

## THE US INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY 2022: AN ANALYSIS

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### **Introduction**

In its 2019 “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report”, the US emphasised preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region to realise a free and open, safe, secure, and prosperous region. Moving ahead, its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy document, released in February 2022, visualises the region as free and open, more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. Although the adjectives are only marginally different, there are two substantial differences between the 2019 and 2022 editions of the document. First, while the 2019 strategy devoted separate sections to Russia, China, and North Korea, the 2022 strategy does not mention Russia at all, North Korea is mentioned just once, and references to China (PRC) are spread all across the several sections. Second, there is far greater focus on areas of collaboration with allies and partners and the methodology of engagement, and US expectations from them. As per the Goldwater-Nichols Defence Reorganisation Act of 1986, the President of the US is required to submit to the US Congress an annual report on the National Security Strategy.<sup>1</sup> Since 2002, however, these reports have been sporadic, with the previous administration submitting the National Security Strategy of the United States of America in December 2017.<sup>2</sup> The incumbent administration published an “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” in March 2021,<sup>3</sup> which provided guidance to various offices and agencies to align their actions to the administration’s thought-process, even while the National Security Strategy itself is being worked-upon. The issuance of the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy within a year of the issuance of this interim guidance clearly indicates the security and economic interests, focal areas, and expectations of the US. This was aptly summed up in the statement of the US President, Joe Biden, at the October 2021 East Asia Summit, where he reaffirmed the enduring commitment of the US to the Indo-Pacific, and outlined his vision for the region, as open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure. This statement forms the core of the current strategy document, which covers a wide range of issues. This article examines issues that merit attention, especially for India.

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<sup>1</sup> 50 USC § 404A – *Annual National Security Strategy Report*, <https://nssarchive.us/50-usc-%c2%a7-404a-annual-national-security-strategy-report/>

<sup>2</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017), <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (2021), [https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021\\_Interim.pdf](https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021_Interim.pdf)

## Objectives and Core Lines of Effort

The 2022 Strategy document specifies five objectives, and ten core lines-of-effort (CLOEs), which would be pursued to implement the strategy. Although there is a complex web connecting the objectives to the core lines-of-effort, **Table 1** has attempted to indicate, even if simplistically, which CLOEs could directly support each stated objective. This might provide a better understanding of how nations would be engaged by the US, and *vice versa*, as the strategy is progressively operationalised.

Ser	Objective	Main Associated CLOEs
(a)	Advance a free and open Indo-Pacific	This is an all-encompassing objective; hence all CLOEs would be associated with it.
(b)	Build connections within and beyond the region	(i) Drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific (ii) Strengthen an empowered and unified ASEAN (iii) Lead an Indo-Pacific economic framework (iv) Partner to build resilience in the Pacific islands
(c)	Drive regional prosperity	(i) Drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific (ii) Lead an Indo-Pacific economic framework (iii) Support India's continued rise and regional leadership (iv) Support good governance and accountability (v) Support open, resilient, secure, and trustworthy technologies
(d)	Bolster Indo-Pacific security	(i) Drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific (ii) Reinforce deterrence (iii) Strengthen an empowered and unified ASEAN (iv) Support India's continued rise and regional leadership (v) Deliver on the QUAD (vi) Expand US-Japan-ROK cooperation (vii) Partner to build resilience in the Pacific islands
(e)	Build regional resilience to transnational threats	(i) Drive new resources to the Indo-Pacific (ii) Reinforce deterrence (iii) Strengthen an empowered and unified ASEAN (iv) Support India's continued rise and regional leadership (v) Deliver on the QUAD (vi) Expand US-Japan-ROK cooperation (vii) Partner to build resilience in the Pacific Islands (viii) Support good governance and accountability

Ser	Objective	Main Associated CLOEs
		(ix) Support open, resilient, secure, and trustworthy technologies

**Table 1:** Matching Objectives and Core Lines of Effort: US Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022

**Source:** Author

## Broad Contours of Engagement

### *Allies and Partners*

The strategy lays great emphasis on working with intra-regional allies and partners to address challenges and threats; and places them in two groups — regional treaty-alliance partners, and leading regional partners. The first group comprises Australia, Japan, the ROK, the Philippines, and Thailand, and the second includes India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Pacific Islands. With its European allies, specifically the UK and France, the strategy seeks linkages to a regional rules-based order and recognises the strategic value that the European Union (EU) could bring to the region. This recognition could, of course, be an attempt to assuage any misgivings resulting from the AUKUS episode. However, the document also states that efforts would be made to “bring together our Indo-Pacific and European partners in novel ways, including through the AUKUS partnership”.<sup>4</sup> This approach may negatively impact the way a cohesive and collaborative approach is sought, particularly if future partnerships, such as the AUKUS, influence existing and future bilateral agreements and understandings. This is an important aspect, as Asia and Oceania, for the period 2016 to 2020, accounted for 42% of global arms imports.<sup>5</sup> These imports, apart from emanating from the US, Russia, and PRC, were from allies and partners of the US who are listed in the top 25 arms-exporting nations.<sup>6</sup> The recently-released “French Indo-Pacific Strategy” of 2022 clearly states that France will re-evaluate its strategic partnership with Australia and will pursue bilateral cooperation on a case-by-case basis, according to its national interests and those of its regional partners.<sup>7</sup> With respect to the US, the French strategy states that France will maintain close relations with the US, which it recognises as an ally and major player in the Indo-Pacific, and will strengthen coordination with it, including on issues raised by the announcement of the AUKUS agreement.<sup>8</sup> Such a schism between major players and strategic partners could dilute the convergent approach to a stable and secure Indo-Pacific.

<sup>4</sup> *US Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022), p 13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Pieter D Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers*, (2020), (SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2021), [https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs\\_2103\\_at\\_2020.pdf](https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022), p 41, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_dcp\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_022022\\_v1-4\\_web\\_cle878143.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_indopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cle878143.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## **ASEAN**

The US strategy “*endorses ASEAN centrality*” and states that the US will examine “*opportunities for the QUAD to work with ASEAN*”.<sup>10</sup> However, as the strategy identifies the PRC as a main security threat, working with ASEAN, either independently or through the QUAD, will be a major challenge, given that ASEAN nations are keen ‘not to be forced to choose sides’.<sup>11</sup> This notwithstanding, ASEAN centrality can, indeed, form a major point of convergence for most US allies and partners, especially India. This was quite clear from the Indian Prime Minister’s address during the annual India-ASEAN Summit in October 2021, wherein he highlighted the special role of ASEAN, India’s concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), India’s Act East Policy, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and, the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), as a shared vision and framework for mutual cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>12</sup> The joint statement issued upon completion of the summit also pointed out the convergence between India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).<sup>13</sup>

## **China and Russia**

The strategy has been viewed by the PRC as anti-China, exclusive (and not free and open), divisive, and based on a Cold-War mentality.<sup>14</sup> While the 2022 Strategy states that the “*objective is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates, building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favourable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share*”, it also looks at managing “*competition with the PRC responsibly*”, while “*seeking to work with the PRC in areas like climate change and non-proliferation*.”<sup>15</sup> These words reflect a comparatively softer approach, in contrast with the harder tone adopted in the Interim National Security Guidance of March 2021. This, perhaps, is one reason for the strategy being criticised as lacking clarity on China.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of Russia in the strategy leaves an engagement void that the US will be hard-pressed to contend with, as some of its partners have strong relations with Russia — examples being India and Vietnam. Russia, like China, still strongly opposes the idea of the Indo-Pacific, and

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<sup>9</sup> *US Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022), p 9

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ASEAN nations have often stated that they would not like to choose sides in the ongoing US-China rivalry*

<sup>12</sup> *Remarks by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 18th India-ASEAN Summit*, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34423/Remarks+by+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modi+at+the+18th+IndiaASEAN+Summit>

<sup>13</sup> *ASEAN-India Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity in the Region*, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34425/ASEANIndia Joint Statement on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific for Peace Stability and Prosperity in the Region](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34425/ASEANIndia+Joint+Statement+on+Cooperation+on+the+ASEAN+Outlook+on+the+IndoPacific+for+Peace+Stability+and+Prosperity+in+the+Region)

<sup>14</sup> *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on February 14, 2022*, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202202/t20220214\\_10642170.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220214_10642170.htm)

<sup>15</sup> *US Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022), p 5

<sup>16</sup> Alec Blivas, “The Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Lacks Clarity on China”, *The Diplomat*, February 18, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/the-biden-administrations-indo-pacific-strategy-lacks-clarity-on-china/>

had also been called out as a “*revitalised malign actor*” in the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.<sup>17</sup> The absence of Russia in the document, perhaps, follows the assessment of the US “Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific”, which had been approved by the National Security Council in February 2018, that “*Russia will remain a marginal player relative to the United States, China, and India.*”<sup>18</sup> Russia has often questioned the Indo-Pacific concept of a free and open region based on the existing rules-based order, and is aligned with China’s approach. “*Russia argues that the Indo-Pacific concept is designed primarily as a security containment strategy for China and as an effort to promote a two-bloc system in Asia, analogous to developments in Europe during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the US led opposing security groups.*”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Russia’s own interest in the region is well known. In 2021, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, indicated implementation of a ‘pivot to Asia’ focused on the Asia-Pacific region, with the aim of promoting a modernisation of the economy. Further acknowledging its need to bolster its modest economic ties and weak regional security-influence, Russia has often indicated its keenness to be a part of an increasingly multipolar world, in which Asia, especially China, were important players. One of the three regional policy-pillars of Russia was building closer political alignments with key Asian countries. However, due to western sanctions, which forced Russia to reorient its economy away from Europe, China emerged as the central focus of Russia’s pivot to Asia.<sup>20</sup> The ongoing Ukraine crisis will only exacerbate US-Russia relations and reinforce Russia’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Russia’s interaction with nations and its role in various organisations will only increase with time. Therefore, the US may have to review its assessment and look at engaging Russia in the Indo-Pacific, in addition to engaging it in Europe.

### ***Developing Capacities and Capabilities***

Execution of a strategy for a vast region like the Indo-Pacific, which is home to nations with diverse degrees of capacities and capabilities, requires massive investments in terms of time, material and materiel,<sup>21</sup> and, most importantly, financial support. The 2018 National Defence Strategy looked at strengthening “*alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.*”<sup>22</sup> The 2022 strategy document states that the objective to reinforce deterrence would be supported by funding through the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) and the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). Just as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) supports the US and its allies in

<sup>17</sup> *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (2019), 11-12, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF#:~:text=This%202019%20Department%20of%20Defense%20Pacific%20Strategy%20Report,partnerships%2C%20and%20the%20promotion%20of%20a%20networked%20region>

<sup>18</sup> Abhijnan Rej, “The US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific: 3 Curiosities”, *The Diplomat*, 14 January 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/the-us-strategic-framework-for-the-indo-pacific-3-curiousities/#:~:text=The%20%20CU.S.%20Strategic%20Framework%20for%20the%20Indo-Pacific%20%20SFIP%20%20C,Advisor%20Robert%20O%20%20Brien%20accompanying%20the%20SFIP%20%20public%20release>

<sup>19</sup> Neil Melvin, “Russia and the Indo-Pacific Security Concept”, *Emerging Insights*, (Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2021), p 3, [https://static.rusi.org/277\\_russia\\_ip.pdf](https://static.rusi.org/277_russia_ip.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. See full paper for specific details

<sup>21</sup> Materiel refers to specific military equipment, while material refers to all other non-military items

<sup>22</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defence Strategy of the USA*, p 9, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

Europe, the PDI will look at bolstering deterrence and maintaining a competitive edge in the Indo-Pacific. The US is looking at investing USD 66 Billion in the Indo-Pacific for Financial Year (FY) 2022. This includes USD 5.1 Million for PDI, of which USD 0.5 Million is for strengthening alliances and partnerships, which includes capabilities designed to further interoperability and enhance partners' abilities to defend against aggression, conduct maritime security and maritime-domain awareness operations, and participate in combined operations with the US forces and like-minded nations in the region.<sup>23</sup> The MSI was established under the FY 2016 National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) Section 1263 and will expire in December 2025. Its purpose is to increase maritime security and maritime domain awareness, through annual appropriation, of several Indo-Pacific nations — Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Singapore, and Brunei.<sup>24</sup> However, given the extent of cooperation envisaged, and the high expectations of the countries involved, the PDI appropriation seems quite inadequate. As the MSI amount is not known, questions can easily be raised as to the extent of actual support envisaged. It is possible that apart from these two initiatives, the US will continue to support and assist nations via bilateral arrangements and other initiatives, such as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, which authorised an annual appropriation of USD 1.5 Billion from 2019 to 2023.<sup>25</sup> This legislation, mentioned in the 2019 US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, is a whole-of-government approach for a free and open Indo-Pacific region, and includes initiatives that promote sovereignty, rule of law, democracy, economic engagement, and regional security.<sup>26</sup>

## **QUAD**

The strategy seeks to expand the role of the QUAD beyond the oft-perceived notion of it being a hard-security construct aimed at containing China. The approach extends the role of the QUAD to matters of “*holistic* maritime security”, which has been defined as “*freedom from threats arising ‘in’ or ‘from’ the sea*”<sup>27</sup> and addresses issues that will aid prosperity, stability, security, and peace in the region. These factors could certainly enlarge the “inclusivity” factor and may not only broaden acceptability of the QUAD by dispelling the notion of it being solely a hard-security dialogue exclusively driven by its four constituent nations, but could also address the issue of “choosing sides” as mentioned earlier in the context of ASEAN.

## **India**

The US-India relations have weathered many a storm, from 1947, right through the Cold War, and today both nations share a Global Strategic Partnership. The fact that the document

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<sup>23</sup> Pacific Deterrence Initiative, *Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2022*, (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), 2021), [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/fy2022\\_Pacific\\_Deterrence\\_Initiative.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/fy2022_Pacific_Deterrence_Initiative.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> US Defence Security Cooperation Agency, <https://www.dsca.mil/section-1263-indo-pacific-maritime-security-initiative-msi>

<sup>25</sup> Section 201 (b) of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018

<sup>26</sup> US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), p 6

<sup>27</sup> Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, India's Proposed Maritime Strategy, *National Maritime Foundation*, 03 February 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/indias-proposed-maritime-strategy/>

dedicated one CLOE as “*Support India’s Continued Rise and Regional Leadership*”, not only acknowledges the position and role of India in the Indo-Pacific, but also highlights the support expected by the US from India. This latest Indo-Pacific strategy offers avenues to build on this partnership. However, there is a view that although “*a global strategic partnership between the US and India means a strong understanding on global issues and a sharing of global responsibilities*”, there are differences that will hinder the growth of the global strategic partnership.<sup>28</sup> However, the CLOE on India makes it clear that the US looks to support a strong India as a partner in its regional vision of freedom and openness, while acknowledging “*autonomy and options*”.<sup>29</sup> This open acceptance of autonomy could further strengthen the “trust” factor between both nations and enhance their cooperation on areas of convergence, while seeking solutions to the divergences. To further cement the convergences and respect the autonomy factor, the US should reassess its tagging of India as a net provider of security, as India looks to be viewed as a “Preferred Security Partner” and “First Responder in the Maritime Domain”. These terms were coined in 2019 and 2020 respectively and were reiterated by the President of India during his Review of the Indian Fleet, at Visakhapatnam, on 21 February 2022.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

There is a view that the 2022 strategy has retained many of the priorities and initiatives adopted by the earlier administration, especially the Indo-Pacific framework, but, unlike the 2019 strategy, it is “*thin on details, methods, and means for confronting America’s most daunting challenge in the Indo-Pacific: the rise of an increasingly belligerent and nationalist People’s Republic of China*”.<sup>31</sup> It can hardly be denied that the Indo-Pacific is a vast region and its ambit is certainly more than just China. Hence, the region must be seen as broadly as possible, while allowing for the extent of the vision of each nation concerned, so as to maximise the contours of possible engagement. Specific assessment of challenges, threats, risks, opportunities, and detailed engagement policies should, accordingly, form separate strategy documents. The 2022 strategy looks at issues at the broadest level and addresses a wide array of aspects that can be considered as enhancing “inclusivity”, which is a term greatly favoured by India, in addition to the global reference to the region as being one that remains free and open. The strategy essentially looks at shaping the strategic environment and building a balance of influence favourable to the United States, its allies, and partners. This shaping of a favourable and positive regional environment can be viewed as convergent with India’s concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Like many strategies, we can expect certain course corrections as the strategy is operationalised, and its overall success will depend on the degree of acceptance by the US allies and partners of the various aspects contained therein.

<sup>28</sup> Kanwal Sibal, “Why 2022 Will Not See India and US Become Global Strategic Partners”, *News 18*, 01 January 2022, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/why-2022-will-not-see-india-and-us-become-global-strategic-partners-4613582.html>

<sup>29</sup> US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), p 7

<sup>30</sup> Address by the President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind, on the Occasion of Presidential Fleet Review – 2022, <https://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?900>

<sup>31</sup> Jeff Smith, “The Indo-Pacific Strategy Needs Indo-Specifics”, *Defenceone*, 15 February 2022, <https://www.defenceone.com/ideas/2022/02/indo-pacific-strategy-needs-indo-specifics/362022/>

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