



Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the US and its Allies

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ABSTRACT

The strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific has today gained salience due to the region becoming the centre of gravity of economic development and social mobility. This has been driven, to a large extent, by commercial maritime activity and the assurance of security on the global commons. The US has played a significant role in the provision of this security, with Japan and Australia emerging as vital regional partners in this effort. While the US' presence in the region was primarily motivated by its Cold War aim of containing communism, the post-Cold War period has demanded a fresh approach to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Transforming geo-political and strategic considerations have, however, raised questions on the continued efficacy of this system. With the somewhat problematic rise of China, the US, Japan, Australia and India, as major regional maritime powers, need to evolve a regional maritime security architecture that will continue to support the peaceful and legitimate use of the seas.

KEYWORDS

maritime security; Indian Ocean; Indo-Pacific; USN; RAN; JMSDF; Indian Navy

Introduction

The centrality of the Indo-Pacific to global economic and strategic considerations is a well-recognised and accepted premise today. While there exist justifiable reservations on viewing this vast span of predominantly oceanic space as a single strategic construct, there is no doubt that this region is a significant engine of global economic growth. As in any other part of the world, a secure environment, and the near consensus of all regional and extra-regional stakeholders to maintain the same, underpins this economic growth.

The littoral nature of the region, and the key role played by the oceans in facilitating free flow of trade and commerce, has lent a distinct maritime hue to the security architecture of the region. One third of global commercial shipping and one fifth of the world's oil production passes through the Malacca Straits, which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is one of the busiest "chokepoints" in the world.¹ The vulnerability of this maritime feature is underscored by the fact that at its narrowest, the strait is about 2.8 km (1.5 nautical miles) wide.² Together with the straits of Sunda and Lombok, these regional "chokepoints" account for nearly half the global seaborne trade tonnage. A breach of maritime security in the region, therefore, could severely impact free flow of shipping through these international shipping lanes (ISL), with potentially catastrophic implications for the global economy.

The US, as the lone superpower, and two of its regional allies, Japan and Australia, have played varying but significant roles in the maritime security construct in this region. Whereas US interest in the region originated in its Cold War aim of containing communism, the other two countries have emerged as major maritime players through economic growth, development of commensurate naval power, and the evolution of national doctrines that promote an active engagement in regional maritime security efforts. This paper seeks to examine the role of these countries in the maritime security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, it will evaluate the nature of current maritime threats in the region, and study the individual circumstances of maritime engagement of these countries. The paper will also discuss India's growing contribution to security in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the context of cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia in the maritime domain. It will further examine the functional aspects of their maritime security efforts, and the manner in which current events may influence these in the near future.

China has an undoubtedly large role to play in the maritime and littoral spaces of the Indo-Pacific. However, a description of China's role remains beyond the scope of this paper for reasons of brevity, and also for the fact that much of the US activity in the region is ostensibly directed at "managing" the rise of China as a global power.

The Maritime Threat Environment in the Indo-Pacific

One of the biggest challenges in viewing a large geographical space such as the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic construct is its diversity; of terrain, of sovereignty, and of state interests. Another factor that constrains a cooperative approach to maritime security is the large variety of threats. For instance, in recent years, piracy has been the primary threat to maritime security in the Western part of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).³ The strategic discourse in the North Arabian Sea has been dominated by the rivalry between India and Pakistan.⁴ In the Bay of Bengal, poaching and illegal migration prevail as the primary threats. East of the Malacca Straits, the environment in the South and East China Seas is primarily characterised by competing territorial claims and unresolved maritime disputes, which have caused significant deterioration of the maritime security environment over the last five years. The threat posed by North Korea casts a shadow on the stability of the Korean peninsula. The contiguity of this region to the Pacific Ocean has also brought to the fore the great power rivalry between the US and an emergent China. To evolve a collaborative approach to maritime security, in such a diverse threat scenario, is problematic to say the least.

There is, however, a strong case to be made for drawing connections, tenuous as they may seem, across the Indo-Pacific. These are easier to internalise if this region is viewed as a single maritime space, somewhat at the expense of continental considerations. The importance of the maritime continuum is buttressed by the dependence of China, Japan, South Korea, India and the Southeast Asian economies, on energy and trade that traverse regional waters. Two thirds of global oil production transits West to East across the Indian Ocean, into the South China Sea and beyond, and one third of global bulk cargo crisscrosses these waters.⁵ The dependence of each littoral state on the assurance of maritime security throughout this oceanic space cannot be over-emphasised.

At another level, a sizeable chunk of the population in the Indo-Pacific is dependent on the seas for its livelihood, as well as its nutritional requirements. Asia accounts for over 68% of the world's fishing fleet, with China and Japan contributing a major share.⁶ Six of the top 10 fish-producing countries in the world are located in this region.⁷ Strains placed on fisher folk due to depleting fish stocks have engendered security challenges of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. These have been exacerbated by additional threats to food security, and the effects of climate change, which are collectively causing displacement of the coastal populace in large numbers.⁸ Strategic and military considerations of security in the traditional sense have somewhat diluted the attention being accorded to such social and economic threats, which have the potential to cause significant turmoil in the region. This is again a common thread running through the Indo-Pacific region, albeit with varying local causes and effects.

The lack of homogeneity of threats in the Indo-Pacific quite obviously precludes the adoption of a "one size fits all" solution for their mitigation. Local environmental factors are far too unique and disjointed for such an approach to succeed. But the fact remains that as a contiguous maritime space, with a high concentration of supply and demand chains that are largely fulfilled in the maritime domain, a minimum level of security is essential to sustain human development and economic growth in the region. In short, the complexity of the problem cannot be permitted to discourage the evolution of a viable model. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for instance, wrote, "How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region".⁹

The US Alliance System and Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific

On January 9, 1992, then US President George Bush addressed a media conference in Tokyo, alongside Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa of Japan. The Bush–Miyazawa summit came at a critical period, exactly a year after the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union, and the resultant end of the Cold War. President Bush was emphatic in reaffirming the importance of the US–Japan alliance to the world in general, and stability in East Asia in particular:

The US–Japan security treaty remains the core of stability in East Asia, a region still beset with the uncertainties of a world in profound change.

*... as we enter the post-Cold-War era with its many challenges and opportunities, increased cooperation between the United States and Japan on global issues and regional problems is absolutely essential to achieve the foreign policy objectives of both countries.*¹⁰

Two and a half decades later, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the US, the first in President Trump's tenure, was being watched with equal interest around the world. It gained publicity for all the wrong reasons such as the unusually long handshake, and the Trump administration's national security discussions in public view at his resort in Palm Beach, Florida.¹¹ However the outcome of the visit assuaged widespread apprehensions. While President Trump termed the US relationship with Japan "very deep", the joint statement retained many of the assurances made 25 years ago, under vastly different circumstances:

The unshakable US–Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of peace, prosperity, and freedom in the Asia-Pacific region. The US commitment to defend Japan through the full range of US military capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, is unwavering.

*Amid an increasingly difficult security environment in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States will strengthen its presence in the region, and Japan will assume larger roles and responsibilities in the alliance.*¹²

While evaluating the role of the US and its Asian allies in promoting maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, the centrality of mutual defence pacts between them cannot be ignored. The treaty commitments the US has entered into with regional countries form the strategic backdrop for its continued presence since the end of the Second World War. The US perceived forward deployment of its assets, riding on the back of this alliance system, to be the most effective means for the containment of communism in the Cold War years. This helped the US overcome the “tyranny of distance” and made the US into what the erstwhile secretary of defense Robert Gates called “a resident power in East Asia”.¹³

Much has changed, however, in the post-War alliance architecture. The US created the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954.¹⁴ It was meant to be a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-equivalent structure for the region, created with the intention of containing communism. Unlike NATO, however, SEATO had a limited collective operational framework. Despite its name, it had only two Southeast Asian countries as members (Philippines and Thailand), and Pakistan was the third Asian member among the eight member countries. This factor gave rise to the suspicion that it was more a neo-imperialistic organisation than one that addressed the security concerns of its member states.¹⁵ Opposition to the US war in Vietnam, and Pakistan’s disillusionment at lack of support from the organisation in its 1971 war with India, finally led to the disintegration of SEATO, with its inevitable formal dissolution in 1977.¹⁶

The Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan was signed on 2 December 1954. Coming close in the wake of the Korean War, this treaty put an end to the uncertainty of the US’ commitment to come to the defense of ROC against a hostile People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹⁷ The US, under the Carter administration, terminated the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan in 1979 as a condition for establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC. In lieu of this it enacted the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, through which it retains an implicit, if somewhat ambiguous, commitment to help Taiwan resist the use of force by the PRC. The ambiguity is further amplified by the fact that the US neither recognises Taiwan nor has any diplomatic relations with the country.¹⁸ Recent actions and pronouncements from the Trump administration, which indicate the possibility of Taiwan being used as a bargaining chip to redefine the parameters of US relations with China, further muddy the waters on either side of the Taiwan Strait.¹⁹

The US’ Mutual Defense Treaty with Philippines, signed in 1951, saw turbulent times in the early 1990s after a series of circumstances ended US use of Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Base.²⁰ The US military’s engagement with the Philippines, however, continued, and a new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed in 2014. This has also hit a rough patch in recent times, with President Duterte’s outbursts against the US, and the somewhat perplexing signals originating from Manila on the

future of the Philippines' security partnership with its ally. The US now maintains a rotational presence of troops in bases across the Philippines, and is in the process of building three of the five military bases that it has committed to develop under the EDCA.²¹

The US–Republic of Korea (ROK) security alliance has played a decisive role in maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula. It is focused on the North Korea challenge, a Cold War conflict that has refused to go away. The US currently maintains about 28,000 troops in South Korea – the largest concentration of American forces on the Asian mainland – as well as a significant number of combat aircraft.²² The recent decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the Peninsula has drawn sharp reactions from China, adding another dimension to the alliance that is otherwise targeted at Pyongyang.²³ While both the ROK and US have attempted to dispel Chinese misgivings on the deployment of this system, there exists the prospect of an arms race that could further deteriorate the security environment. This could add to the fragility that exists, in significant part, due to the dangerous eccentricity of the Kim regime in North Korea.

Not all of the US defense alliances in the region have withstood the test of time and changing circumstances. For instance, the pact with Thailand is steeped in an uncertain future. Though there are periodic military exercises, the political turmoil in the country, and its decidedly pro-China tilt in recent times, have virtually sounded the “Last Post” for this partnership.²⁴ New Zealand's participation in the Australia–New Zealand–US (ANZUS) treaty was suspended in the mid-1980s, when the island country refused to allow US nuclear-powered and -armed ships to enter its ports.²⁵ The last five years have witnessed a thaw in the relationship, with the resumption of a defence dialogue under the ANZUS umbrella.²⁶

The US–Japan and US–Australia alliance commitments have survived, and even flourished, through the somewhat tumultuous geo-strategic and economic developments in the region. In Japan the US maintains nearly 50,000 defence personnel as well as a carrier battle group (CBG) and the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF).²⁷ These are supplemented by substantial operational and support infrastructure across Japan, especially in Okinawa. US presence in Australia includes a rotational marine detachment in Darwin and access to a number of joint military communication and surveillance facilities.²⁸ Regular joint operations and exercises over a period of time, together with significant commonality of doctrines and equipment, have ensured a high degree of interoperability between the US and host militaries. This is especially true in the maritime domain as the expeditionary nature of US forces in the region places primacy on seaborne operations for both security and benign operations.

Outside of its treaty commitments, the US has developed extensive military ties with other countries as well. Singapore in particular is noteworthy, as not only do the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) exercise frequently with their US counterparts, but the city state also hosts the US Navy's littoral combat ships (LCS) and an F-16 squadron on rotation.²⁹ In recent years, there has also been a renewed focus on exercises with other countries in the region, such as India and Indonesia. While the Malabar series of naval exercises with India and Japan have become a permanent annual feature, the need to enhance security ties with Indonesia has led to the recent revival of military exercises with the archipelagic nation.³⁰

All the forward-deployed military assets are supported by the largest and oldest of the unified US Commands, the Pacific Command (PACOM) based out of Hawaii, as well as

the combat and support elements at Guam. As the joint Command, which has the entire Indo-Pacific in its Area of Responsibility (AoR), the PACOM's charter was expected to be critical for the successful execution of the military component of the "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia.³¹ But as the rebalance strategy itself is being brought into question today, the manner in which PACOM's strategy for the Indo-Pacific will evolve remains to be seen.

There is widespread acceptance of the fact that the presence of US forces in the region over the past seven decades has been a defining factor in the regional security landscape. In the maritime domain, it has promoted free flow of trade and commerce, and has underpinned the economic growth of regional countries. The US' alliance commitments have also allowed its allies the luxury of reduced military spending, as gaps in their military capabilities were often plugged by US assets and forces. Without doubt, the remarkable rise of Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian economies may largely be attributed to regional maritime security underwritten by the US and its military forces in the Indo-Pacific.³²

Japan's Influence on Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific

For Japan, the primary post-war consideration was economic reconstruction, "divorced from any considerations of ideology". The Yoshida doctrine prioritised the pursuit of trade-led economic growth as a foundation for domestic stability and a minimal politico-military footprint overseas, based on a political and military alignment with the US.³³ So, while this may have led to an arguable dilution of sovereignty, it paved the way for four decades of prosperity and unparalleled economic growth.

With growing economic might, the ability of Japan to maintain a purely reactionary self-defensive posture diminished significantly. As an export-led economy, Japan found an increasing need to protect its commercial shipping interests, and also its long energy supply lines from the Middle East.³⁴ Japan also found it expedient to raise its maritime profile, with naval forces operating out of public sight, therefore incurring reduced social and political costs.³⁵ Its first public articulation to this effect was made by Hideo Sekino, a commander in the Imperial Japanese Navy, who wrote an article on the role of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) in the United States Naval Institute (USNI) proceedings in 1971. He postulated that Japan would be able to maintain economic access to Southeast Asia, the Americas and the Oceania only through a mix of diplomacy and the cooperation of American and Australian seapower.³⁶

Japanese maritime security activity is today driven by three major challenges: first, the fact that its dependence on the Middle East sea lines of communication (SLOC) will continue into the foreseeable future; second, its maritime territorial disputes with China and Taiwan over the Senkaku Islands; and, third, the threat posed by North Korea.³⁷ Built around a national character of shunning offensive warfare and under the shadow of constitutional restrictions, the JMSDF has been a force focused around anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and anti-mine warfare.³⁸ Recent years have, however, witnessed a distinct augmentation in the capabilities of the JMSDF, which makes it a veritable regional naval power.

There is today an animated and somewhat polarised debate in Japan, over the current interpretation of its constitution and, the move towards revising it, or at the very least modifying the manner in which it is understood. This is primarily due to the fact that the

nature of maritime threats that Japan seeks to address require the JMSDF to adopt a more proactive stance. As Okazaki Hisahiko, a former ambassador to Thailand, said, the “Finlandisation” of littoral states in the SCS by an assertive China is a major security concern for Japan – one that would require the JMSDF to equip and prepare itself suitably.³⁹

The JMSDF, while fulfilling a largely “homeland defence” role, has been maintaining a continuous anti-piracy mission presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2009.⁴⁰ It exercises extensively with the US Navy, and has now become a permanent partner in the Malabar series of exercises with US and India. In addition to its naval capability, Japan relies extensively on maritime capacity building and diplomacy, to assure security. Its official development assistance (ODA) is a major diplomatic and economic tool, which has been deployed with significant success, especially in the Bay of Bengal region (the BIG-B initiative).⁴¹

While increasing military and nuclear adventurism of North Korea, and the maritime territorial disputes with China and Taiwan, keep the JMSDF engaged in its immediate neighbourhood, it continues to rely on a robust alliance commitment from the US to ensure security in the maritime commons. There is, however, an inexorable move from Japan to attain greater self-sufficiency in its ability to protect its interests anywhere in the world.⁴² How these efforts will take shape will largely be governed by domestic, social and political factors in the coming years.

Australia and the Indo-Pacific

Australia first articulated the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific construct in the National Security Strategy document of 2013. This document makes the distinction between the “Asia-Pacific” and the “Indo-Pacific” and states that while these two terms complement each other, “they are both useful frames through which to view Australia’s national security interests”.⁴³ This thread is carried on and expanded in the Defence White Paper of 2013, which based Australia’s security environment on the manner in which the Indo-Pacific architecture evolved.⁴⁴ These pronouncements logically extend Australia’s view of the strategic environment, from the relatively proximate Asia-Pacific, to the larger maritime Indo-Pacific.

Australia envisages the fulfillment of its maritime security role through its alliance with the US, and by means of building meaningful partnerships with regional countries. Notwithstanding the somewhat wobbly start to the relationship between Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull and President Trump, the Australian strategic community relies on the strength of its alliance with the US, to endure the stresses that may be created by individuals in a particular administration.⁴⁵ This has been a bipartisan strain through the Australian political establishment, from the Labor administration to the current National Coalition government. However, with a significant degree of uncertainty in the extent of US engagement with its allies, there is a renewed call in Australia to forge stronger partnerships with other regional countries such as Japan and India.

In contrast to the uncertainty of US foreign policy for the Indo-Pacific, US military presence in Australia is set to increase in the coming years. The US maintains a rotational deployment of over a thousand marines and combat aircraft at Darwin.⁴⁶ It also has access to communications facilities in the Australian hinterland, operating a major joint defence facility at Pine Gap in Alice Springs. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has sought to

acquire capabilities that complement those of the US, conforming to a strategy that relies largely on joint war-fighting. For instance, while Australia does not have, nor intends to acquire in the near future, ship-borne fighter aircraft, its Canberra-class Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) ships are equipped with a ski jump to cater for possible operation of the F-35B, Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) aircraft from its deck.⁴⁷ The ADF's relationship with its US counterpart is rooted in strong historical ties, forged through shared operational experiences since World War I. This is likely to continue, even through the period of uncertainty in the future contours of US foreign policy.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has been a significant stakeholder and participant in maritime security operations in the Indo-Pacific region. It has been a permanent contributor to the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), deployed in West and Southwest Asia. Closer to home, the RAN has spearheaded regional defence cooperation through its Pacific Patrol Boat Program, an initiative launched in the 1980s to enable smaller Pacific Island countries to secure their maritime zones.⁴⁸ The Australian Border Force (ABF) also conducts joint operations and capacity-building programmes with a number of neighbouring littoral countries. This regional cooperative outlook of Australia's maritime security strategy is also evident in its active participation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and search and rescue (SAR) operations in its immediate maritime neighbourhood. The Australia-led search for the crashed MH-370 Malaysian airliner is an example.

Australia's regional engagement approach to maritime security is driven by its doctrinal articulations. The 2016 Defence White Paper states that Australia's security is underpinned by two major factors, viz. a "secure" near region including maritime Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, and a "stable" Indo-Pacific region and global rules-based order. Accordingly, two of its three strategic defence objectives also pertain to making regional and extra-regional contributions to maritime security efforts.⁴⁹ While this doctrine is likely to endure geopolitical shifts in the security calculus, there is a perceived need to evolve a new strategy which will enable the achievement of Australia's security objectives.

The India Connection

India's increasing importance to the maritime security architecture of the Indo-Pacific is driven by three major factors. First, India's rapid economic growth in recent years has served to highlight the critical role of "good order at sea" in enabling it. Second, is a leadership-driven focus on maritime affairs, which has gradually supplanted the dominant continental focus since independence; and, third, the growing capabilities of the Indian Navy, which have allowed the maritime force to serve as an effective foreign policy tool for successive governments in New Delhi. Coupled with the somewhat troublesome rise of China, these factors have resulted in a progressively increasing and important role for India in the maritime security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region.

That fact that India enjoys a broad commonality of interests with the US, Japan and Australia makes it easier to evolve an architecture for these countries to adopt a collaborative approach to regional maritime security efforts. While there are legacy challenges to be overcome, it may be useful to refer to the distinction made between "common perception of interest" and "perception of common interest", albeit in a

different context.⁵⁰ Focusing on the former is more likely to make a positive contribution to regional security initiatives.

India–US ties attained unprecedented heights during the second term of President Obama, and the present Narendra Modi government. In the last month of his administration, President Obama signed legislation recognising India as a “Major Defense Partner”, a designation that promises to facilitate much cooperation and collaboration in defence ties.⁵¹ The US’ Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy sees a strategic convergence between the US “rebalance” to the region and India’s “Act East” policy. It dwells at some length on upgrading the bilateral maritime security partnership and reinforcing India’s maritime capabilities as a net security provider in the IOR and beyond:

*In South Asia, the Department sees a strategic convergence between India’s “Act East” policy and the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, and we are seeking to reinforce India’s maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. Given our broad shared interests in maritime security, the Department has developed a three-pronged approach to maritime cooperation with India: maintaining a shared vision on maritime security issues; upgrading the bilateral maritime security partnership; and collaborating to both build regional partner capacity and improve regional maritime domain awareness.*⁵²

India–Japan maritime cooperation has also received a significant fillip in recent years, driven primarily by political will and closer India–US ties. It is somewhat revealing, if not ironic, that the Indian Coast Guard has periodic exercises with its counterparts in Japan and ROK, while it does not have such an arrangement with many countries in its immediate neighbourhood.⁵³ Japan’s National Defense Program Guidelines talk about strengthening cooperation with India in the field of maritime security, through joint training, exercises and peacekeeping activities. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Delhi in December 2015, and Prime Minister Modi visited Japan in November 2016. The joint statements issued on both occasions highlight the considered need for both countries to work together, for stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁴ Both leaders have also reaffirmed their confidence in the “2+2” dialogue mechanism between India and Japan, and their intention to utilise this framework for greater security cooperation.⁵⁵

The potential for maritime cooperation between India and Australia has thus far remained largely unfulfilled. While this may be partly attributable to divergent views on certain issues, and political relations that have oscillated between cold and lukewarm, there is now a mutual appreciation of the need for India and Australia to engage more meaningfully. This is especially relevant, and relatively easier to achieve, in the maritime domain, as they share similar concerns on freedom and security of the commons. There has been significant yet cautious forward movement in this area, with the first bilateral naval exercise, AUSINDEX, being conducted in 2015.⁵⁶ There are also indications of interest on both sides in including Australia in the “Malabar” series of exercises again. At the operational level, there have been regular naval and Coast Guard exchanges at multiple levels, together with port calls on both sides. So, while the India–US–Japan–Australia “quadrilateral” may have failed to take off in 2007–2008, primarily due to concerns of Australia, it is quite likely that such an arrangement in a new avatar may emerge in the near future.

Challenges and Future Outlook

The Indo-Pacific presents significant strategic challenges, one of which is the question of the US' continued engagement in the region.

The value and relevance of an alliance system that was evolved in the Cold War period may need to be reassessed. During the Cold War, communism, and by association the erst-while Soviet Union, were the adversaries for America and its allies. It is difficult to define a common adversary or enemy today. While it may not be theoretically necessary for a common adversary to shape the contours of an alliance, the security-based nature of the current alliance system probably requires one to be defined.

It can be argued that China's non-conformity to the established international order may be a common concern for the region. But, at the same time, it will be extremely difficult to label China as a common adversary, in the classical sense. One of the main reasons for that today is the globalised nature of the world. The economic interconnectedness of all major regional economies, and US allies with China, does not permit a simplified view of China, with a black and white, or a friend or foe, prism. Table 1 highlights⁵⁷ the economic interdependence of the US' Asian allies, and India, with China. For all these countries, China is the top trading partner (goods and services combined), and all these countries are among the top 11 trading partners for China. This stark economic interdependence does not easily permit the classification of China as an adversary by these countries.

The uncertainty in US foreign policy under the Trump administration is another major aspect that the region has to deal with today. Before Secretary of State Tillerson's first visit to Asia in March 2017, the State Department spokesperson made it clear that the Trump administration will not use the terms "pivot" or "rebalance".⁵⁸ In all likelihood, the US will not replace the centrality of the Indo-Pacific to its foreign policy, and the new administration will continue the "rebalance" or "pivot" in a new branding.

For some time now, there has been significant debate in the US for the country to assume a less "forward" foreign policy.⁵⁹ The Trump administration has also recently announced significant cuts to the State Department budget, and an increase in the military budget, which appears to be arguably dichotomous. The US military, more than any other armed force in the world, has primarily been an instrument of the country's foreign policy. If there is a move to disrupt the international order that the US has so far promoted, there may not be a sound basis for an increase in its military budget, considering the lack of credible threat to the continental US. As the Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said on March 13, 2017 in Singapore, the Indo-Pacific region is in a "strategic holding pattern and waiting to see whether the United States and its security allies and partners can continue to play the robust and constructive role that they have for many decades in preserving the peace".⁶⁰

Table 1. Data on China's Trade with US allies and India.

Country	Bilateral trade with China (USD billion)	Ranking of China as trading partner	Ranking of country with respect to China's trading figures
USA	618.7	I	I
Japan	269.7	I	II
ROK	227.3	I	III
Australia	107.3	I	VII
India	71.1	I	XI

Japan faces significant domestic opposition to adopting a foreign and security policy that is alien to its strategic culture, and at odds with its constitution. While there have been moves to reinterpret the constitution so as to allow Japanese forces, especially the JMSDF, a more international outlook, the ruling dispensation will have to expend significant political capital to achieve this.⁶¹ Prime Minister Abe has demonstrated his resolve in this direction, in his short Prime Ministerial term in 2007, and now since 2012. However, the extent to which he will succeed remains to be seen. What will also influence this shift from a history of pacifism is the confidence that Japan will have in the Trump administration and, by association, the US to uphold its defense treaty commitments.

For Australia and India, a more active engagement with the maritime region is not constrained by political will, at least in the immediate future. A greater challenge for these countries is the lack of adequate capacity to fulfill a regional maritime security mandate, and to some extent, especially for India, to create the necessary doctrinal enablers to assume greater roles in this domain. There is, however, a widespread recognition of the necessity, and indeed the inevitability, for these countries to work towards evolving a cooperative maritime security architecture that continues to promote and enable the peaceful use of the seas for legitimate purposes.

Conclusion

There is without doubt, a strong case to be made for the continued presence and involvement of the US in the Indo-Pacific region, and for Japan, Australia and India to assume a more active role in promoting maritime security in the region. But there is also the fact that historical alliances need to evolve into contemporary partnerships, capable of meeting the challenges of the current era. Much has been said about the transition from a US-centric system to a more mini-lateral, smaller grouping system, driven not by common ideologies but by shared interests and concerns of regional countries. Such smaller groupings could mitigate the handicap that large structures such as the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) face in building consensus amongst diverse national and economic interests.

The US today is well entrenched in the region – to the extent that it is almost impossible to call it an extra-regional player. In the unlikely scenario that the new political dispensation in Washington, DC, chooses to extricate itself from the Indo-Pacific, and withdraw closer to Hawaii, Japan, Australia and India will have to assume a much larger role in the regional system, to ensure that the Indo-Pacific continues to reap the economic and social rewards of free and secure seas.

Notes

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