by far remained peaceful, primarily due to cooperative and often constructive engagement between China and USA on the regional and international issues ([Ishaque, Rehman, et al., 2017](#)). The Chinese and regional economic development in the last four decades is principally credited towards the largely existing stable security environment, which has facilitated the economic development and prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region. The post-World War II regional order has been greatly influenced by the US presence and post-war reconstruction. The fact of the matter is that constructive and cooperative engagement between China and the US has ensured long-term stability and provided enabling environments for the Chinese spectacular economic growth. Therefore, it is assessed that the stable China-US bilateral and military relations are regarded as the significant stabilizing factors ([Ishaque, Rehman, et al., 2017, p. 104](#)). The rising stature of China as the second-largest economy is in fact complementary to the US endeavours of progress and development. Therefore, mutual cooperation, greater communication, mutual trust, and accommodation shall help in building a wide-ranging relationship for the benefit of both countries, the region, and the world at large.

However, despite apparent stability and cooperative engagement among the countries of

the Asia-Pacific region, the turf war for enhancing the sphere of influence between the US and China since President Trump took office in 2017, the cold war mentality of zero sum and negative competition have been generated by the US and its allies. US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2018 ([Encina, n.d.](#)) signifies major power competition with China and Russia as a new paradigm of US national security concerns and priorities, which has created anxiety, instability, and nervousness among the analysts of international security and China alike. While the situation has so far been handled pragmatically, the chances of miscalculations and unprovoked reactions remain at large. The US, on the behest of alliance obligations, is embarked upon creating a network of alliances aimed at containing China and giving flip to regional hot spot issues ([Ishaque, Rehman, et al., 2017, p. 106](#)). Such a calibrated instability in the name of creating a free and transparent Indo-Pacific region, maintaining freedom of navigation, providing explicit support to secessionist tendencies against Core National Interests of China ([Ishaque, Anjum, et al., 2017b, p. 262](#)), and launching of an unprovoked trade war are some of the concerns causing instability in the region.

### **Strategic Construct of Theory of Complex Interdependence**

Theory of Complex Interdependence highlights the intricate ways in which, because of expanding ties, the international actors turn into jointly dependent actions and are responsive to each other's desires. Complex Interdependence highlights that "the states are important actors. However, cooperation in the social welfare issues, security issues, and global developmental agenda is the dominant characteristic of international politics as well as the conflicts" ([Rana, 2015, p. 291](#)). In the structure of 'Interdependence,' the states cooperate due to their common interests, and as a consequence, it leads to the stability and prosperity of the international system as a whole. Another important facet of the 'Complex Interdependence' is that it is a fusion of two opposite views, as it combines the components of power politics and economic liberalism, apart

from the costs and benefits of interdependence associations.

In the era of economic globalization and 'Complex Interdependence', the possibility of global military conflicts cannot be disregarded, despite the growing economic collaboration and ecological Interdependence. Nevertheless, traditional power politics looks at zero-sum, whereas 'Complex Interdependence' generally cooperates outside the scope of the zero-sum game ([Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 10](#)). According to Joseph Nye and Robert O. Keohane, Interdependence should not be described solely as situations of 'evenly balanced mutual dependence'. They argue that: "it is asymmetries in dependence that are most likely to provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another." In the context of imbalanced proportion, the "less dependent actors can often use the interdependence relationship as a source of power in bargaining over an issue or affect the outcome of other issues" ([Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 11](#)). The high politics of national security and hard power continue to remain relevant and important. However, the economic, social, and environmental issues - low politics - are also high priority international agenda. It can, therefore, be concluded that complex interdependence factors in the traditional and nontraditional security aspects as well as the economic collaboration and common development often out of the zero-sum game.

### **US Perspective on Security and Stability in Asian Pacific Region**

It is highly significant to note that the United States' presence in the troubled regions of North and Southeast Asia after the Second World War provided immense stability to the war-torn region and also helped in rebuilding the devastated regions through a massive economic and infrastructure development plan. It is also worth mentioning that the stability umbrella provided by the United States provided a huge opportunity for China to focus on internal consolidation, rebuilding, and economic development. Today's peaceful rise of China is highly attributed to the

United States' presence in the region. Asia Pacific region today is far more developed and economically integrated as compared to other regions of the world. At the heightened Cold War, and also Korean War and Vietnam War, the Southeast Asian region has maintained steady growth and infrastructure development. The United States, over its involvement in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East, paid heavily in terms of economy and embroiled the US military in unending wars. Realizing the vacuum in the Asia Pacific, the United States introduced the policy of Pivot to Asia, which was formally announced in 2012 by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She described the policy reorientation of the United States by labeling it as a swivel of developing a regional economic and security architecture ([Ishaque, Anjum, et al., 2017b, p. 266](#)). The pivot to Asia contained economic and military components with basing arrangements with the regional countries. However, the balance was heavily tilted in favor of military prong. Such a strategy was aimed at altering the status quo in the Asia Pacific region, which created a lot of uneasiness in Chinese policy planners. It was feared that the Cold War mentality of containment was again at play. Why from the US perspective, it was felt necessary to execute the alliance obligations against rising China with hegemonic ambitions, as evident from Chinese assertive behavior and military modernization plans aimed at forcefully tilting the balance of power in her favor. The US also feels that China is adamant about rewriting the rules of international order and throwing the United States out of this region, which is highly unacceptable for the United States.

The United States' freedom of navigation has been repeatedly challenged in the South China Sea by assertive China by establishing claims over islands disputed as per international law. With the rising economy and military modernization plan, China is getting assertive every day. The United States has to execute alliance obligations that demand robust military forces ready to defend the countries from hegemonic China and also maintain free and open Indo-Pacific for economic and infrastructure development of

regional countries. This increasing US attention is due to the fact that the Indo-Pacific region faces escalating challenges, especially from China, which is joining its technological, economic, military, and diplomatic tools to increase the sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and pursues to convert itself as world's most influential power replacing the USA. The Chinese assertive behaviour and bullying of her neighbours have become a routine affair, with complete disregard to international obligations. In this practice, China is also destabilizing the international regimes on human rights and international law especially the hard earned freedom of navigation and other cooperative arrangements made by the USA in the last five decades, which eventually brought prosperity and stability to Indo-Pacific region.

For ensuring enduring peace and stability against assertive Chinese behaviour, the US is committed to the capacity building of its partners and allies aimed at safeguarding the liberal ideals shared by the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. For strengthening the international system based on transparency and shared liberal values, the US intends to contribute to shaping the strategic environment in favour of US allies and partners while managing positive competition with China. The US is open to joining mutually beneficial cooperation with China on account of nontraditional security challenges like climate change, nuclear proliferation, antipiracy and counter-terrorism to name a few.

The US has formalized Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) forum for synchronizing the response in nontraditional security, mainly in the maritime domain with member countries, comprising Japan, Australia, and India. The US is concerned about growing Chinese behavior asserting to alter the regional status quo ([Smith, 2021](#)). This assumption is shared by other QUAD members as well. Therefore, QUAD has gradually emerged as a security cooperation platform against China.

### **Chinese Perspective on Security and Stability in Asia-Pacific Region**

Peace and stability of Asia-the Pacific region is the

top priority for China. The Chinese Government is conscious of the fact that China cannot progress until the region is stable and also that China cannot progress alone without factoring in the overall development and progress of the entire region. As a significant member of the Asia-Pacific family, China is cognizant of the fact that its peaceful development is closely associated with the future of this region ([Zhang, 2015](#)). China has all along taken the development of regional stability and prosperity as its own obligation. Therefore, China is ready to follow the security through negotiation and collaboration in the essence of acting together for mutually beneficial outcomes and jointly cooperating with other countries to safeguard regional peace and stability. China and the regional countries have pragmatically managed the hotspot issues, territorial differences, and great power's competition and in the overall construct, Asia-Pacific is a relatively peaceful region in the entire globe, which has provided an opportunity for common development through mutual goods and as a result, the region has achieved stable and relatively fast growth ([Ishaque, Rehman, et al., 2017, p. 107](#)), despite the pandemic situation in last two years. Another important aspect is that it focuses on utilizing the regional organizations for introducing and coordinating joint efforts for economic development and maintaining peace. In this regard, regional integration has picked up the tempo, with flourishing subregional collaborations. Despite many successes, the Asia-Pacific region even now confronts several destabilizing and uncertain circumstances. The nuclear question on the Korean Peninsula is complicated, delicate, and provide immense security challenges ([Dalton, 2021](#)); the territorial issues in the north and south China sea, the US alliance obligations, and meddling into the internal affairs of China on Taiwan and Hongkong issues, the aggressive Indo-Pacific strategy and QUAD alliance are some of the destabilizing factors which drag China-US relations to cold war type zero-sum game on one pretext or the other. The ongoing instability in Afghanistan, sovereignty and maritime rights, US-Russia tension over Ukraine ([Grahm, 2021](#)), and

great power's competition as enunciated by USNSS 2018 and interim NSS 2021 of President Joe Biden are hindering the trust-building and economic cooperation. In today's global and regional order, nontraditional security threats such as natural disasters, terrorism, and transnational crimes have expanded and appear to be more pronounced. Therefore, joint and coordinated efforts are required to defeat this evolving global menace.

### **Chinese Contributions for Maintaining Peace and Stability in Asia-Pacific Region**

China believes that the old paradigms of security based on the Cold War mindset of containment and the zero-sum game have outlived their viability due to the vibrant progress of regional integration organizations, and therefore, the emphasis on hard power and use of brute force appears to be outdated concepts. The situation in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Korean Peninsula is testimony of the fact that hard power has its limitations, and mere blusters won't undermine the determination of sovereign countries. In the evolving strategic landscape, all countries are required to review and update their policies, strengthen harmony, and collaborate with sincerity and inclusiveness. China's vision for regional security and cooperation is discussed in detail in the ensuing paragraphs.

### **Pragmatic Foreign Policy of "Panchshel"**

In 1954 with forwarding looking pragmatic vision, China founded its foreign policy based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence commonly called "Panchashel" ([ZEWEI & Thakur, 2004, p. 37](#)) and reached out to the countries of the Asia-Pacific region for bilateral engagement without propagating the export of communist ideology. This was a landmark turning point for Chinese acceptance in the wider Asia-Pacific region and around the globe. Since then, every successive Chinese government has followed the policy of non-interference and respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of relevant countries, based on international norms of equality and justice. Therefore, "Panchashel" is

the inward-looking policy with respectful interstate relations based on sovereign equality and mutual accommodation. Mutual respect, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence are the cardinal facets of Panchashel.

### **New Security Concept**

Following the principles of friendly and good neighbourly relations, China proposed a New Security Concept in March 1997 at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). China stressed that there is a dire need to construct a security architecture, which seeks to ensure common security instead of one-sided security, and also enhance mutually beneficial cooperation, which does not visualize "security as zero-sum game at the cost of neighboring countries" ([China, n.d.](#)). China restated the territorial differences are no longer an impediment for China and its neighbours to develop usual collaboration and good-neighbourly relations and together develop a regional security framework. China intends to negate the western echoed perception of "China Threat" as China's destiny, development, and security are tied to that Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, China reassures ASEAN countries that the perception of "China threat is illusory."

### **Good and Friendly Neighbourhood policy**

China believes that her core national interests would best be served by ensuring enduring stability and development of Asia-Pacific region, as China and Asia's destiny are intertwined. President Hu Jintao, while addressing at Bao Forum on April 15, 2011, described China's Asia policy in the context of shared destiny by stating that "China cannot achieve development without Asia and Asia cannot realize prosperity without China." It is the consistent policy of the subsequent Chinese governments to strengthen the good neighbourly relations with its surrounding countries." It is based on the concept of "befriending and maintaining good relationships with neighbours" (*yi lin wei ban, yi lin wei shan*) and guided by the



ideal of “be harmonious, pacify and enrich thy neighbors” (*mu lin, an lin, fu lin*). This new approach is aimed towards the pursuit of building the viable regional cooperation framework of mutual consultations and mutual accommodation.

### **Peaceful Development and Building Harmonious World**

Since the end of the cold war in 1990, the international system has been in a state of transition. From the unipolar world order under US auspices, now there is a great transformation towards multipolarity due to the peaceful development of China and marked economic progress demonstrated by India, Russia, Brazil, ASEAN region, to name a few. With an increase in the comprehensive national power of China, it is playing a pronounced role on the world stage for the development and prosperity of mankind. The donation of COVID-19 vaccines across the continents, especially to underdeveloped and developing countries, is the testimony of this fact. However, despite benign intent and peaceful policy of win-win cooperation, China's development is being viewed with suspicion and mixed feelings about the very notion of peaceful intent and how far it shall remain peaceful due to the anarchic nature of international order and geopolitics in interstate relations, especially among the great powers. The Chinese benevolent intent is to contribute as a responsible player of the global system towards common development and prosperity of the world at large, through its soft power adhering to international principles of non-interference and mutual respect ([Jintao, 2011](#)). On September 15, 2005, while addressing at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN, President Hu Jintao announced the concept of building a harmonious world through; upholding multilateralism, mutually beneficial cooperation for realizing common prosperity, inclusiveness where all civilizations co-exist harmoniously, and reforms of the UN to maintain its efficacy and assertiveness. Therefore, President Xi Jinping also announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for the development and prosperity of relevant countries and the regions, which is assumed a

greater degree of acceptance as now more than 60 countries are members of BRI.

### **Shelving Disputes for Common Development**

China encourages and promotes dialogue and peaceful means to resolve disputes. China does not advocate the use of force, or threat of use of force, or any other coercive means to subdue others for settling trivial issues. While respecting each other's core national interests, China advocates time and long-drawn consultations for arriving at a consensus dispute resolution mechanism. Meanwhile, the prospects of common development and creating destiny with a shared future should not be held hostage to dispute resolution first. While China maintains a sufficient national military power, essentially, it is required for self defence and safeguarding its territorial integrity with no expansionist agenda, as China does not seek invasion or aggression against any other country.

### **Three NOs**

China believes in the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and respects their sovereignty and system of governance. China does not demonstrate any hegemonic ambitions or posture and also advocates no hegemony by any outside power. These are three philosophical underpinnings of China's policy of interactions with other states.

### **Peaceful resolution of disputes**

China has reached out to all the regional countries and reassured them that China seeks peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and consultations. No matter how strong China becomes, it will not seek hegemony and shall never impose its will on others. China, therefore, advocates the inclusive policy of shelving the disputes for common development. Thereby implying strategic patience in resolving trivial issues through peaceful means, irrespective of the time required.

### **Opposition to expansionist tendencies**

China opposes any extra-territorial ambitions by

the great powers or regional powers on one pretext or the other. Respect for Core National interests, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and respect for diversity are hallmark of China's foreign and defence policy.

### **Respect for Civilizations**

China is opposed to clashes and conflicts between civilizations as China does not relate any particular ethnic group or religion with terrorism. China, therefore, appreciates the assortment of civilizations, as they make positive contributions towards global development. China supports different cultures as they make exchanges, learn from each other, and complement one another with their own strengths.

### **President Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Vision**

On taking over the office of President of PRC, Mr. Xi Jinping elaborated fundamental foreign policy principles to be adopted by his government for realizing the Chinese dream. The main strands of his vision are; "pursuing a peaceful international environment to develop itself and encouraging the world peace through its own development, promoting harmonized development among major powers, to unswervingly increase the friendly relationship with the neighboring countries; to strive to maintain enduring peace and stability in peripheral areas, to deepen cooperation and unity with the developing countries." China follows an independent foreign policy of peace and

development on the basis of "five principles of peaceful coexistence." Therefore, all countries, regions, and multilateral organizations are of immense significance, and China will pursue the policy of public goods and common development for creating a shared future and destiny through win-win cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

Security of Asia-Pacific region is highly significant for the great powers and regional countries alike. Despite hotspot issues, this region has largely remained peaceful and economically more integrated despite two decades of US-led war of terrorism, Arab Spring, and regime changes across the Middle East. China considers that her destiny and Asia-Pacific security are intertwined. China has generally maintained a pragmatic policy of engagement, common development, and creating a community with shared destiny and future. Despite US provocative and hostile posturing for alliance obligations, China has maintained a benign posture and cooperative engagement, thereby ensuring a stable and economically integrated regional order. However, there are growing concerns among the regional countries on growing US-Chinese tension for regional dominance, which will retard the pace of economic development and hard-earned peace and stability. The pragmatism demands the competition should be managed in a healthy way with due regard to the core interest of all the countries avoiding conflicts.

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