

Analyzing United States Pivot to Asia and China's Global Rebalancing through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Waseem Ishaque¹

Abstract

This article focuses on 'Pivot to Asia' and 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) as two competing paradigms defining the great power relations in the evolving regional and global order. The article is based on the premise that a dialectic relationship exists between the United States and China, manifested through the *pivot* to Asia and global rebalancing by China. The paper investigates the contours of both strategies using the theoretical framework of hegemonic stability theory to provide empirical answers to the assertive behavior of the United States as the status-quo power and China as the rising power. The central argument of the paper revolves around the renewed United States strategic focus in the Indo-Pacific, which is creating perceptions of containment in China. In doing so, the article investigates the evolving power dynamics and role of the United States in shaping the strategies and alliances among the regional actors and Chinese counterbalance strategies through economic incentives and developmental projects such as BRI. The research is an original contribution to unveiling the saga of the United States *pivot* to Asia and counterbalance by China for enhancing their spheres of influence in maintaining hegemony.

Keywords

Pivot to Asia, containment, rebalancing, Belt and Road Initiative, China, USA

Introduction

Like every imaginative space, the Indo-Pacific region is the construct of contested interpretations (Das, 2019). The academic literature defining the Indo-Pacific region focuses on the countries and islands *in* and *around* the western Pacific Ocean: the Pacific islands, south-east Asia and up into Japan and China (Galloway, 2021). The region has immense geopolitical and geo-economic significance as it holds 60% of global wealth, 3/5th of the world's population and an intense demonstration of great power's competition (Rajagopalan, 2022).

¹ Waseem Ishaque is a Director of Area Studies Centre (China) at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad.

E-mail: waseem.ishaque@numl.edu.pk

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The Indo-Pacific region in recent times has remained under sharp focus and interest for the status-quo and rising powers to an unprecedented level due to its proximity to highly industrialized Northeast Asia, the Australian continent, the Indian subcontinent, and the oil and gas-rich region of the Middle East. The Straits and Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the Far East region also assume great importance due to the heavy flow of traffic for interstate trade and oil imports from the Middle East (Andrews-Speed & Len, 2016). Keeping the international SLOCs open has attained superior strategic orientation from the United States national security perspective; therefore, reprioritizing preference from military alone to economic incentives. The United States has repeatedly pronounced that it would not accept trade disruption in the South China Sea (Noer & Gregory, 1996). In May 1995, Secretary of State Warren Christopher once again warned that the divergent claims over Spratly reefs should not disrupt the SLOCs (Noer & Gregory, 1996).

Since the end of World War II, the United States has maintained a military presence in this region with varying intentions, generally unclear. However, it is felt that this presence brought immense stability to the war-ravaged region, as the United States unstinted commitment to the reconstruction of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and even China resulted in an economic turnaround for these countries and the entire region at large (Zagoria, 2015). Since the reforms and opening up of China led by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the last three decades witnessed an unprecedented economic leap forward, which rightly placed China at the global center stage as the second largest economy after the United States (Cheng, 2019).

The peaceful rise of China amid varying interpretations has generated intense debates across the globe and has placed China as a competitor of the United States. In the contemporary international order, both China and the United States are influential players and contributors to global governance; therefore, their bilateral relationship is far more significant today than ever before. China-US relations are complex and often delicate, featuring a multitude of critical issues that both countries must navigate together as miscalculations could spell catastrophe (Hachigian, 2015, p. 63).

China's economic cum political rise is interpreted as a serious challenge to post-World War II international order and a direct threat to the status quo power, i.e. the United States. At the same time, the region lacks effective structures for cooperative security and mechanisms to contain conflict in case of any miscalculation (Amt, 2021). Realizing the strategic vacuum provided to China due to involvement in Afghanistan and the Middle East and the impact of costly unending wars, the United States announced 'Pivot to Asia' Strategy in 2011 to bolster the multidimensional relations with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region (Lieberthal, 2011). In the argument of maintaining hard-earned freedom of navigation, the regional countries are encouraged to follow the pattern of the United States, which is creating friction with China and causing heightened tension. It is highly appreciable that both China and the United States have rationally managed the controversial issues of the South China Sea by adopting restraint and accommodation.

Realizing the challenges of possible containment, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the vision of constructing the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' in September 2013 during his address at Nazarbayev University Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2013) and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (Ling, 2018, p. 1) in October 2013 during his address to Indonesian Parliament. Both later transformed into 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) (State Council, PRC, 2017, p. 1). The Chinese

government issued a White Paper in 2015 highlighting the conceptual dimensions and implementation of the BRI. From the Chinese perspective, the BRI can help “economic prosperity of countries and the regions along the road, strengthen exchanges between civilizations and promote peace and development for the benefit of people around the world” (National Development and Reforms Commission, 2015, p. 1).

The alternate views have also been frequently expressed by scholars on the Chinese motivations behind BRI. It serves as a counterbalance against the *pivot* to Asia and a possible option for China to develop new investment opportunities for increasing spheres of influence (Chatzky & McBride, 2020; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). From the Chinese perspective, BRI has positively attracted many countries covering all the regions due to the potential benefits of common development and prosperity. The report published in 2016 by ‘Fung Business Intelligence’ highlighted that 64 countries are willing to participate in the mega developmental project (Chin & He, 2016), which has been vindicated by the World Bank report as well: “70 countries signed up for joining the initiative, containing 65% of world’s population and one-third of world’s gross domestic product (GDP)” (The World Bank, 2018, n.d.). The number has reached 126 countries and 29 international organizations (Xinhua, 2019).

To alleviate the rising concerns about Chinese intentions and future geopolitical aspects related to BRI appearing in the media, the Chinese government issued comprehensive policy guidelines in 2015 titled ‘Vision and actions on jointly building Belt and Road’ (Xinhua, 2017). Elizabeth. C. Economy writes that “under President Xi Jinping, China now actively seeks to shape the international norms and institutions and forcefully asserts its presence on the global stage” (Chatzky & McBride, 2020, p. 1). In the same context, it is further added that for President Xi Jinping, the BRI serves as a pushback against the United States *pivot* to Asia (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Since 2013, extensive and often contrasting debates have been taking place on the Chinese BRI and the United States *pivot* to Asia with varying perspectives. Substantial literature is available on both *pivot* to Asia vis-à-vis BRI. However, a literature gap exists in comparative analyses of competing strategies, defining great power relations. In doing so, the dialectic relationship between these opposing strategies has been examined by providing answers to the following research questions:

- What conceptual contours and manifestations of the United States *pivot* to Asia, Indo-Pacific, and QUAD alliance?
- What are the motivations behind China-led BRI, and how is it manifested on the ground?
- How are the United States and Chinese strategies creating great powers’ competition in the Indo-Pacific region to enhance their sphere of influence?

Research Context and Methodology

The Last two decades have witnessed intense competition between the status quo power USA and rising power China, vying for regional dominance and rewriting the rules of international order (Loke, 2021). The United States military involvement in Afghanistan and the Middle East in the aftermath of the 9/11 incidents provided an uninterrupted opportunity for China to rise economically and earn the rightful position as the world’s second-largest economy after the United States. Since then, Chinese military modernization plans and assertive behavior in the Indo-Pacific region on the premise of core national interests have generated intense debate on

changing patterns of Chinese behavior. The United States is concerned about the rising national power of China; therefore, it introduced a series of strategies like 'Pivot to Asia', the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the QUAD alliance containing military cum economic incentives for allies and partners aimed at putting caution on China (Mahapatra, 2018). The United States National Security Strategy (USNSS) 2018 declaring great power's competition with China vindicated the Chinese perception of containment (Galdorisi, 2019). Realizing the potential of containment, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced BRI as a global rebalancing to counterbalance United States strategies through soft power and economic incentives (Beeson, 2018). This paper identifies the evolving trends in the Indo-Pacific region leading toward great power competition, i.e. between the United States and China.

This research is explanatory in nature and employed qualitative research methods using secondary data. Official statements, transcripts, white papers, and articles have been analyzed to develop and substantiate the arguments. Due to the evolving trends of intense competition between the USA and China in the Indo-Pacific to assert domination and maintain hegemony, this article critically examines the competing strategies and their dialectical relationships. The period of the last two decades, from September 2001 to September 2021, has been considered for analyzing the strategies and policies of the two countries. In this period, the United States has demonstrated enhanced attention towards the Indo-Pacific region with the contention of imposing caution over the assertive behavior of China and its expanding influence in the region. The paper investigates the contours of both strategies using the theoretical framework of hegemonic stability theory to critically assess the assertive behavior of the United States as the status-quo power and China as the rising power.

The Hegemonic Stability Theory

There is a great degree of geopolitics at play in the Indo-Pacific region with a renewed focus on United States foreign policy in the region, especially after the announcement of the 'Pivot to Asia'. After President Donald Trump assumed office, three policy documents highlighted key priority areas, i.e. 'United States National Security Strategy 2018', 'Defense Strategic Guidance and Indo-Pacific Strategy' (Pant & Parpiani, 2020). All three have made the Indo-Pacific the fulcrum of the United States attention. However, from the Chinese perspective, the BRI provides a mechanism for enhancing its sphere of influence by demonstrating cooperative engagement through economic incentives as new norms of international relations (Huang, 2016). Therefore, the evolving regional landscape demonstrates great powers' competition (i.e., between China and the United States), where both *forces* are vying to enhance their sphere of influence through assertive behavior and contrasting strategies.

The hegemonic stability theory exemplifies the established ascendancy of a hegemonic power, which in this case is the status-quo power of the United States that would decide the rules of the game for prevalent global order by using different foreign policy tools like economic coercion, diplomacy, military and persuasion (Charles, 1973, p. 8). The hegemonic stability theory postulates that unmatched economic and political power must exist, where essential features of large economies are backed up by technological sophistication. One postulate of this theory describes the innovative foreign policy by the status-quo power for maintaining a dominant role in the global arena to retain its hegemonic status apart from serving self-interest (Charles, 1973, p. 4). Another dimension of the theory envisions that the prevailing

hegemon offers a tremendous amount of public goods that are rationally distributed among the states in the existing regional and international system (Keohane, 2005, p. 135). The United States and China are promising tremendous economic incentives through the *pivot* to Asia and BRI to demonstrate soft power for public goods.

The theory describes power turf, the hierarchy of nations in international politics with the fluctuating intensity of competition and cooperation (Tammen et al., 2017, p. 17) and bifurcates the difference between domestic and international environments by assuming that global politics is integrated both vertically and horizontally (Kim & Gates, 2015). Additionally, the static and dynamic factors affecting the structure of the international system also help to investigate the underlying causes of transition and change that occurs in the international system (Werner & Kugler, 1996).

It is important to note that the growth rate and its impact on relative power distribution among the states reshape interstate relations by forming new economic and (or) political entities (Tammen et al., 2017, p. 19). When the growth in accumulative power reaches a certain level, and when rising power is in apposition to challenge the dominant hegemon, there are strong possibilities that a conflict may occur, as increasing power has acquired the requisite means to challenge under extensive pressure applied by the dominant power. Such scenarios appeared from several policy statements of the United States officials and matching responses from the Chinese officials. Such developments may create environments of discontent, where rising power feels dissatisfied with the prevalent status quo; therefore, a potential conflict is likely to happen (Tammen et al., 2011, p. 59). Both 'Pivot to Asia' and 'BRI' provide substantial economic incentives for public goods, providing alternate power transition philosophy through economic incentives and cooperative engagement.

United States 'Pivot to Asia' and Indo-Pacific Strategies

On 17 November 2011, President Obama announced a major foreign policy shift from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region while addressing the Australian Parliament. He emphasised that the "United States will play a larger and long-term role in reshaping this region and its future by upholding core principles and in close partnership with allies" (Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, 2011). Also, in 2011, the United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, announced 'America's Pacific Century'. Her statement aptly enunciated the core strategic message demonstrated by the shift in the regional priorities that the future of politics will be decided in Asia-Pacific and not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the centre of actions (Clinton, 2011). The strategy later transformed into a *pivot* or rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific. Therefore, this region characterized the future *pivot* of global geopolitics, as major powers' competition for domination emerged due to China's rise. On the positive side, the United States has appreciated China's peaceful rise; however, the Chinese intentions for peace remain suspicious due to its assertive role in disputed regions of the North and South China Sea, military modernization plans and transforming defense policy to 'active defense'. China's increase in the defense budget, development of missiles and strategic capabilities are worrisome developments that the United States cannot ignore (Davidson, 2014, p. 3).

The Indo-Pacific region has been anticipated as the future economic center of gravity (Schiavenza, n.d.). The United States presence in this region after a victory in World War II and allocation of funds like the Marshal Plan in Europe provided

security, stability, development, and economic assistance that facilitated the post-war recovery of Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Taiwan. Realizing the vast potential, the United States committed to renewed engagement and focused on the Indo-Pacific region (Wang, 2016, p. 81). Former United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave the rationale that “just as Asia is critical to America’s future, an engaged America is vital to Asia’s future” (Clinton, 2011, n.d.). By virtue of its unique geographical disposition, the United States is an unfathomable Pacific and Atlantic power; therefore, it is in an exceptional position to build a multifaceted partnership with the regional countries unswerving with core values (Lieberthal, 2011).

The United States recognizes the enormous potential promised by the Asia-Pacific region. By its deployment in the region and exceptional diplomatic and military relations with most ASEAN countries, the necessity to *pivot* to Asia has become a reality through collaborative engagement with the regional countries and organisations (Bower et al., 2015). Hillary Clinton described the region as a ‘fulcrum’ for comprehensively building the multipronged security and economic engagement model in consonance with ‘forward deployed diplomacy’ for long-term and sustainable cooperation with the regional countries (Clinton, 2010). The *pivot’s* important component is the United States military modernization plans to bring the military capabilities of regional countries to a level of strong deterrence. The military components of the *pivot* contain the enhanced military deployment in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and the deployment of Littoral combat ships to Singapore (Kato & Shimbun, n.d., p. 5).

Additionally, the robust engagement with allies in South East Asia and the Indian Ocean region is also the focus of the *pivot*. The United States has declined Chinese sovereignty over islands, reefs and Spratly archipelago and has stressed the hard-earned freedom of navigation. The evolving situation created a diplomatic row as China reacted swiftly to the United States intentions of military containment (Rose & Brunnstorm, 2015).

Former United States Secretary of Defense, Mr Leon E. Panetta, promulgated policy guidelines for manifesting military components of *pivot* named ‘Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense’. It highlights the military-level engagements with regional countries, including deployment of additional forces, joint military exercises, and capacity building of allies for increasing the United States’ influence in the region (Panetta & Obama, 2012, p. 3). Addressing Shangri-La Dialogue Singapore in 2013, Former United States Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel elaborated on the contours of rebalancing, containing the deployment of military assets to enhance partnership and posture with rotational deployments in the Pacific region (US-China Institute, n.d.). Additionally, the United States has deployed P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft in Singapore to serve as a deterrence against China’s assertive role in the South China Sea (Dyer, 2015, p. 1). The Singapore and the United States military cooperation pact was also formalized during Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng En Hen’s visit to Pentagon aimed at capacity building and enduring stability in the region (Yong, 2015). The Chinese government has reacted to such developments by stating, “such cooperation will militarize the region” (Yong, 2015, n.d.). The United States also committed US\$19.7 million for capacity building of the Philippine Coast Guard (Misalucha, 2014) and also Vietnam’s Navy and Coast Guard (Ton, 2018, p. 4).

The controversies surrounding the *pivot* to Asia have been going on since 2011; the conclusion can be drawn as enhanced economic cooperation, refuting China's rise, rebalancing the regional alliances, and redefining the rules of the game in the Asia-Pacific region with a more assertive outlook (Oehler-Sincai, 2016, p. 13). Such overtures highlight the United States intentions to restrain China's behavior as it is perceived as the biggest threat to the world order and wants to rewrite the rules of business and drive the United States out of the Asia-Pacific region (Burns & Lee, 2020). Therefore, while contradictory assessments and responses have been appearing from time to time, it is widely agreed that the *pivot* strategy created heightened tension in the region due to the perceived containment of China (Ford, 2017). The Trump administration has issued a comprehensive defense policy document termed the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report', amplifying the future intentions towards the Asia-Pacific region. The strategy builds on continuing obligations to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region, where all nations are safe and able to follow economic development paths with recognized international norms, rules, and fair competition.

The United States believes that under the communist party, China pursues the path to reorder the region to its benefit by leveraging military modernization plans, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations (Shanahan, 2019). The report also highlights that the Indo-Pacific region today is challenged by a more assured and emphatic China that is prepared to admit friction in the quest for a more expansive set of economic, security, and political interests (Shanahan, 2019). The Indo-Pacific strategy document formalizes the United States future economic and military engagement in this region to safeguard national security interests and restrain China from assertive posturing. Therefore, the Hegemonic Stability theory validates the accepted dominance of hegemonic power; the United States, which through *pivot* to Asia, aims to dictate the rules of the game by using tools like; economic incentives, diplomacy, coercion, and persuasion. Another contention of this theory highlights that status quo power offers an incredible volume of public goods, manifested by the economic incentives of the *pivot*. Additionally, when the growth in accumulative power reaches a level where rising power is in apposition to challenge the status quo power, there are strong possibilities that a conflict may occur, as rising power has acquired the requisite means to challenge under extensive pressure applied by the dominant power. This is evident from several policy statements of the United States' officials and matching responses from the Chinese officials.

However, despite apparent stability and cooperative engagement among the countries of the Indo-Pacific region, the turf war for enhancing the sphere of influence between the United States and China has generated the cold war mentality of zero-sum and negative competition by the United States and its allies. United States 'National Security Strategy' (NSS, 2018) signifies major power competition with China and Russia as new paradigms of United States national security concerns and priorities, which has created anxiety among the analysts of international security and China alike. While the situation has been handled pragmatically, the possibility of miscalculations and unprovoked reactions remains. The United States, on the behest of alliance obligations, is embarked upon creating a network of alliances aimed at containing China and giving flip to regional hot spot issues (Ishaque et al., 2017b). Such a calibrated instability in the name of creating a free and transparent Indo-Pacific region, maintaining freedom of navigation, providing explicit support to secessionist tendencies against the core national interests of China (Ishaque et al.,

2017a), and launching an unprovoked trade war are some of the concerns causing instability in the region. Resultantly, the United States is attempting to retain and maintain its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region through enhanced military deployment, economic incentives for public goods, and coercive military maneuvers (hence, generating the perception of containment by China).

The BRI and China's Expanding Influence

The peaceful rise of China is momentous in the contemporary international order. China has also transformed the traditional pattern of interstate relations by professing catchphrases like: "shared destiny, common development, and peaceful coexistence." China has reiterated that peaceful development is not China-specific but for the world at large and in service to humanity. China expounds development of the countries and regions through win-win cooperation. President Xi Jinping underlined to steadfastly follow the path of peaceful development and pursue a win-win strategy of opening up. President Xi also highlighted that Chinese development is not confined to the benefit of China only but also caters to the world (Xiaosi, 2013). To understand the dream of collective opulence of humankind, the Chinese BRI is a demonstration of regional connectivity and greater economic integration that had prevailed in the past in the form of the ancient silk route and boosted the succor of relevant countries, regions and the world at large.

President Xi Jinping announced the strategic vision of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' in September 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan. Speaking on the theme of 'Promote people-to-people friendship and creating a better future' at Nazarbayev University, he specified the cardinal aspects of building the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' for enhancing regional connectivity, people-to-people contact and exchange of civilizations for the eventual benefit of mankind (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 2013). President Xi capitalized on the momentum generated in his Central Asian trip by proposing the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' (Jiao & Yunbi, 2013) during his speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013. He also highlighted that China-ASEAN relations are monumental in contemporary regional order and accentuated the shared destiny of China and ASEAN countries. The original vision of 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' gradually transformed into 'One Belt One Road' and later to BRI (Stanzel, 2017) to give it a more inclusive outlook containing comprehensive networks of roads, corridors, infrastructure development, special economic zones, ports, shipping hubs to name a few.

The BRI embraces two components. The land-built road is called the 'New Silk Road', and the sea-based feature is referred to as the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. Additionally, six Economic Corridors (Derudder et al., 2018, p. 1) are also planned to enhance connectivity with relevant countries and regions. The government of China allocated US\$ 40 billion and another US\$ 100 billion to Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for Silk Road Fund. Since the unveiling of the BRI, intense debates have surfaced on the possible motives and future orientations of China.

The lack of a comprehensive road map in 2014 and 2015 generated suspicions about how China would undertake such an ambitious plan and how such a massive investment would remain confined to the noble intent of serving humanity, as it is against historical precedents. Recognizing the information vacuum, the Chinese government issued policy guidelines titled 'On Actions for Jointly Building Belt and Road' (National Development and Reforms Commission, 2015). While the Chinese

official framework is understandable, the debate on the possible motives of China's peaceful rise and what sort of international order China professes occupies the discussion and analyses across the globe. Western media, scholars, and think tanks perceive the BRI as a disquieting extension of China's expanding influence with geopolitical motives (Kuo & Tang, 2015, p. 1). The United States also shares the apprehension of some Asian countries that the BRI might be a Trojan horse for regional progress and military modernization plans for China (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). President Trump has also voiced apprehensions about Chinese motivations regarding the BRI and has branded it as a tool of geopolitics for enhancing spheres of influence, but has remained deficient in offering an alternative economic vision. The Chinese officials are reasonably sensitive to deleterious interpretations of the Belt and Road, especially the geopolitical aspects like Marshal Plan. Therefore, they have been trying to mitigate the negative perceptions attached to this project during their regular interactions.

The Chinese government's mission to European Union has formalized specific answers to the above apprehensions by stating that BRI has no geopolitical ambitions as based on ethics of equivalent consultation, joint collaborations, and shared benefits by respecting the sovereign choice and inclinations of other countries, ensuring openness, transparency and aligning the project with the developmental schemes of other members. The cardinal aspects of the BRI comprise economic collaboration, people-to-people exchanges, enhanced trade, improved connectivity, and infrastructure development (Mission of People's Republic of China to European Union, 2015).

The Chinese strategic planners assume that BRI is an important milestone for leading China to a strategic opportunity that is essential for China's development *itself*. However, the journey looks bumpy and full of hurdles as BRI has generated anxiety about China's hidden motives. The transparency, therefore, warranted publishing full details to undo misapprehensions. The possible reasons can be; (i) ambiguity of BRI's goals and approaches due to the non-availability of an implementation framework; (ii) the nature of BRI when viewed in the context of a more assertive role of China in safeguarding core national interests and (iii) rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and its possible misinterpretations (Zhang, 2018, p. 329). To undo such apprehensions, President Xi Jinping advocates building a harmonious world through win-win cooperation and creating a community with shared destiny and a prosperous future.

Therefore, Chinese officials believe that BRI is means of stimulating common development through consultations and joint efforts. It is an important part of China's global strategy intended to maintain a favorable environment for China's enduring development, which is critical to realizing its strategic goal to continue developing and attain the status of great power consistent with the norms of international order and aspirations of the Chinese nation. Through the BRI, China has professed common development and complex interdependence to create shared destiny and a shared future through win-win cooperation. However, it is essential to note that such a model already exists in the existing regional and international systems (Keohane, 2005, p. 135), validated by *hegemonic stability theory*. Another postulate of the mentioned pronounces novel foreign policy for maintaining a dominant role, which BRI fulfills for China and also an attempt by the Chinese government to collaborate with the willing countries and struggling economies, thereby enhancing the sphere of influence. It is argued that the interstate relations in

today's global order may not necessarily be regulated by anarchy but most probably centered on need satisfaction (Danilovic & Clare, 2007). Therefore, BRI covers more than 60 countries traversing all the continents, and a dedicated financial support mechanism through the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIB) not only radiates the soft power of China but also helps in breaking the perceived containment by the United States in the Indo-Pacific region by global rebalancing through economic collaborations and investments.

Reshaping and Rebalancing the International System

The analyses of *pivot* and BRI under the framework of hegemonic stability lead us to conclude that both the United States and China are asserting dominance in their own perspectives in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States recognizes that the period of hegemony and supremacy is gradually fading due to China's increased economic and strategic challenges. The United States does not want to concede to China and simultaneously reassure its partners of unstinted commitment to alliance obligations in the face of Chinese hegemonic ambitions. The regional countries have strong military and economic relations with the United States, but at the same time, China has also successfully increased economic interdependence due to its geo-strategic location. The economic interdependence matrix is creating more dilemmas for the United States policy planners as the regional countries also want to continue their economic engagement with China avoiding conflict or negative competition.

The *pivot* to Asia has overwhelming military dimensions aimed at creating strong deterrence against China from asserting in disputed regions of the North and South China Sea and maintaining hard-earned freedom of navigation. However, the BRI has emerged as a vision of connectivity across the continents, covering land and sea transportation with mega investment estimated to be over US\$ 4-8 trillion connecting China to Europe, Africa, and the more expansive Asia-Pacific region with enormous potential of extending spheres of influence. Therefore, the *pivot* provided leverage to the United States to contain China, while BRI provided means to China as an alternative to global rebalancing against the *pivot* to Asia (Chen, 2014). The Chinese government has also attempted to capitalize on its civilizational roots of the ancient Silk Road and replicate BRI on the same scheme, manifesting China's grand strategy indicating great power status, which is contributing to common development and global governance through win-win cooperation, avoiding Thucydides' trap and competition with the United States. China and the United States are concerned about each other's intentions, hence, trying to hedge against each other for domination through rebalance and counterbalance strategies. The United States policymakers strongly feel that China is a potential 'threat' that will discount the United States from the region (Lungu, n.d., p. 1). Nevertheless, it can be argued that both status-quo and rising powers are asserting to maintain hegemony.

The success or failure of BRI is too early to predict; however, it contains consequences as the United States has a range of interests at stake, from immediate commercial opportunities to ensuring the viability and stability of global systems in the long term (Hillman, 2018). The BRI will elevate China as an economic and political power in the world which may result in outlasting the United States from the Indo-Pacific region (Zongyi, 2019, p. 65). Such a paradigm shift will reduce the United States influence against China, which is an improbable proposition and unacceptable to the United States in times to come. Therefore, the Trump

Administration has announced a multipronged Indo-Pacific strategy, and President Biden's NSS will revoke the Chinese influence and aspirations of global hegemony.

Conclusion

In the evolving global and regional order, Indo-Pacific has emerged as the epicenter of great power competition due to competing strategies unveiled by the United States and China. The *pivot* to Asia was an attempt by the United States to realign strategic priorities back to Asia-Pacific after two decades of over-commitment in Afghanistan and the broader Middle East. Despite an all-encompassing vision comprising economic and military components, the perception of the *pivot* is that the United States attempts to increase influence in the region to counterbalance China. The inherent interpretation of such a policy shift was containment of China and putting some caution on the assertive Chinese role in the disputed islands and issues of freedom of navigation. The strategic effects envisaged by such policy were to change the behavior of China and dissuade the position of a 'competitor'. The subsequent policies like the 'United States Defense Strategic Guidance' and 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' vindicate the above apprehensions of China's containment.

Similarly, BRI radiates the perception of hegemon in making as China seeks to expand their influence in the region. China's assertive movements were demonstrated by challenging the United States on freedom of navigation and sovereignty issues of disputed islands. China's ambitions for regional influence are also manifested through the multilateralism approach, which the country has prudently managed. China and the United States are vying to assert their influence with varying degrees of manifestation. Therefore, it has become dialectic of opposing *wills*, where both hegemonies claim positions. The contemporary era is characterized by economic globalization and complex interdependence; therefore, cooperative engagement and mutual trust are crucial to moving forward for the eventual benefit of countries, regions, and the world at large. China and the United States have to work together to ensure the stability of the international system through trust-building and economic engagement.

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