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The US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report

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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group is among India's oldest independent think tanks with its primary focus on international and strategic issues of critical national interest. Over the past decades, the Delhi Policy Group has established itself in both domestic and international circles, particularly in the area of national security.

In keeping with India's increasing global profile as a leading power and the accompanying dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the Delhi Policy Group has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role; India's initiatives to strengthen its strategic periphery; India's political, security and connectivity challenges and policies across the Indo-Pacific; and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise. To support these goals, the DPG undertakes research, publishes policy reports and organises conferences on strategic and geo-political, geo-economic, and defence and security issues.

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US Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan delivered the First Plenary Speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1, 2019 in Singapore. Source: US Embassy in China

US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 13th G20 Summit held in Buenos Aires, Argentina on December 1, 2018. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China

President of the United States of America Donald Trump and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at the Helsinki Summit in Finland on July 16, 2018. Source: Government of Finland/ Flickr

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The US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report

by

Mohit Musaddi and Ishita Singh

On June 1, 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) under Acting Defense Secretary Patrick M. Shanahan released the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region' (IPSR). The report describes the rationale, interests and stakes of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region and was released in the backdrop of Mr. Shanahan's First Plenary Speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue (or the 18th Asia Security Summit) which was held in Singapore from May 31 – June 02. The IPSR is exclusively focused on the Indo-Pacific and lays down the strategic vision and intent of the Pentagon in the region.



US Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan delivered the First Plenary Speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1, 2019 in Singapore. Source: US Embassy in China

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in January 2018 marked a major shift in the US strategic vision. Since 9/11, the United States had been focused on the 'War on Terror' and on combatting the threat emanating from terror groups around the world. In pursuance of its objectives, the United States prosecuted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, under the Trump administration (and during the term of his predecessor), America has focused on withdrawing from these commitments and the US strategic policy laid

down in the National Security Strategy (NSS), NDS and presently in the IPSR has marked a significant departure from the primary focus of countering terror. Instead, the threat to the United States' dominance as a global power has been identified as emerging from China and Russia. There is a new focus on the Indo-Pacific¹ as a strategic geography which also stresses on the importance of India as a strategic partner and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as an area of vital interest to the United States.

The IPSR is a testament to the priority that the United States attaches to the region and a manifestation of its desire to retain a dominant presence there. It represents a key inflection point in the development of the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) with its three guiding principles: 'preparedness', 'partnerships' and 'promoting a networked region'. Since the usage of the term 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' by Japan in its foreign policy strategy in 2017, the United States has not only adopted the concept but also translated it into the three pillars of security, economics and governance. The IPSR focuses on the security pillar of the concept and articulates in a comprehensive manner the Pentagon's approach to the region and what extensive documents such as the NSS and the NDS would mean for specific countries in the Indo-Pacific.

In a broader sense, the IPSR is an extension of the Indo-Pacific strategy outlined in the NSS and the NDS with a few subtle but important differences. The report seeks to retain Washington's main focus on countering China while cautiously revisiting its stance on Russia and prioritizing its presence on the Indian Ocean littoral states.

On China

The NSS and the NDS put the onus on China as a 'revisionist power' whose actions had allegedly focused on opposing U.S. values, attempting to displace the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific and expanding its own influence in the region. However, even though Washington blamed China for eroding other nations' sovereignty and trying to mould the international order in its favour, the U.S. had hitherto viewed Chinese activities through the paradigm of competition rather than conflict.

In the IPSR, China continues to be viewed as a 'revisionist power' albeit with greater fervour. For the first time, the Pentagon accused the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of undermining "the international system from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously eroding the values and

¹ As distinct from the usage of the term Asia-Pacific which excluded from its scope India and the Indian Ocean.

principles of the rules-based order.”²China is accused of complicity in cyber theft, espionage, debt-trap diplomacy and promoting unlawful restrictions on the exercise of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. The Pentagon in the IPSR has thus reaffirmed its commitment to ‘Freedom of Navigation Operations’(FONOP) in the South China Sea to ensure free and open maritime access to all. The IPSR has separate subsections on ‘China’s Military Modernization’ and it’s ‘Use of Economic Means to Advance Strategic Interests’. These allegations against China can also be seen as an attempt on part of the Trump administration to apply indirect pressure on Beijing to comply with America’s increasing tariff rates on imports from China without the U.S. being subjected to the same.



US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 13th G20 Summit held in Buenos Aires, Argentina on December 1, 2018. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

Further, the report describes China’s aggressive stance on Taiwan’s reunification with the mainland and calls on Beijing to uphold the rules-based international order which includes a “strong, prosperous and democratic Taiwan”. The IPSR creates deliberate ambiguity by omitting mention of Washington’s commitment to the ‘One China’ policy earlier advocated in the

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* (2019), Pg. 7

NSS. While the United States is unlikely to alter its 'One China' policy as this would invite a strong Chinese reaction and be destabilising for the region, the report does signal the U.S. intent to strengthen its support for Taiwan's security by various means including the supply of defense equipment.

Finally, a section on 'Engaging China' clarifies that despite overt Chinese aggressive behaviour, the United States is not prepared to bear the economic costs of committing itself to any large-scale attempt at containing China, particularly at a time when Beijing is increasing its footprint in the region through its aggressive investment policies.³ Despite the ongoing trade disputes, the Trump administration realises the need to avoid the onset of a new Cold War as China is still America's single largest trading partner with total trade amounting to over USD 659 billion in 2018 alone.

On Russia

From being described as a revisionist power in the NSS and the NDS, Russia was termed as a 'Revitalized Malign Actor' in the IPSR. Nonetheless, the difference in the treatment of Russia in the two documents relates more to the geographical frame within which Russian activities are being addressed. While the NSS mentioned Russia's attempts to weaken U.S. influence across the *globe*, the IPSR accuses Russia of trying to re-establish its presence in the *Indo-Pacific* through "national outreach and military modernization – in both its conventional forces and strategic forces."⁴

A key takeaway from the report is the emphasis upon the China-Russia nexus which had previously found no mention in the NSS or the NDS. The IPSR accuses China and Russia of working together in tandem against the interests of the United States. In particular, China's purchase of advanced defense equipment such as the Su-35 and the S-400 from Russia and the joint participation with Russia in bilateral and multilateral exercises is viewed by Washington as an attempt to undermine U.S. legitimacy and influence. The convergence of interests between China and Russia in regions outside the Indo-Pacific has manifested itself in activities such as the joint extraction of natural resources and the development of the Northern Sea shipping route through the Arctic. The IPSR underlines the U.S. concern at these convergences amid growing cooperation in strategic areas between China and Russia and

³ Liow, Joseph Chinyong and Phua, Amanda Trea. "Shangri-La Dialogue: Blind Spots in America's Indo-Pacific Strategy". *The Straits Times*, June 3, 2019. Link:

<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/blind-spots-in-americas-indo-pacific-strategy>

⁴ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), Pg. 11

uses them as a justification and rationale for the new U.S. policy vision for the Indo-Pacific.



President of the United States of America Donald Trump and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at the Helsinki Summit in Finland on July 16, 2018. Source: Government of Finland/ Flickr

It would however appear that through the NSS, NDS and the IPSR, Washington has shifted its main focus to China and thus does not accord equal importance to Russia at present. In fact, Shanahan's speech at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue which summarised the IPSR completely ignored Russia and focused primarily on the Sino-US relations.

On North Korea

North Korea continues to be categorized as a 'rogue state'. International policies of North Korea including the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the disregard for international sanctions has put the relationship between Washington and Pyongyang on edge. Even the two summits between Trump and Kim Jong-Un have failed to pressure North Korea to deliver on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, the talks that have taken place between the U.S. and North Korea have resulted in a subtle change of position in Washington as is evident from a comparison of the sections on DPRK in the NSS and the IPSR. While President Trump emphasized upon the need to respond with overwhelming force to North Korean aggression in the NSS, the IPSR recognises the prospects of diplomatic and peaceful avenues to settle disputes. It signals the willingness on part of the Trump administration to undertake a diplomatic approach with a country that was compared to

terrorist groups for having similar objectives in regard to the continued pursuance of the development of WMDs.



US President Donald Trump with Supreme Leader of North Korea Kim Jong-un at the Hanoi Summit in Vietnam on February 27, 2019. Source: White House/ Flickr

On Allies and Partners

In the IPSR, Washington has reaffirmed its commitment to allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The report recognizes the need for mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships and calls for “focused security cooperation, information-sharing agreements, and regular exercises” with its partners.⁵ Alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand are considered ‘indispensable’ and the expansion of partnerships are sought from Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand and Mongolia.

In the Indian Ocean region, the strategic partnership with India is the focal point. Specific examples of India-U.S. cooperation such as the annual 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) and the Malabar Exercises were highlighted to manifest the growing U.S.-India ties under President Trump and PM Modi. Further, the Pentagon has included two new Indian Ocean countries – Nepal and Sri Lanka – in its State

⁵ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), Pg. 21

Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP which already includes other regional countries such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia is a Pentagon-initiative which aims to provide experience and training to partner countries to meet their defense objectives through building partnership capacity.

Building trilateral partnerships and strengthening regional institutions through multilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific are also accorded attention. Washington has laid strong emphasis upon the South Korea-Japan-U.S. trilateral partnership for preserving peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. Other partnerships such as the US-Japan-Australia and the US-India-Japan are also considered crucial for enhancing security and increasing interoperability in the region. Further, preserving ASEAN centrality is also a vital aspect of the U.S. vision in the Indo-Pacific because it is at the core of the U.S.-sponsored regional security architecture in East Asia.



US President Donald Trump met with the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Moon Jae-in on the side lines of the G20 Summit on July 6, 2017, in Hamburg, Germany. Source: US Embassy in Japan

However, a section on 'Burden Sharing' somewhat dampens the mood. President Trump has repeatedly called upon his allies and partners to share the burdens and responsibilities of alliance and partnership more equitably. He has already withdrawn from major deals such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Agreement and the Iran Deal and revised the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on the pretext of the U.S. having to contribute

more in terms of concessions, funding and personnel as compared to the other member states. Washington has also dialled up pressure on its closest allies, Japan and South Korea over trade issues and on Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam over currency policy. Finally, “the US termination of GSP benefits to India from June 5, 2019 and imposition of additional tariffs on solar panels and other products...highlights the emerging impasse between the US and India on...market access issues that require urgent attention.”⁶ A review on the termination of GSP benefits is expected to be conducted during the upcoming visit of U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo to India from June 25 onwards.

Geographical Expanse

Washington envisions the Indo-Pacific to be a stretch from the west coast of the United States to the western shores of India. Apart from the major countries of littoral and maritime Asia, the IPSR focuses on a number of smaller island states including those of the Indian Ocean, South-east Asia and the Pacific. The White House’s reaffirmation to its commitment to the region can be gauged from the \$60-billion BUILD Act (Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act) which was passed by the Senate and House of Representatives in 2018. The Act, which finds mention in the IPSR, is intended to unleash investments in the low and middle economies of Asia and is a reaffirmation of the U.S.’s intent to ‘Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners’ as outlined in the NDS in 2018.

However, the IPSR’s geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific is still limited in scope as it ignores key regions of the Gulf, West Asia and East Africa. In essence, Washington’s definition of the Indo-Pacific seems to be a mere addition of the Bay of Bengal region to the concept of the Asia-Pacific. Given the priority that the U.S. has accorded to the security of the region, it is likely that Washington’s current focus in the “new” Indo-Pacific is on countering Chinese inroads into the Bay of Bengal littoral. Other regional actors may not share the same view and would rather prefer a broader and more inclusive focus of the region. PM Modi, for instance, outlined in the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 that India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific region stretched from the shores of Africa to that of America.

⁶ Singh, Hemant Krishan and Sahgal, Arun. “India’s Foreign and Security Policy: Achievement and Future Challenges for NDA 2.0”. Delhi Policy Group, Policy Brief vol. 4, issue 12 (2019)
Link: https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indias-foreign-and-security-policy-achievements-and-future-challenges-for-nda-20-1160.pdf



Contrary to the American geographical definition of the region, PM Modi has outlined India's vision of the Indo-Pacific stretching from the Eastern shores of Africa to the Western shores of the United States. The map displays a comparison between the geographical expanse of the Asia-Pacific versus the Indo-Pacific. Source: China-US Focus

Conclusion

The NSS revolved around the four national interests of the U.S. namely, preserving the American way of life, promoting America's prosperity, preserving peace through strength, and advancing American influence in the world while the NDS's primary focus was on defending the homeland from attack. The IPSR, on the other hand, has a narrower focus on the security aspect of the Indo-Pacific and revolves around the three pillars of preparedness, partnership and promoting a networked region.

The NSS and the NDS had laid out the broad design of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic geography and the United States' approach and policies towards the security of the region. The IPSR gives geo-spatial expression to the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States and is more granular in its approach as it considers specific U.S. policy initiatives towards allies, partners and smaller countries in the region. The IPSR also indicates the evolution of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy in terms of identifying its key challenges and adversaries.

As in the NSS and the NDS, China is the main challenger of the United States' dominance in Asia. The challenge is both a security challenge (as manifested in its territorial assertions in the South China Sea) and an economic cum technological challenge to the primacy of the United States. The security aspect is being addressed through the strengthening of the U.S. alliance system and the onboarding of key partners like India and broadening the geographical scope of U.S. interest in Asia through the substitution of the Indo-Pacific concept in place of the Asia-Pacific. The economic cum technological challenge is being addressed through the US-China trade discussions and technology controls imposed on China. The US is also repeatedly calling upon its allies and partners for greater burden sharing.

Russia has evolved from being given equal treatment with China and being described as a 'revisionist power' in the NSS and NDS to being described as a 'Revitalized Malign Actor' in the IPSR. The strategic establishment in the United States would be comfortable and in known territory in dealing with Russia because it is being viewed in a paradigm which is a continuation of the Cold War period. The policy tools of dealing with Russia would therefore be familiar territory for the strategic establishment in the U.S. There is however, a sense of urgency in dealing with the Chinese challenge which has been exacerbated in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-08 when the United States was looking inwards at repairing the damage to the U.S. economy and was engaged in two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan. During this period, China drove a wedge between the United States and its alliance partners, leveraged its equities in Asian countries through its preponderant role as a trading partner and as a source of investment for infrastructure through the BRI, and established bases and places in the Indian Ocean littoral to realise the potential of its rapidly growing naval power. These developments are precisely the targets of the United States' Indo-Pacific policy and strategy.



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