



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

The Ukraine War: Impact on Indo-Pacific Regional Dynamics

Author

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Cover Photographs:

President Vladimir Putin of Russia hosting a banquet in honour of President Xi Jinping of China on March 21, 2023. Source: Kremlin.

The Nimitz Carrier Strike Group conducts a trilateral maritime exercise with the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Forces in the US 7th Fleet Area of Operations on April 5, 2023. Source: Twitter (U.S. Forces Japan).

Philippine Army and U.S. Army Pacific soldiers held a platoon live-fire exercise which is part of the ongoing 38th iteration of Exercise Balikatan at Range 5, Camp Ernesto Rabina Air Base, Capas, Tarlac on April 11, 2023. Source: Philippine Army

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Contents

Introduction	1
Power Dynamics in Asia	2
State of Play	2
China as a Regional Hegemon	2
Sino-Russian Entente	3
US and Allied Response	4
South East Asia	5
India's Perspective	6
Conclusion	7

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Introduction

With war in Ukraine lingering and no signs of an early termination of hostilities, global geopolitical equations are fast changing. At one level, US-led NATO partners are feverishly equipping Ukraine for the proposed spring offensive, even as Russian special operations are making incremental progress in the Donbas region. The US and its allies are clear that their combined challenge to the Russian invasion must sustain, to secure Europe from Russian aggression and to marginalise Russia both militarily and economically. But the overall US objective is to leave the field open for dealing with China, seen as the foremost multi-dimensional challenge to US power and influence in the contemporary world order.

This has in turn invigorated the China-Russia entente, driven by their shared concerns about the threat posed by the US-led international order dominated by the West. For Russia, it is NATO's progress towards its borders that poses existential threat. China is equally concerned with the US-led containment and confrontation strategy, aimed at constraining China's rise as a peer competitor in its strategic space along the Indo-Pacific rimland. Although this primary architecture is Eurasia-centric, it is increasingly moving towards the Indo-Pacific where both nations are beginning to coalesce as the US focuses increasing attention to weave countervailing architecture.

Whatever the outcome of the ongoing conflict in Europe, the main arena of competition is now shifting to the Indo-Pacific to determine the eventual distribution of regional and global power, reviving old geopolitical theories.

The US-led West is seeking dominance over maritime space from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, in line with Alfred Mahan's proposition of control of commercial sea lanes. On the other side is the China-Russia axis dominating the Eurasian heartland, in concert with Mackinder's hypothesis of control over the heartland as the basis of global dominance. In this correlation of power dynamics, the central competition is essentially over Spykman's idea of control over rimland, from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pacific.

Power Dynamics in Asia

Asia is not a homogenous construct as it combines continental, maritime and rimland space. The continental space is dominated by the Sino–Russian bloc, whilst the US, allies and partners dominate the maritime domain. The critical competition for power and influence in Asia is along the rimland, straddling the Indo-Pacific littoral. In these competitive power assertions, middle powers are being forced to adopt balancing strategies in pursuit of their interests and regional stability.

Fundamentally, the strategic balance in Asia will be defined by how the pervasive tensions and competition between China and the US play out. What is of concern is that their contest for domination in Asia is entering an escalatory and dangerous phase.

Despite the resumption of face to face contacts last year, the Sino-American tensions have only increased, with both sides following their own 'inexorable' logic. On one side, China is breaking promises of restraint through continuous assertions and shows of force; on the other, the US is accelerating its containment of China, both militarily and economically. While the US wants an acquiescent China, the latter, under President Xi's leadership, desires to be a muscular and rejuvenated global power which is America's peer competitor. Faced with this predicament, both countries are locked in a security dilemma. Prevailing tensions encompass multiple issues that include the Russia–China entente, China's support to Russia, human rights issues in Xinjiang, trade and technology competition, and attempts to diversify supply chains away from China denying it overwhelming trade leverages.

State of Play

China as a Regional Hegemon

China sees American "exceptionalism" as a means to maintain indispensable American global power with unchallenged primacy. The overall effect of this is that China feels encircled within its own natural sphere of influence. Red lines agreed to in the 1970s, when the two countries re-established relations, such as those on Taiwan, are being trampled by "ignorant and reckless American politicians". There are also concerns over China being dragged into the Ukraine conflict as part of policy of dual containment.

Resultantly, China's rulers think that in the prevailing competitive environment it is only prudent to improve its economy and technological capacities, raise military spending and upgrade conventional and strategic capabilities. In

addition, China is pursuing strategies to put in place alliances to preserve its natural sphere of influence. A number of recent Chinese policy initiatives relate to the development of comprehensive national power. Increase in the year-on-year military budget, military modernisation and upscaling asymmetric and hybrid warfare capabilities are part of President Xi's exhortation to be prepared for regional conflict. A recent PLA Daily editorial talked about the legitimacy of conflict to safeguard national interest in the context of the reunification of Taiwan, alluding to China preparing for a military contingency. As President Xi recently remarked to the EC President, Taiwan is the "core of China's core interests".

President Xi's political consolidation has allowed him to become more assertive in pursuit of China's national interests. China has upped the ante on multiple friction points, resulting in a more tenuous security scenario. Taiwan is being subjected to daily coercion through breaches of its ADIZ, intimidatory deployment, and shows of force. Against Japan, its intimidatory actions have included continuous breaches of the ADIZ around the Senkaku Islands, and threatening deployments that have included carrier strike group operations and long-range strike drills. A new normal has been set by the combined Sino-Russian maritime exercises in the East China Sea.

Against India, China is raising the ante in the high Himalayas along the disputed LAC both as means of coercion and to test the resolve of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategic architecture. Further, it is widening its alliance perimeters by inducting Russia as a credible strategic partner (Russian maritime doctrine gives primacy to the Indo-Pacific) and pushing North Korea towards muscle flexing through provocative missile tests in a message to the US, Japan and ROK.

China's attempts to shape the strategic space in the Indo-Pacific through its assertions and domination is the real cause of the US labelling China as a peer competitor and a regional hegemon attempting to dominate Asia as a step towards its global ambitions. For the US, China's dominance of Asia is strictly unacceptable, as this will lead to a coalition of forces that can over time undermine regional order and America's global domination.

Sino-Russian Entente

The main driver of the current convergence in China-Russia relations is the US's single-minded pursuit of unipolarity through NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe and the US rebalance to Asia. Both face similar pressures that include Western bullying over a wide range of issues that include governance, interference in their internal affairs, and their legitimate regional interests. This

has driven both not only towards “no limits” relationship, but also to expand the scope of their partnership from increased bilateral trade, energy, technology, and infrastructural investments. The recent visit by President Xi to Moscow was aimed at affirming this partnership, conveying a message of growing convergence of geopolitical interests, and the need to maintain an equitable global balance.

Both China and Russia are also involved in shaping strategies from Middle East to the Eurasian continent and across to the Indo-Pacific. As a result, apart from a burgeoning trade and energy partnership, we are witnessing the two coming together to extend their footprint both in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific. China has recently brokered a Saudi Arabia-Iran thaw, and created new trilaterals that include Russia-Iran-China. These initiatives are backed by number of maritime exercises, extending from the Persian Gulf to Northeast Asia. There are reports of a Russia-China bilateral undersea partnership. A proposal from China, a sort of “Anti-AUKUS” Axis, with Russia trading submarine technology for military aid, is being seen as a win-win for both.¹

In short, as strategic competition rises, both countries are likely to deal jointly with the common challenge from the West, even as they have differences over many issues.

US and Allied Response

To deal with the China challenge, the US is adopting a four-pronged strategy.

- a. Upgrading and building new capacities that include deployment of nuclear submarines, medium and intermediate range missiles, developing new bases, e.g., in the Philippines, and the Stirling submarine naval base on the West Coast of Australia in the Indian Ocean.
- b. Encouraging allies to upgrade their capabilities. Japan’s shift in security posture has been a development with major implications for security architecture in East Asia. Japan has announced the doubling of its defence outlays over the next five years, making Japan the 3rd largest defence spender from the 9th presently. The change in Japan’s posture, in addition to allowing it to field capabilities (including counterstrike) commensurate with other middle powers, will also assist in beefing up its overall regional defence posture. Equally noteworthy is the capability enhancement of Australia under AUKUS, which apart from SSNs includes long-range

¹ “Buckle Up! China May Propose New Anti-AUKUS Military Alliance Very Soon”, [Forbes.com/sites/craighooper/2023/03/14/buckle-up-china-may-propose-anti-aukus-military-alliance-soon/?sh=6b2b27433d0e](https://forbes.com/sites/craighooper/2023/03/14/buckle-up-china-may-propose-anti-aukus-military-alliance-soon/?sh=6b2b27433d0e)

- missile systems and research in hypersonic and underwater unmanned systems, among others. Equally, the Republic of Korea is being encouraged to upgrade its missile and asymmetric capabilities. To deal with the possibility of strategic escalation, the discourse is shifting on the efficacy of extended deterrence.
- c. In addition, an all-encompassing capability enhancement security architecture is being weaved to strengthen the Eastern seaboard and Western Pacific through a number of intertwined bilateral and trilaterals, involving the US, Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Philippines etc.
 - d. The most recent element of this architecture is integrating NATO into the Indo-Pacific architecture, to create seamless rimland connectivity from the Euro-Atlantic to the US west coast.

Along with the above, the Quad's soft security architecture is incrementally being shaped into a more robust security framework through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Initiative, establishment of a HADR partnership and commitment to invest \$ 50 billion for quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.

South East Asia

In this US-China strategic competition, South East Asia is an important zone of contention. South East Asian nations look at the US and China as two poles pulling them in different directions. The key element of competition is the Chinese claim of territorial waters in the South China Sea, which America rejects. This region is of enormous strategic importance for China. It lies astride the key trade and energy supply routes, central to Chinese commerce. Additionally, China hemmed in the east by three key American allies Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, astride what is termed as the 'First Island Chain', sees itself as a constrained power. Second, for largely continental China, it is the region which provides access to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, for both power projection and commercial purposes. It is only through control of the South China Sea can China overcome its containment dilemma.

Further, to strengthen its regional control, China is increasing its footprint in peninsular and continental ASEAN countries like Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia and even Singapore, through its economic and trade influence. BRI and soft loans are providing the region with means for both infrastructure development and connectivity. China's forays in developing bases, such as Ream in Cambodia, and developing facilities at the Great Coco Islands barely 55 Kms from India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, are deeply disturbing developments.

The second element of the region's importance is its burgeoning economy. Several major countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia are posting 5-7 per cent annual GDP growth rates. Given the situation in Europe, South East Asia is fast becoming an economic hub of choice, important for its supply chains, manufacturing and trade.

Despite the strategic importance of South East Asia, the US and its allies have little leverage over the region. Whatever be the gains, these are a consequence of China's muscle flexing in the South China Sea, delaying the resolution of the Code of Conduct with ASEAN, and imposing unilateral restrictions for both energy exploration and military exercises. One of the key consequences of China's domination over the South China Sea is a wedge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, which is dominated by China through both economic strength and deployment of the PLAN.

India's Perspective

Seen in the above context, from an Indian strategic calculus, the China-US competition in the Indo-Pacific largely remains Asia Pacific/East Asia-centric. This is resulting in India being left as a stand-alone power in South Asia/IOR, to deal with the multi-domain China challenge. This reality has important implications for the US intention to dominate the Indo-Pacific rimland and establish a rules-based order. The following aspects need reiteration:

- a. China's domination of the South China Sea has created a disconnect between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This allows China to engage both regions piecemeal. Despite growing tensions over Taiwan, there has been no let-up in the India-China standoff, in fact PLA intrusions have only increased.
- b. This disconnect, and limited capabilities to address growing challenges in IOR-South Asia, creates a dilemma for Indian planners over the commitment of its Indo-Pacific partners towards addressing India's security concerns.
- c. As a result, India has little option but to develop capabilities and strategies to deal with both China and Sino-Pak collusion, in both conventional and nuclear domains.
- d. Adding to India's security concerns is the instability in the Af-Pak region – political, economic, and resurgence of Islamist extremism. We are also witnessing attempts by the US to re-engage with Pakistan and build up its capacities. This will only embolden Pakistan and make it risk averse. Regional turbulence is also radiating into Central Asia, extending the arc of insecurity and geostrategic challenges faced by India.

Conclusion

There are signs of increasing contestation for power and influence between two great power – the Sino-Russian entente versus the US-led realignment of power structures in East Asia and Western Pacific – which is likely to lead to rising tensions. China is using Taiwan to flex its muscles, without resorting to open hostilities. It is using this period for power consolidation and sending a message that attempts at China containment is perceived as a challenge that will invite serious consequences. In short, it is putting in place a strategy of deterrence by denial. The US on the other hand, mired in an unending conflict in Europe, is building a coalition of power that it believes can dissuade China from escalation or a Taiwan contingency.

From an Indian perspective, as highlighted earlier, this is becoming an Asia – Pacific contest, forcing India to adopt strategies and develop capabilities, to deal with a direct and collusive China challenge, stand alone. This is the real rationale behind India's 'Aatmanirbhar' programme in developing a credible defence ecosystem and acquiring threat mitigation capabilities.

Meanwhile, a scenario of miscalculation, that could lead to escalation with serious regional consequences, prevails and continues to preoccupy India's policymakers.



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