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Indo-Pacific is ‘priority theatre’ for the US

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The Shangri-La Dialogue 2019, hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, was the 18th Asia Security Summit that brought together defence ministers and top-ranking military personnel of 30-odd countries, including the US and China, in Singapore. Seen as an American-centric meet where the US announces its security policy for the region, the US stoked anticipation saying that it would unveil a new vision for the Indo-Pacific.

The meet came in the midst of the ongoing Sino-US trade war and was a highly anticipated event, given the participation of both the (acting) US Secretary of Defense

Patrick Shanahan and China's defence minister General Wei Fenghe. In fact, for the first time, China sent its defence minister to the meet.

This set the stage for, if not the "clash of civilisations," as the US State Department's director of policy planning Kiron Skinner famously said a few weeks ago, then surely restating the power equation between an established power, the US, and a rising, resurgent and somewhat recalcitrant China.

Much of what the US unveiled at the Shangri-La Dialogue was neither random nor surprising. If anything, it was in line with the recent tenor of the American policy towards China. The National Defense Strategy (2018) honed the idea of China as a 'strategic competitor', a 'revisionist power' and 'authoritarian actor' (along with Russia), and signalled the US's commitment to 'compete, deter and win' in the complex environment. This was also in tune with the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA, 2018) geared to promote US interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The new vision, marked by clarity and simplicity, reiterates that the US is a Pacific power, a resident Asian power, and that the US 'pivot' is here in Asia to stay—with the Indo-Pacific identified as the 'priority theatre' of the American strategy. According to the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), seven of the 10 largest standing armies are in the region, as are six nuclear powers; the region also hosts nine of the 10 busiest ports, US foreign direct investment is $1.3 trillion, and two-way trade is $2.3 trillion. The Indo-Pacific accounts for 60% of global GDP.

In addition to being identified as 'priority theatre', the critical bottom line of the US vision was the reaffirmation of the Indo-Pacific as Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). This had been announced earlier, in 2017, by President Donald Trump at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit (APEC) in Vietnam. By reaffirming FOIP and spelling out that it is inclusive, embracive 'shared security order' based on a 'rules-based international order', the US emphasised rules and norms that are global, universally-accepted and not American (nor Chinese) in spirit.

The US stressed respect for sovereignty and independence, and adherence to international rules and norms including the freedom of navigation and overflight and resolution of disputes through peaceful means. With simmering disputes in Northeast

Asia, South China Sea, East China Sea and critical shipping routes at stake, Shanahan said, “No one nation can—or should—dominate the Indo-Pacific,”—an oblique reference to China?

Shanahan’s speech called out actors in Asia that “undermine the system by using indirect, incremental actions and rhetorical devices to exploit others economically and diplomatically, and coerce them militarily” with a new “toolkit of coercion.” This toolkit of coercion implies contentious and controversial actions that include deploying weapons in disputed areas, interfering in domestic politics of other nations, ‘predatory economics’ and theft of intellectual property right—all of which make it easy to guess who the actor is.

One of the important components of the new strategy is the $60-billion Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act (BUILD Act), passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives (in 2018). This will create a new US development agency, the US International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC). This is likely to unleash investments in the low and middle economies of Asia under the rubric of ‘Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners’, as the National Defense Strategy (2018) mentioned.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019) came on the heels of Shanahan’s speech. The report, ‘Preparedness, Partnerships, And Promoting A Networked Region’, reiterated and emphasised the “Inter-state strategic competition, defined by geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions” as the primary concern for US national security.

Clearly, the overall US strategy goes beyond protecting immediate US interests, but rather has its eyes on the future. Pre-emptive and preventive, it consolidates and concretises the US as a formidable bulwark against competition and contest in the region.

In all this, the US is trying hard not to come across as a ‘global policeman’, but it turns out this is hard sell. In the last few decades, the American policy has been conveniently negotiating Asia (including India) with blinkers on. In China, it has brushed aside an ‘inconvenient truth’ or two such as human rights (remember Tiananmen, 1989, or

China's ban on academics such as Perry Link, Andrew Nathan and others who worked on controversial subjects in China?). Hundreds of cases of self-immolation in the Tibetan region of China in the mid-2000s and destruction of large-scale monasteries haven't mattered either. Neither has state persecution in Xinjiang. But these were the times of economic bonhomie.

The US as a 'global policeman' comes without free lunch. For the region, the stoic reminders are pages from the Vietnam War (1955-75) writ with the tragic episode of Agent Orange—the herbicide used by the US Army to decimate forest cover decimated people instead. The American actions have been suspect in Cambodia, too, where the Khmer Rouge killed more than a million people in the 1970s. Beyond the region, the recent disappearance of journalist Jamal Khashoggi is a reminder of the US turning a blind eye—when it wants to.

The Indo-Pacific has much to thank China for. Not just manufacturing prowess (that has come at a huge environmental and human cost to China) and trade, but also for stirring waters in a way that neither Japan nor South Korea could do or did.

To take one example, China's Belt and Road Initiative (2013) indirectly spurred the BUILD Act and the Japanese initiatives of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC, 2017) and Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQLI, 2015). China, with $60 billion for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), $930 million (in investments) to the Philippines (2018), $50 billion to Africa (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2018) and foreign aid to Africa leaning more towards grants and interest-free loans, has reinvented 'aid' as a formidable soft power tool.

For the countries of the Indo-Pacific, the question is: Who is the greater danger, or the greater evil? As alignments, networks and partnerships show, the writing is emerging on the wall.

There is global consensus that China prematurely departed from the dictum 'bide its time' before its time. But the Chinese are masters of pragmatism and know when to advance and when to retreat—just as Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War' describes. This pragmatism showed up in General Wei's Q&A session during the Shangri-La Dialogue where he indicated that "China is the biggest developing country … and does not want

to vie for the number one position," suggesting introspection and the possibility of a retreat to China 'biding its time'.

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