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Assessing the Ability of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Strategy: To Maintain the Status-Quo in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans

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ABSTRACT

China's rising power and challenge to the status quo of the rules-based international order had led several nations, primarily Japan and the United States, to pursue a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. However, such a strategy was predicated upon multilateral support. Was such a strategy viable? The research focuses on this fundamental question, applying various IR theories to the strategy. This paper hypothesizes that if multilateralism was successful, the FOIP strategy was viable. The significance of this research is that it may suggest necessary changes to the existing FOIP strategy or may validate its trajectory. Either way, the research provides both academic and policy significance.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, multilateralism, international order, middle powers, balancing theories.

INTRODUCTION

The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy was Japan's brainchild. In 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, for the first time, initiated the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy to connect the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, while addressing the parliament of India (Abe, 2007). In the speech, Abe also proposed for countries like India and Japan to form open and transparent Indo-Pacific maritime zones as part of the broader Asia.

Soon after, in 2012, Prime Minister Abe published an article advocating the formation of a security relationship between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia to create what he called the “Democratic Security Diamond” (DSD)—a functional security framework in the Indo-Pacific (Abe, 2012). According to him, the main objective of DSD was to repel Chinese “coercion” from the region by improving maritime networks among the member countries in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. In a joint communique in 2015, Prime Minister Abe along with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi committed to establishing an open, stable, and rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific (MOFA, 2015). Both leaders agreed to secure and develop the Indo-Pacific region following the

principles of democracy, rule of law, sovereignty, and national integrity.

BACKGROUND

The FOIP strategy can be considered a huge undertaking for Japan. Japan, which usually takes a back seat to the United States in strategy formulation and implementation, drove the US into the concept. In fact, after Japan used the term Indo-Pacific, the United States adopted the name as well. The reason behind the adoption was that even though the United States had the strategy of the Asian Pivot, it was still focused on the middle east, especially Iraq and Afghanistan.

As the hegemon's competitors grow more powerful, their dissatisfaction with the status quo, ambitions, and demands for prestige and influence grow as well. (Schweller & Pu, 2011 p.42) China had also been seen challenging the rule-based international order that existed in the world through activities like building islands (Chellaney, 2018), and initiatives like the “Belt and Road” initiative (BRI) wherein “debt diplomacy” was wielded to try to influence these country's affairs. With the increase of the Middle Kingdom's power and growing

regional ambitions in Asia, countries like the United States, Japan, Australia, and India were continuously developing huge concerns regarding this issue. Such concerns led Japan to the emergence of the concept of the “Indo-pacific” construct, whose aim was to hedge against the assertive authoritarian Chinese-centric regional order (Pan, 2014).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

China’s BRI and maritime silk road was overwhelming the United States government’s original conception of the “Asia Pivot”. Japan also saw rising China as a potential threat to the rules-based international order and proposed the DSD and FOIP strategy as an alternative to China’s BRI strategy. Therefore, we can see that competition in the Indo-pacific rose and that the stakeholder nations were trying to manage and contain this competition. Yet, despite the significance of the issue in the contemporary world, there is a dearth of scholarship on this issue.

We know that the strategy had been developed but we do not know why the strategy really did not work in the real world. Only formal academic scholarship will be able to answer the possible paths the strategy took and the outcomes of this strategy. Therefore, because of the complexity of the situation, this research seeks to provide clarity, especially with regard to multilateralism. The outcome of this study will provide insights into whether multilateralism is effective when confronted with a rising power that has nuanced and revisionist designs.

RESEARCH QUESTION/ HYPOTHESIS

RQ. Can a FOIP strategy that required “multilateralism” work?

Hypothesis 1

Based on three balancing theories, we can say that if multilateralism was successful, the FOIP strategy was viable because it presented a viable alternative to China to counterbalance the potential revisionist power.

Hypothesis 2

Based on the liberal interdependence theories, we can say that if multilateralism was successful, the FOIP strategy was viable because it presented a measure where the countries could benefit from relationships from the existing rule-based international order.

Hypothesis 3

Based on the middle power theories, we can say that if multilateralism was successful, the FOIP strategy was

viable because the middle powers countries like India, Australia, and Japan were the ones who supported the rule-based international order that already exists.

METHODOLOGY

The research techniques for this paper are descriptive, observational, and analytical in nature. Numerous research reports by various NGOs and INGOs, government organizations, civil societies, and independent agencies are consulted for secondary information. The author has used archives and open-source materials available. A close examination of various factors imperative for a better understanding of the relationship between these states was conducted.

The study applies IR theory from the lens of the balancing theories as proposed by Waltz, Morgenthau, Walt, Schweller, and others. Why this strategy? Why may it or may it not work? How do we measure the success of such a strategy? This research focuses on these questions to generate an academic understanding of critical foreign policy. The outcome of this research is based on the answers derived from the analysis through these theories. Subsequently, these theories are used and analyzed for the justification and relevance of the methodological approach to this research. The reasons and compatibilities of these theories chosen are also justified.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Academic Significance

This paper is significant because it sets up a situation for a case study to determine whether existing IR theories are validated. This research offers a comparative examination of existing IR theories and focuses on the FOIP strategy as representative of the struggle between major powers vis-à-vis the rules-based international order. It also examines the utility of multilateralism and the potential depth of connectivity between Asia and Africa through a comprehensive regional strategy.

Policy Significance

The major focus of this research paper is to understand the concept and mechanism of the FOIP strategy. This paper also aims to tell us whether the FOIP strategy was a viable strategy or if changes were necessary. The major advantage of this study is that the United States and Japan’s policies were very transparent, therefore a significant amount of the resources related to the

operation of this strategy were accessible. We can understand this strategy and how the member countries operated. This paper applies academic theory to determine whether this strategy was firmly rooted in something that was going to work and provides a conclusion based on the outcome.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Cannon, the FOIP strategy combined the strategic interest of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia (Cannon, 2018). He stated that the major goal of this strategy was to preserve the rule-based international order by enhancing security relationships with member countries and through partner capacity building. Even though Japan was the one who first initiated the concept of the Indo-Pacific strategy to contend with China and its growing influence, McDevitt explains in his report, *the long littoral project: Summary report*, that the US later adopted the “Indo-Pacific” strategy as the conceptual framework to maximize US’s influence and to provide its allies with commercial and diplomatic maritime advantages in the Asia-Pacific region (McDevitt, 2013). Similarly, Hong also states that the major goal of this construct for the US was to facilitate the US as well as its regional allies for smooth operations of their alliance network and to make it much stronger than before (Hong, 2018). McDevitt further stated that “Indo-Pacific” became the concept of the new political space interconnecting the Pacific and Indian oceans, which came into consideration after the emergence of India as a rising economy in Asia and as a strategic partner to the US (McDevitt, 2013). Therefore, in today’s world, the concept of “Indo-Pacific” has been touted by many authors as one of the significant geopolitical realities.

In 2011, the then secretary of state of the US, Hillary Clinton in her article *America’s Pacific century* stated: “one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment-diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise-in the Asia-Pacific region” (Clinton, 2011). Here, she referred to Indo-pacific as Asia-Pacific focusing on its importance in the future as it boasts major actors of the world economy like India, China, and Indonesia as well as the major allies of the US like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and so on. She also stated that it was the responsibility of the USA to safeguard its own interest and the interests of its allies with the development of the idea of the Asia-Pacific region.

Pan states that the framework for the “Indo-Pacific” was not a natural geographical space and may trigger negative consequences if implemented in international practice. He also states that in recent times the significant purpose of this construct is yet to be identified (Pan, 2014). This seems to be true as we can understand the “Indo-Pacific” came up with chronic “geopolitical anxieties” concerning the rise of China. It may ignite a regional backdrop attempting to maintain Asian regional order to contain the rise of China and minimize the “China threat”.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Balancing theories as proposed by Morgenthau, Schweller, Walt, and Waltz

According to the structural balance-of-power theory, the world consists of an anarchic and uncertain system that induces the group of smaller states to follow mutual balancing behavior against the most powerful state. In this model, Waltz in his Theory of International Politics has attempted to describe balancing, as the alliance of the weaker group of countries, and bandwagoning, as joining the powerful nation, to serve as two opposite behaviors. (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 126.) On the contrary, Walt suggests that the alliances among the states are primarily formed to balance against the most threatening state rather than the most powerful one. He further explains that these alliances are formed not only to balance against the most threatening power but also based on their perception which explicitly acknowledges the various other external threats affected by geographic location and intentions from it.

Similarly, Walt states that bandwagoning is the submissive act of the vulnerable nation to play a subordinate role and accept asymmetrical exchange and exploitation from the rising power to escape illegitimate pressure. (Walt, 1985) On the contrary, he states that Détente is mutual understanding based on equal exchanges and concessions with mutual recognition of each other’s legitimate interests. Unlike bandwagoning, this mutual understanding among these states collapses whenever one attempts to exploit the other.

Based on his examination, Walt concludes that, instead of bandwagoning, the country will show the propensity to balancing behavior. The states are also reluctant to defect from their alliances and join the threatening power. They will instead forge and form new reliable alliances and sought new defensive arrangements against the most threatening power even after their current alliance may

seem unreliable and indifferent to their interest. But in the case of complete withdrawal from the powerful allies or following isolationist policies, the vulnerable states may feel isolated, and to assure their existence and secure their interest, they may seek to bandwagon with the threatening state in either economic and military realms or both.

On the other hand, Schweller states that the country chooses to adopt balancing behavior or bandwagon based on their subjective desire for self-preservation or self-extension, respectively. As opposed to the balance-of-threat theory, he further explains that the country chooses to bandwagon not because of the external threat but because of its desire to gain values coveted. Therefore, the presence of external threats essential to ignite the balancing behavior may not be necessary for the country to adopt bandwagoning behavior. Sometimes, activities like military build-up can be perceived as an increase in the power of the country and can also motivate the untargeted state to bandwagon with the powerful country with the aim to repel other threats.

Schweller also states that, like the other contemporary realists, the balance of threat theory also views the world through the lens of status quo states who are satisfied with the system and their present values. (Schweller 1994, 85) These theorists view the world with all the countries consisting of similar status-quo orientations, where war and conflict occur only due to miscalculation and uncertainty. To this Schweller states that there are dissatisfied states in the system as well who have an unstable system and lack internal strength and capabilities. These dissatisfied countries are motivated by profit rather than security, they may show their reluctance towards the declining Superpower and gravitate towards the ascending revisionist state. (Schweller 1994, 88).

He further elaborates that the countries tend to form alliances among themselves driven by both opportunities and threats. Even though Walt states that the primary objective of the bandwagoning states is to share the spoil of victory, Schweller criticizes the statement stating that the balance-of-threat theory is misleading and seems to underestimate the alliances among the countries which are purely motivated only by the aim of gaining values coveted.

As a challenge to Walt's theory, Schweller points out Kaufment's statement regarding the behavior of democratic countries which consists of delayed

responses to the balancing process diluting its overall effectiveness as they are imposed by various domestic constraints. (Schweller 1994, 76) Also, with respect to the third-world countries, he points out Larson and David who have suggested that the elites of these countries, instead of adopting balancing behavior, tend to bandwagon with the hostile power with the aim of overwhelming the more dangerous prominent threats from domestic revolutionaries and foreign challengers. (Schweller 1994, 77)

Similarly, the primary concern for the Superpower status-quo country should be to deter the powerful revisionist state from aggression and contain them which will enable it to avoid fighting them in the future. These responsibilities, as Schweller explains, are performed by the powerful status-quo country to maintain its position and prestige in the system. But, if the superpower thinks that the collective action of these coalitions can fulfill this responsibility by achieving deterrence without their interference, then the country can pass this responsibility to other smaller allies and stay on the sideline. (Schweller 1994, 101) This way the superpower tends to avoid the high cost of balancing against the powerful predatory states.

JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES

Among the member countries, the US without any doubt was the strongest member with its economic and military capabilities. *"The politics of austerity at home and pressing realities abroad necessitate a new U.S. foreign policy."* (Mylonas & Yorulmazlar. 2012) The US is the military powerhouse among the member countries followed by the Indian military. Later, despite the controversy over its constitution, Japan's Maritime Self-defense force also participated in Malabar 2018 off the coast of Guam along with the Indian and the US Navy. ([USINDOPACOM. 2018](#)) Schweller states that sometimes the revisionist power can be bigger than the opposing status-quo coalition. In this situation, the revisionist power's primary objective is to disrupt the formation of this opposing coalition where it does not require greater assistance from its allies. Instead, the revisionist state simply allows the subordinate states to gain unearned spoil from the victory which further prevents them from joining the weaker status-quo coalition. Schweller's epithet for this type of bandwagoning is the form of a predatory buck-passing process where countries whose aim is to free-ride on the efforts of others are lured from these kinds of settings.

This statement has significant implications in this case because the alliance between these member countries was bilateral cooperation with the US being the hub for others. Therefore, to turn it into more like NATO-type cooperation, the US focused to achieve a gradual transformation from a bilateral to a multilateral structure. This can be perceived as the most practical reason for the US as it did not want to bear the sole burden while other members were happy buck-passing it to the US. As such, Japan was dependent on other countries especially the US for safe passage before but with this Japan started increasing its own security contribution for the safe passage of the vessels in the region.

According to Walt, bandwagoning is a submissive behavior of the vulnerable states accepting asymmetrical exchanges and exploitation from their most imminent threat. These states demonstrate a willingness to play a subordinate role between them to escape the illegitimate pressure from the dominant state. (Walt. 1985) Accordingly, the US was the sole driver of this strategy with its member countries onboard. But the influence of the US in the region was eclipsed by the influence of rising China. There were prevailing doubts about American leadership regarding the strategy, and rising concerns about the American leadership ideation among the other member countries, especially Australia as it was asymmetrically interdependent to China economically and India which was in close proximity with China and lacked sufficient capabilities to defend itself militarily.

ROLE OF MIDDLE POWERS

Australia

As Hamilton states in his book *Silent Invasion*, China attempted to infiltrate important institutions in Australia to disrupt the relationship between the USA and Australia. For this purpose, he stated that China was using its money for these institutions' politicians, and civil society to serve Chinese interests (Hamilton, 2018). Although having close economic ties with China, allegations of the Chinese government for interference in Australian political affairs, Australia passed legislation strengthening foreign espionage offenses, in June 2018 (Doran, 2018). The Major objective of this legislation was to prevent external influences in Australian political affairs either in the election or in other democratic processes.

Australia also bores immense economic pressure as they have directly interconnected economic ties with China where Australia was asymmetrically interdependent regarding the bilateral interests with China. This was the result of the range of FTA-related trade opportunities within the region which remained largely unexplored by the Australian government. Therefore, Australia needed to double down on other relationships, grow links to South Asia, and diversify its interest in Indo-pacific. Similarly, Australia was also concerned regarding its decreasing influence in the southwest pacific region because of increasing Chinese influence. To tackle this situation, Australia hiked its fund for these pacific nations offering \$1.45 billion in grants and loans (BBC, 2018). This step by the Australian government can be perceived as a step to reassert the Australian position in the region to counter the increasing influence of China. With this increasing Chinese economic influence and the USA's commitment to rebalance the region, the Australian government assuming that there will be the rise of new strategic power relationships in the future acknowledged itself as part of the "Indo-pacific arc" in its Defense White Paper. The Australian government also stated that their security environment will be dependent upon the development of the "Indo-Pacific" (Department of Defense, 2013).

India

Not only the US and Japan, but every member country had its own strategy and expectation for "Indo-Pacific". In the case of India, with this strategy implemented doubts loomed as it may increase the presence of the US military in the Indian Ocean. Even though India and the US shared a strategic partnership, India perceived this as a threat as it jeopardizes its role as a regional power. This will also go against India's diplomatic principle of strategic autonomy in the region where it will have to address demands proposed by the US and other members even regarding containment and sanctions on countries like China, Iran, and so on (Xingchun, 2018). Therefore, due to this reason, Prime minister Modi denounced this strategy with the aim to enhance US-led unipolarity in the Shangri La Dialogue addressing "Indo-Pacific" as a natural region that is free for all nations where India will not participate in the domination and containment of any other nation (Modi, 2018).

From the Indian perspective, Chinese projects like *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)* and Hambantota,

China's development assistance to other south Asian countries raised questions, particularly regarding the sustainability of this development assistance. The failure of these projects disabled the government to pay the debt, therefore, the Sri Lankan government had to lease the port to a Chinese firm to pay the debt for the next 99 years as a debt-for-equity swap. This whole process was constantly touted as the Chinese strategy of "Debt-trap diplomacy" to secure its access to the Indian Ocean and was considered to spill over with the other southeast Asian nations. The *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)* was transparent in its approach to its projects, while similar transparency where BRI is concerned was not maintained. Due to this reason, although being a member of the *AIIB*, India did not support the BRI.

Walt states that the country will choose to bandwagon or follow détente with its adversaries according to its subjective perception of them as not being an imminent threat (Walt, 1985). As such, if the state perceives its adversary adhering to its interest and showing less aggressive behavior or the state itself has accumulated more capabilities than its adversary, the state may desire détente. On the contrary, if the enemy state exhibits increasingly bellicose behavior threatening its interest, then the state will choose to the bandwagon. India following this strategy, especially with military commitments, which China has already denounced and perceives as the grouping to dominate it, may have exacerbated the conflict in the continent where it would have been faced with different challenges instead of developmental challenges. This fear of India instilled a lingering sense of non-alignment which was essential to be re-examined and changed to become a fully committed member of the strategy. As India was a developing economy, India also sought a stable Asia for this development purpose.

South Korea

Participation of South Korea in the US-led THAAD defense program deployed in the Korean peninsula against China's strong opposition led to Chinese economic coercion which disrupted the economy of South Korea. This event clearly showed the economic vulnerability and dependence of South Korea on China. (Lim & Ferguson, 2019) Therefore, initially, South Korea displayed its support for this strategy in this region as was seeking multilateral initiatives which had economic orientations.

Despite having this economic interest, eschewing antagonizing China, it refrained from signing up for this strategy (Prado, 2019).

China also showed its concerns regarding this alliance as it perceived the strategy was formulated against China itself in Asia. China also issued formal diplomatic protests regarding the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue held in 2012. It was apparent that China also wanted to gain control over the sea routes as most of its economy relies upon this medium of transportation, especially in the Indian Ocean. China's fear of what it calls the "Malacca Dilemma" persists in the Malacca Strait of the Indian Ocean which had a significant role in the economy of China as it provides transit routes for China's energy imports (Storey, 2006). Therefore, it was obvious that serious competition will arise for the control of the sea routes in the future among these superpowers. Due to this reason and with the ongoing tension between South Korea and Japan regarding wartime history, the South Korean government did not show its desire to become a member of the QUAD.

CHINA'S SOFT-POWER STRATEGY

While defining revisionist states, Schweller writes, "They want to increase, not just preserve, their core values and to improve their position in the system. These goals cannot be achieved simply by ensuring that everyone else does not gain relative to them. They must gain relative to others." (Schweller 1994, 87) These bandwagoning states are most often coerced by the ascending revisionist state with the hope of future rewards after the victory. Therefore, the initial success and victories achieved by these revisionist power generate positive feedback that lures the other states to voluntarily bandwagon with the victor which can also be understood as the result of the domino effect. (Schweller 1994, 92) Similarly, with the rise in its economy, the Chinese government, understanding the importance of its neighbors, also attempted to use soft power diplomacy to fulfill its geopolitical ambitions. With this strategy, China was trying to increase its influence and its prestige in the international arena (Deng, 2018). As a result of this strategy, the attempts to amend the strained relationship with its neighbors were seen to increase dramatically.

Jervis in his article *Cooperation under the security dilemma* states that nations will attempt to seek cooperation with other nations if it sees less gain from exploiting other nations and perceives fears of being

exploited by other nations (Jervis, 1978). This statement holds true in China's case because as compared to Jervis's statement, we can understand that China was also perceiving a "Prisoner's dilemma" where it has the fear of being exploited by the alliances of democracies around it producing hurdles for its economic development. Therefore, to counter this dilemma, China was seen improving ties and relationships with its neighbors which deteriorated in the past either to territorial disputes, sea routes disputes, or historical sentiments, especially with ASEAN countries. China, which was considered an irredentist, was approaching its neighbor with a benign approach. With this increase in friendlier relationships with other countries followed by the increase in the influence of China, the relationship between China and the US deteriorated.

MULTILATERALISM AS THE FOIP STRATEGY

FOIP was the strategy that was to be built by one or two different countries and they needed to be followed by other countries multilaterally. For FOIP to work, it required multilateralism as neither Japan nor the United States or any other country alone was able to execute this strategy unilaterally. They needed to have committed partner countries for successful functioning.

In its initial stage, FOIP was a fledgling strategy that required multilateral support from all its member countries to overcome their foibles. Also, most importantly just setting up the multilateral institution was simply not enough without fully committed partners and streamlined processes. While implementing FOIP, there were similar crossovers and duplication of the effort among these member countries making their effort redundant. The region was dumped with a plethora of similar inefficient and inadequate networks of alliances and frameworks i.e., Australia had the "Pacific Step-Up", India had the "Act East" neighborhood first policy, Japan's "FOIP Strategy" and the US had its own strategies and system of alliances in the region. The failure of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) collective defense in Southeast Asia can be taken as an example of such a similar take. Therefore, for meaningful operations of these multilateral institutions, the member countries were not able to better coordinate their efforts and streamline the processes. By streamlining their strategies, they could have reduced the amounts of costs and avoided redundancy to institutionalize single meaningful and transparent operations multilaterally.

Looking through the substantive interdependence, the current geo-political competition differs from the past as the interdependence of each other further complicates the rivalry among nations. The objective of the strategy was the soft containment of the rise of China through strategic alliances with the surrounding democracies. These small powers who were dependent on Chinese economic incentives were wary of the situation. Their reliance on distantly located US would be to divert their own self-interest and growth to establish coherent rule-based order. Due to this vulnerability, they responded to this strategy rather ambiguously and with increasing doubts. The Ineffectiveness of this strategy can also be contributed to the growing pressures on the small powers who did not want to be caught in the containment strategies and chose to side with the rising economy instead of the existing hegemon, especially with the US's inconsistent diplomacy and trust issues and Japan as a significant but shrinking player in the growing global economy with pacifist nature of the constitution.

CONCLUSION

Japan can be considered the main protagonist of the FOIP strategy. FOIP was the strategy that was to be built by one or two different countries and needed to be followed by others. Therefore, for it to work, it required multilateralism as neither Japan nor the United States or any other country alone was capable to execute this strategy on their own. Similarly, for this strategy to be viable strategy, both the US and Japan's geo-political interests were required to coincide with their economic and military commitment in the western part of the Pacific. This way the US commitment to balance the security of this region would have had assured and more nations to have joined the strategy as it required partner countries for successful functioning. As such, the ineffectiveness of multilateral institutions like FOIP was not the strength of China itself but the failure of the member countries to come up with better alternatives.

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