



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **The Indo-Pacific: A Global Region of Geopolitical Struggle<sup>1</sup>**

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The Indo-Pacific is now an increasingly enlarged and expanded global region, reflecting the geoeconomic and geostrategic significance of the two oceans and a broader area of full-fledged cooperation.

As a strategic discourse, the Indo-Pacific is essentially contested. Different actors interpret this concept differently. Since its coinage of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, nowadays there are at least eleven distinct strategic visions endorsing the Indo-Pacific since the European Union has recently released the latest version

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of Indo-Pacific Strategy in September 2021. It follows the likes of Japan, Australia, India, the US, France, ASEAN, Taiwan, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

At the same time, the Indo-Pacific region is a site of great power competition where a potential conflict looms large even before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. China envisioned it with a skeptic view: The Indo-Pacific is both essentially meaningless and strategically dangerous since it would exacerbate regional security dilemma. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi disregarded the Indo-Pacific as an “attention-grabbing” concept, which would dissipate like “ocean foam”.

In contrast, the US, at least since 2017, has adopted Japan-initiated FOIP Strategy and expanded its geopolitical focal point. The Indo-Pacific concept is not value-free or neutral, but inherently political and value-laden. This strategic narrative has traversed and replaced the older Asia-Pacific concept, which previously emphasised globalisation, economic interdependence and connectivity and region-wide multilateral cooperation, culminated in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) that Thailand is currently a chair in 2022.

Within the Indo-Pacific framework, the US has a double strategic goal to maintain its hegemonic power and prestige in the region as well as to constrain China’s assertive rise. By doing so, the US coupled with other like-minded states such as the quadrilateral security initiative (Quad) and now a trilateral security pact (AUKUS) have sought to rebalance a regional distribution of power in their favor and to contain Beijing in the South China Sea and the strait of Taiwan.

In addition, the US under President Joe Biden increasingly expands democracy promotion, culminated in a tougher stance on human rights, liberal economy and freedom of navigation as well as the highly contested, if not controversial, establishment of the Summit for Democracy. The latter risks dividing the world into two rivaling blocs along different value systems in the near future.

The formation of minilateral security pacts such as the Quad and AUKUS and the value-laden Summit for Democracy provokes China, which in turn has sought to defend its core interests in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea and to step-up so-called wolf-warrior diplomacy internationally.

Great power competition has intensified regional security dilemma and exacerbated region-wide tensions and the potential of escalation. Military showdowns are likely to happen more than in the past. This also pushes the choosing side mentality among small/middle states and renders hedging strategy relatively difficult to maintain.

That said, the Indo-Pacific region has been driven by hegemonic attempt to maintain its preponderance of power and followed by counter-hegemonic strategies by other major powers in the region.

First, Japan and India both of which have territorial or border issues with China arguably prefer to cooperate with Beijing and try to deemphasise the value-laden diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific discourse. Both players aim to diversify and defend their economic wealth and prosperity.

Second, the Quad is seemingly overshadowed by the recently established AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between Australia, UK and US. The latter is not only about a nuclear submarine deal but also a deeper security cooperation between these three like-minded states. AUKUS can be envisioned as a revived form of an Anglosphere or English-speaking bloc. Above all else, AUKUS is the latest minilateral security arrangement that illustrates twofold ultimate aims of the US in the Indo-Pacific: to constrain the rising China and to sustain American preponderance of power in the region. However, AUKUS is seen by the Chinese as part of a new containment strategy.

Third, the main areas or flash points of the Sino-US contest can be classified as the “3Ts” – trade, technology and territorial/maritime disputes.

Sino-US trade war has begun when President Donald Trump launched a tit-for-tat tariffs policy against China in early 2018, citing Chinese unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft. Beijing retaliated by imposing tariffs on a number of American goods. As trade wars mainly focus on Chinese technological companies and products, they are fundamentally characterised by technological competition. This trend still continues during the Biden administration.

The cutthroat competition has gone into the digital space. The US and China are competing on 5G technology and semiconductors, in which Taiwan is strategically important because of its high-tech capacity in semiconductor manufacturing.

Meanwhile, the South China Sea territorial dispute has heightened regional tension and is yet to be resolved. In addition, President Xi Jinping has promoted a series of bold economic measures, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Mekong-Lancang cooperation channel, seeking to bypass US-led global institutions and rewrite the global order.

Last but not least, great power politics in the Indo-Pacific region is shaping the world into a bipolar world order or G2 at the top echelon of power. Rather than a new Cold War, it is the Sino-US ice age where the rivalry is like having “two big elephants in the same room” competing for regional, if not global, supremacy. Their contest is characterised by the great decoupling and divergence of interests in all dimensions, ranging from trade, technology and now value systems.

It is also driven by a clash of international orders: a liberal rules-based order and neo-Westphalian order based on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.

Despite its geopolitical and normative competition, the Sino-US ice age is not yet a new Cold War. This is because of two elements. First, there are no clear-cut distinct ideologically-oriented blocs. Nevertheless, it seems that an emerging minilateral bloc is nascently forming via such security arrangements as the Quad, AUKUS and Five Eyes intelligence alliance.

Second, other states prefer to hedge and leverage with both superpowers – developing military ties with the US while maintaining economic cooperation with China. However, the nascent bipolar world order will instigate the return of power politics and increase small powers' dilemma, thereby interrogating their ability to hedge with the two Superpowers in the twenty-first century.

In addition, the misused and misguide framing of US-China rivalry as a new Cold War would be, to quote Kishore Mahbubani, a “strategic mistake of fighting tomorrow’s war with yesterday’s strategies”. It would also turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is in fact not inevitable and could be avoided at all costs.

Being locked in the intensity of geopolitical competition, the US and China have turned the Indo-Pacific region into a cockpit of international rivalry due largely to the struggle for global supremacy. With G2 superpowers, the world enters into an ice age of bipolar system with the three main flash-points of trade, technology and territorial/maritime disputes. Without a proper balancing act, the likely scenario is that the Sino-US ice age might be driven by a new arms race and a dividing world with two rivaling blocs along different value systems in the near future.

A traditional parable says that when the two big elephants fight, it is the small grass that suffers. The small/middle states can struggle to maintain hedging and equidistant strategy, but perhaps need to elevate a leading-from-the-middle strategy that constrains great power competition and binds these powers into region-wide norms and rules. While a multipolar and multiplex world

order is an aspiring dream for many players, a bipolar system is now the emerging rule of the game in the twenty-first century great power politics. Against this backdrop, the Indo-Pacific region is now in flux. We are living in an era of uncertainty.

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