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CHINA'S BRI PROJECT VERSUS AMERICA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The research aims to discuss and analyze the major motives and the strategic approaches of China's BRI and US Indo-Pacific strategy in their geo-politics of contestation to shape the global world order and regional dynamics. The BRI's central focus is on investment projects, economic cooperation, integration and connectivity among major continents across Asia, Africa and Europe whereas the counter strategy of US is Indo-Pacific strategy that focuses on free and open Indo-Pacific region in the form of formation of multiple anti-China alliances of Quad, AUKUS and ANZUS countering China's growing assertive dominance. A comparative analysis of both geo-political policies particularly in Southeast Asia will provide insight into power dynamics, formation of alliances and being responsive towards global challenges.

Keywords: *China, BRI, Indo-Pacific, America, Alliances.*

China's BRI and Indo-Pacific strategy

China's Belt and Road Initiative is a colossal global development strategy that aims to develop regional connectivity and economic integration. The strategy developed by President Xi Jinping, reflects on the development of infrastructure and broadens the horizon of China's influence across Africa, Europe, Middle East and other parts of the world (Smith, 2020). The vital objectives of BRI are amalgamation of economic growth revolving around enhancement of trade routes, facilitating new markets for Chinese goods and to secure the energy supplies and to create trade corridors, the BRI also focuses on upgrading infrastructure such as

energy pipelines, railways, roads and to enhance regional and international connectivity with the states that lie under the domain of BRI. The central agenda of China is not only to develop economic corridors rather raise diplomatic influence fostering political will and security strategic alliances.

The vitality of BRI could not be denied in terms of regional impact as it has developed significant inroads across Asia, particularly in South and South East Asia. Projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) developing connectivity of China towards Arabian Sea and South East Asia including countries like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have become central in terms of significant Chinese investment and increasing their economic dependency on China. The BRI is a multidimensional strategy extending 'Silk Road Economic Belt' across Europe and Africa. Through the BRI, China has positioned itself as a key strategic asset in the international arena, outcompeting traditional western lenders like World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Critics argue that BRI contributes towards 'debt traps' for the periphery countries. Examples like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port being leased to China is a prominent example.

Indo-Pacific region consists of two maritime regions which are Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. These two oceans linked by Malacca Strait. The region comprises of East Asia, South East Asia, Australia and South Asia. It is home to more than half of the world's population, the world's seven largest militaries, nearly two-thirds of the world's economy, naval bases, center of trading water ways, enrich with natural resources and hub of International geopolitics.

Historical background:

Cold War had furnished strategic prominence to Asia Pacific region and US rejected the idea of withdrawal from the region even after the Cold War era. Since then the US remained present in this region and also provided strength to its allies in the region. The George W. Bush Government recognized the regional significance and supported Japan and India as its partners. The Obama administration considered Asia as the priority of US and explored new ways to develop diplomatic and strategic ties in the region. The Trump administration measured the region as center of global politics (Das, 2019). Joe Biden Government recognized the value of Indo-Pacific and determined to focus on every crucial aspect of the region.

US Indo-Pacific Strategy:

There is growing influence of Peoples Republic of China in the both oceans. The key objectives of PRC are economic, political, naval, military and technological advancement to attain the status of most influential, dominant and powerful state of the globe. With the project of “The New Silk Road” also known as “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), China aims to be an emerging power and future super power. It is prime apprehension of the US because rise of China is the upsurge of competitor of present superpower. It poses serious threats and challenges for US dominancy. In response, US introduced Indo-Pacific strategy which is in accumulation with FOIP, QUAD, AUKUS and Island chain strategy (Dixon, 2022).

The major concern of western block is China’s BRI which is seen as a direct potential threat to counter the Indo-Pacific strategy. Indo-Pacific strategy is reflection of security and political alliances whereas BRI emphasizes on economic integration and infrastructure development following covert motives of militarism and regional and global dominance. The BRI could not only be viewed as an economic plan rather it is driven by cluster of multiple Chinese security, diplomatic, financial, geopolitical and ideational interests to mitigate China’s global security threats. In fact, the Chinese spearheading of maritime renaissance at a broader scale includes much of the Indian Ocean Region such as the South China Sea is pivotal to the Chinese security interests as all its seaborne trade across other regions of the world could not be smoothly materialized without it. Major part of world’s trade transverse these maritime waters, this central aspiration of China raises the contesting concerns of regional and extra regional players. Chinese footprints and influence in these maritime spaces raise concern to ignite the already lingering on South China Sea issue and military buildup of China in the contested region.

The BRI could boost economic development in South East Asia shelving of some degree of temporary resolution with respect of maritime disputes but this could give leverage to China in maritime negotiations and could affect navigation in South China Sea for western hemisphere states (Cox, 2018). The expansion of IOR region could precipitate greater threat between resurgent quadrilateral consisting of US, Japan, India and Australia. Quad states are critical about China’s strategic hold in these maritime spaces as Chinese recent activities in Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Djibouti is a clear reflection of an emerging military strategy to curtail western dominance. The aspiration of China to

be a resident military power has been curtailed by change of security policy of US and Japan in lieu of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Under the Donald Trump Presidency, US remarked China as being a 'strategic competitor' as a response to its accelerating BRI plan. Since 2013, BRI has expanded towards 60 countries. Previously, Obama Administration has sought to integrate the China into a global order (Zhang, 2020). However, under Trump's era US has sought to encapsulate "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and strengthening of security and defense alliances with key regional players in Asia Pacific such as Japan, South Korea, India and Australia.

The central component of FOIP strategy was to curtail China's rising influence in Asia Pacific particularly China's assertiveness in South China Sea and its BRI (US state Department, 2017). The US aims to raise investment and promote alternatives to push back China's maritime claims through Freedom of Navigation Operations. With reference to these competing regional interests, Sino-American regional new cold war is evident. The regional states are under competing dichotomy to align with the states propagating Indo-Pacific strategy or to support the BRI initiative. Another logical option to them is to support hedging strategy between US and China by cooperating between them in economic and military engagements.

Belt and Road: Initiative or a Strategy

As per China, One Belt and Road initiative constitute five major principles: mutual respect, no interference, non-aggression, equality and mutual interest (Gion, 2018). The B&R initiative also covers these five areas: Political Coordination, Connect to infrastructure, Advanced Business, Currency support (currency exchange), People exchange, and Cultural diplomacy. If this plan will be practically implemented it will include 60% world's population and GDP of about \$20 trillion. Apparently, a peace plan it is but some scholars identify this plan as a counter strategy to Western globalization. Balance of power between China and US intensifies with China strengthening of its footprints in global politics. China enters 21st century as a major global player claiming its relevance for universal culture and global institutions.

Chinese and American perception:

A peaceful neighborhood in western China is a vital concern for Chinese government. Basic instability hotspots within China are Tibetan and Ughur break way movements advocating separatist movements and influence of Islamic saboteurs through Central

Asia and concerns waging 'color revolutions' in border areas (State Council Information Office, 2015) Strengthening BRI motives in the form of building a strong economy in these conflict prone areas could knit them into regional economy. Safer western region could lead to less strategic distraction and is a pre requisite to develop China's influence across Asia.

Another major challenge is China's energy supplies dependency on Malacca strait maritime route. 'The Malacca Dilemma' another concern for China that its imports will be banned by foreign navies during the political crisis. BRI's potential routes on northern and western side such as CPEC and Sino-Russian gas pipeline could serve as a strategic alternative route to counter Malacca dilemma. The additional Maritime routes could also contribute to development of logistic bases for New People's Liberation Army (Joel, 2018). The ventures of BRI could be seen as a 'march west' strategy. Absence of US as a strategic heavyweight in Eurasia could give leverage to China develops its economic influence without direct confrontation with US.

American Perception

According to US, BRI projects are more construction projects rather than investment ones. They are critical of the fact that these projects may not be able to hire local people. Most money has been allocated through Chinese state-owned enterprises. (SOEs). While many scholars are also of the view that BRI has potential to alter Eurasian landmass, and US should collaborate with China when possible (Hart, 2018). US could lose economic stakes if it completely marginalized the policy.

Through BRI, China is able to secure large energy routes along with Russia and this could lead to larger military presence and a pivot away from the US pressure of rebalancing in Asia. America's concerns over China's strategic and security gains in the region reflect a fundamental assumption that these gains undermine American hegemony and its relative advantage over China (Ratner, 2018). There is a security dilemma that continues to reside in American's perception of Chinese initiatives that its allies could bandwagon with China to secure security ambitions. There is another aspect of development of International institutions to counter US influence such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. This could be a threatening element to set up alternative to current currency system. Over a longer period of time, it could threaten U.S hegemonic power within the sphere of worldwide institutions and global order.

What are Chinese actual motives? Will the motives uphold the values that if will be a contestation strategy between China and India for global economic competition and geo-political rivalry? Under economic dimension, Will China be able to mobilize its huge state apparatus and exert pressure on geo-strategically important partners by placing its quasi-private companies at an unfair advantage over its rivals? Or will it be able to reflect on transparency while bidding for infrastructure projects? There has been wave of ambivalence from American side towards China's outward trade, aid and investment push which was quite evident during the development of Asian Infrastructure Bank. A new Chinese-led and Beijingbased multilateral development institution; AIIB was officially launched in 2015, and has already accepted 57 countries as members, accounting for some two-thirds of the world's economic output in aggregate. With an initial capitalization of \$100 billion (\$30 billion of which comes from China), AIIB is a small institution by the standards of China's own "policy banks."

From the vantage view point, BRI is not being viewed as a threatening strategy rather there is a positive aspect to its development in Eurasia in terms where China could act as a responsible stalk holder to bolster the underdeveloped regions and the clout grows on the global stage. There has been positive merger and developments between US and China on multiple forums such as China-US coordination in terms of global sustainable growth and inclusive development for example the G20 Summit in Hangzhou in 2016, where US and China jointly ratified UN Paris Agreement on Climate Change. This was an ambitious effort from both global powers.

Another major agreement where two nations have collaborated was an agreement taken place in Kigali in 2016, engaging 200 nations to eliminate use of HFC's in refrigerators and air conditioning in year ahead. There have been developments like that but geo-political rivalry in terms of BRI and Quad in Asia-Pacific is another dimension to understand the evolving regional politics in Asia Pacific where narrative varies on both sides leading to cold war in the regional politics of Asia-Pacific. The allure of Chinese investment and infrastructure development under the BRI offers tantalizing prospects for economic growth and development. Yet, it also brings with it a host of geopolitical challenges, including concerns over debt dependency, strategic encroachment, and the erosion of sovereignty (Pulami, 2024).

In the intricate web of International Relations with a complex environment, small states are in hedging position to materialize their national interest. At the heart of geo-political theatre of BRI strategy in Asia-Pacific, small states of South Asia face multitude of challenges and opportunities. BRI aims to promote connectivity across multiple regions of the world whereas US Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to safeguard free and open Indo-Pacific region countering Chinese growing influence and asserting American leadership in the area (Bharti, 2024).

The importance of South Asian states in terms of US-China global rivalry could not be overstated as their geographical location at the crossroads of vital sea routes and their geographical proximity to major powers could not be undermined. The smaller states of South Asia such as Nepal and Bhutan despite of their landlocked nature adds up to their importance due to the fact they are sandwiched between two major powers India and China. In contrast Sri Lanka and Maldives are potentially more important for China as Sri Lanka has a major strategic location in Indian Ocean. In comparison Bangladesh has emerged as a power house despite its economic and political challenges. Through the initiatives like Look East Policy, it has sought to maintain its position as a key player. Therefore, the paradoxes of small state power as identified by scholars such as Katzenstein, Keohane, and Vital are significant in understanding the behavior and experiences of South Asian small states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Yet, Bangladesh's remarkable trajectory offers a glimmer of hope, demonstrating that with strategic vision, economic development, and diplomatic acumen, small states can transcend the constraints of size and emerge as significant players in the international arena.

For South Asian states the impact of BRI has been profound as China engages in infrastructure projects such as CPEC to enhance maritime and land connectivity to other vital regions of the world. In Nepal and Sri Lanka China has invested in major infrastructure projects like construction of the Pokhara International Airport and the Rasuwagadhi-Kerungthe Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City, which have been touted as flagship BRI initiatives in the region (Krishnan, 2022).

China's BRI in South East Asia- opportunities and challenges

Since, Xi-Jing ping's initiative of BRI in South East Asia have taken place in 2013, there have been polarized judgments about the plan in South East Asia. A number of countries view this

initiative as a valuable infrastructure project and a connectivity plan that would connect this region to Eurasian partners. On the other hand critics like US view the plan as being efforts to gain global dominance especially in its neighborhood. As China's foreign policy represents a comprehensive, proactive and complex dimension for the implementation of Beijing's global strategic vision, this study frames the BRI as a landmark initiative whose significance is not limited to economic or diplomatic considerations, being rather all-encompassing (Callahan, 2016).

There are many narratives that predict the BRI development and progression such as Firstly, China's GDP growth has been cooling since second half of 2015 (Zhang & Chen, 2017). Secondly, major economic aim of China is to resolve over capacity strength of China which is increasing debt levels and squeezing corporate profits. The BRI would be a source to internationalize Chinese currency leading to transition from investment based economy to consumer based economy particularly in South East Asia. Thirdly, most important factor is to counter the US initiative of "Pivot to Asia" in 2011, a shift in Washington's foreign policy to counter Chinese ventures in South East Asia (Shambaugh, 2013). Fourthly, China is also concerned about its deteriorating relations with South East Asia neighbors with the occurrence of financial crisis of 2008. Economic relations between China and South East Asian states have rose steadily from 1997 to 2016 through ASEAN-China bilateral economic relations on the rise but political relations have been following ebbs and flows due to Chinese assertive policy in maritime disputes in the South China Sea where nations like Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines have depicted mistrust and security dilemma in their strategic calculation with China. Finally, China has extensive dependency on through which 80 percent of Chinese trade passes and it is vital or China to control Strait of Malacca through BRI to fulfill its geo-political aims and escape from entrapment from "Malacca Dilemma". Under such agendas, China has developed a broader concept of BRI which do not only focus on economic engagement rather for political convergence; President Xi developed 'Community of Shared Destiny' in 2013. During that year, moreover, Premier Li Keqiang "emphasized the need to build the Maritime Silk Road oriented towards ASEAN" within the framework of the China-ASEAN Expo (NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2015). Beijing does not aim to promote comprehensive International cooperation in the region rather is

pursuing an agenda for nurturing win-win situation. Community Shared Destiny can be identified with as integrated and intertwining strategies for consolidation of Chinese influence in South East Asia.

To under this trajectory of Beijing's comprehensive strategy in South East Asia, China the establishment of ASEAN plus 3 with the exclusion of US has been interpreted as a decline of US in South East Asian politics. Despite of South China Sea emerging disputes, China-ASEAN relations have been on the rise to an extent that Frame work Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation was signed to establish free trade area in 2010 covering 6 ASEAN nations and followed by 10 by 2015. Since the signing of FTA, the China's trade with ASEAN have rose from 8 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2018. China has become ASEAN's largest trade partner in 2018 amounting to USD 59.2 billion in 2018 (Menon & Melendez, 2019).

China has also become ASEAN's third largest source of investment by 2018. This relationship is followed by negative aspects also as it claims entire region of South China Sea following bold assertions by China. ASEAN countries have shown various narratives towards BRI which divides them into three sub-groups. The first group makes the poor countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar which are geographically pivotal zones for China and could be a counter route to China's trade ventures having no territorial disputes with China. These countries having weak infrastructure and politically instable regions look up to the China. Some examples of that cooperation include China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and China-Laos Railway Project. The development is followed by immense debt burden and these countries are also facing human rights sanctions from US. In these countries small businesses have not been facilitated by BRI and the political influence over these countries have risen the gap and inequality between rich and poor raising concern about BRI.

Countries in the second group Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam have been cautious about the BRI as due to instable political trajectory with China. The concerns in South China Sea and debt trap diplomacy have raised concerns from these states. One of the issues that has created reservation between China and Thailand is the construction of high-speed rail where Thailand government has raised concerns for high interest rates on the loans that China has offered. Singapore's measured interest in the BRI is likely to continue due to its status of developed country not in need of

incentives for infrastructural development, unlike poorer countries such as Cambodia or Laos. The last group involves Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines which have shown ‘Sino-skepticism’ towards BRI. Philippines have not been able to conduct single BRI agreement with China due to Philippines- China clash in SCS and 2016 arbitration case. Even though China-Indonesia relations have somewhat remained strong but implementation of BRI have faced various hurdles in Indonesia due to permit issues and Indonesia concerns about BRI linked projects employ local workforce. Finally, Malaysia has been a pro-active player to develop BRI but things changed after regime change in Malaysia in 2018 and worsening of economic conditions. Mahathir viewed China as a ‘neo-colonist’ and also cancelled deal of USD 20 billion railway project.

Western-centric alliances to counter BRI

QUAD:

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a group of four states: US, Australia, Japan, and India. These countries started cooperation on the disaster of Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. It is strategic and security dialogue between all four states. It was officially started by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by 2007 other three leaders of the states also welcomed it (A.Smith, 2021). Japan and Australia are close allies of US; India is close Strategic Partner of US that is why all are willing to make group to talk and work against the rise of China. They had started their naval exercise with the tittle of Malabar exercise. It is not a formal alliance; it is a loose group and informal security dialogue but it was lasted for only one year. In 2008, Australia left this group because it wanted to maintain its diplomatic relations with China. Other three members continued their Maritime exercises however in November 2017, QUAD revived again.

Principles of Quad:

The core objectives of Quad are to maintain the region free of any political and military influence and power means it tries to minimization the influence of China. Quad emphases on Freedom of sea routes, maintenance of rule based global order and, global secure trade system. Quad also wants to provide loans and economic aid to the regional actors to restraint the Chinese economic reliance of the regional states.

In ASEAN summit 2017, allfour members were willing to Revive QUAD to curb the growing influence of China diplomatically and strategically and especially focus on tension of South China Sea.

Quad is considered as 'Asian NATO' because it is a military alliance.

It arranges military and naval exercises in Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean to counter China. Quad's concentration is not only on Security concerns but also works on diplomatic, health and economic cooperation (Ulrich Jochheim, 2023). It also covers different aspect of human life of the region including pandemics, climate change, technology, terrorism, freedom of water ways under the doctrines of Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP), respect for international law, moreover the centrality of the ASEAN.

Challenges to QUAD:

Quad has some challenges to adopt clear strategy, agenda and policy against China to gain its objectives because all member states have their own priorities and problems. The main concern of India is Chinese activities in Indian Ocean especially CPEC and Chinese string of pearls policy. It has also territorial dispute with China. Japan is worried for East China Sea and Taiwan. Whereas Australia and US are not sharing their borders with China so, they have not any territorial dispute with China.

Second challenge is Democratic characteristic which is primary driving force which unties all the members. India is considered one of the largest democratic states of the world, but Modi Government spoil its status because of its non-democratic behavior. In his tenure basic human rights are not given to the minorities especially Muslims are suffering under his rule that's why India does not condemn violation of human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Valiolison, 2021). That is alarming situation for the coalition of Quad.

Third challenge is economic relations with China. China is major exporting country for Japan and Australia. China is also largest export market for India and US. Economic dependency, and trade relations with China bound them not to make formal alliance against China and these states are hesitant to give direct threat to China. There is no presence of regional states (ASEAN) in Quad is Fourth serious challenge. Regional states including South Asia, South East Asia, and East Asia are anxious by dint of Quad and these states are willingly working and cooperating China because BRI gave them prominent role. These regional states are trading partner of China.

Fifth Challenge is US tries to prevail democratic regimes in the region but there is diversity of types of regimes and form of

governments. Mostly weak democratic governments, authoritarian regimes, military regimes, and kingship also existed in the region especially in South East Asia: Indonesia and Philippines have Presidential form of government, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand are constitutional monarchy models, Laos and Vietnam have Socialist governments, Singapore is parliamentary democratic state, Myanmar is facing military regime and Brunei has kingship. US and Quad tried different tactic to change their governmental structure to adopt democratic form of government. Whereas China did not pressurize them to change their Structure of government even China is easy with authoritarian regimes. ASEAN prefer China as compare to US led Quad. Quad schedule naval exercises named Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal in 2020, in Guam in 2021, and in Eastern Indian Ocean with the collaboration of France in 2021(Congressional Research Services, 2022). Here, it is significantly shown that Quad never arrange its naval exercises in South China Sea, to avoid the confrontation of China directly because there are disputed territories in South China Sea and China has claim over these territories.

Sixth challenge is about stances and responses of all four members on international phenomenon, they have different point of view on different issues for example Russian- Ukraine war, they all have different responses on this scenario. If they are not on a single page on global issues, then in future their unity and collation on any regional and international would remain consistent?

There are some other questions about Quad; in future Quad will add new regional members or will remain only these four members? How durable is it? If the leadership changes in the any state of Quad, and new leader will be against this collation then what happen next? Only military and maritime security group will be able to counter Chinese economic dominancy in the region? India is member of BRICS which is economic organization and China is also part of the organization. DE-dollarization is the purpose of BRICS. India is playing against US in BRICS with the collaboration of China and other members, whereas in QUAD India is playing vital role against China as a major ally of US. Here, a question arises that how long India will be able to play against both powers with its double face. All these questions could be considered as seventh challenge.

QUAD and FOIP:

Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and QUAD are interconnected. Both concepts were presented by Japanese Prime

Minister Shinzo Abe, he believed that FOIP is a strategy to secure the sea routes of Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean and QUAD will play vital role to fulfill FOIP strategy (Mulgan, 2023). On the initial stages FOIP and QUAD were functioning on the equivalent basis. In 2017, meeting of QUAD explains that member states of Quad will do cooperation on the agenda of Free and Open Indo-Pacific. FOIP provided the Strategic vision to Quad and it started widespread defense cooperation.

FOIP is serving as a soft power to balance Chinese influence however, QUAD is serving as a hard power because it is military alliance and believe in military cooperation (Swaine, 2018). There are many military and naval exercises held in the region under QUAD. QUAD focuses high level collective regional cooperation in term of militarily and maritime defense.

QUAD is also supporting FOIP to achieve its objectives. It also helps FOIP to provide vaccines against Covid-19, gave assistance in disaster management, technological advancement etc. In this way, hard and soft power tactics both have been in process.

South East Asia is the most significant region of the Indo-Pacific region. FOIP is working for the free and open sea routes and Southeast Asia have vital maritime routes to connect the Indian Ocean to Pacific Ocean. FOIP is serving as anti-China agent, which is important for regional actors as they have conflicts with China in South China sea. In this way FOIP is safeguarding their interests.

Some of Southeast Asian states are afraid because of the presence of QUAD in the region because they don't want to provide battlefield to US and China. Southeast Asian states are motivated to cooperate with both powers as both are successfully fulfilling their needs and interests. In case of natural disaster, China will help Southeast Asian States and QUAD will also available in the shape of QUAD and FOIP to provide the aid. During covid-19, regional actors received vaccines by both powers.

Trilateral Partnership:

In 2018, United States, Australia, and Japan initiated trilateral partnership for the economic strategy in term of infrastructure due to response of BRI. They tried to overcome the economic dependency of the region on China and provided the loans and social and environmental protections to the regional states. After a year, trilateral partnership started Blue Dot Network (BDN) to promote "high-quality trusted standards for global infrastructure development." (M. Smith, 2020) BDN not only focus on

government sector but also emphasis on private sector development in the region. ASEAN has concerns about BND and considers it as an agent of disunity of ASEAN (Stromseth). The take it as colonial “Divide and Rule” policy because it is working only in three states Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam other States are not the part of BDN. On the other hand, China’s BRI is working in the entire region.

AUKUS:

It is strategic alliance between Australia, UK and US launched in 2021 to curb the military influence of China in Indo-Pacific region and to maintain balance of power. These three friends also fought both world wars together, that is why their historical relations explain that they can fight against the challenges of twenty first century. AUKUS has two pillars agreements: the first pillar will provide nuclear powered submarines to Royal Australian Navy because it is regional player of Indo-Pacific Region. The second pillar requires manufacturing, advancement, investment in multilateral military proficiencies, sensitive information sharing, and technological skills including artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum computing, undersea capabilities, cyber and electronic warfare, hypersonic and counter hypersonic capabilities, and modern missile technologies. (Markowsk, Wylie, & Chand, 2024).

ASEAN and AUKUS:

There are many discussions on the reaction of ASEAN in respect of AUKUS. ASEAN always focus on its centrality and considered itself as the central player in regional affairs especially security matters. It arranges many multilateral institutions: ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus, ASEAN Ministerial Meetings with dialogue partners, and East Asia Summit. On the announcement of launching the AUKUS, ASEAN had many concerns notably two members of ASEAN, Malaysia and Indonesia gave critical remarks about regional security (Li, 2022). They don’t want to provide a battle ground for China and US alliance on the name of security.

South East Asia has geostrategic location in Indo-Pacific region. It is important for all major powers and major powers want to have good relations with ASEAN to get its support because of their visible rivalry in the region. ASEAN has another concern that nuclear powered submarines of Australia will be used in South China Sea. Some states of ASEAN are quiet and don’t express any concern. In short, diversity of regional states also has been shown on the stance of AUKUS, but prominently it is obvious that

ASEAN has critical concerns on AUKUS. These concerns can become hurdle for the AUKUS.

US Island Strategy:

The U.S. developed the island chain strategy to establish layered defense and influence across the Pacific. The chains consist of multiple chains of islands such as First Island Chain includes Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and other nearby islands, second Island chain stretches from Guam through the Mariana Islands to Palau and third island chain comprises extends into the Hawaiian Islands. The U.S. has adopted the island chain strategy to restrict China's maritime expansion in the South and East China Seas, offer alternatives to BRI investments by supporting infrastructure and development in Indo-Pacific island nations, ensure freedom of navigation in key waterways like the South China Sea and Malacca Strait and to promote good governance and transparency to counter BRI's "debt-trap diplomacy."

Indo-Pacific strategy in South East Asia-opportunities and challenges

The Indo-Pacific Strategy has emerged as a significant framework in international relations, particularly in Southeast Asia. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based regional order. While the strategy presents opportunities for Southeast Asian countries, it also poses challenges that require careful navigation. Economically, the strategy enhances connectivity through infrastructure projects like the Blue Dot Network, enabling Southeast Asian nations to benefit from improved trade routes and access to development funding.

By engaging with powers such as the US, Japan, India, and Australia, these countries can diversify trade partnerships and reduce overdependence on China. Additionally, maritime security is bolstered as the strategy aids nations like Vietnam and the Philippines in countering assertiveness in the South China Sea through naval capacity-building and strategic partnerships. This framework also encourages technological innovation and environmental cooperation, addressing shared challenges like climate change and renewable energy development.

However, the Indo-Pacific strategy also brings challenges, particularly in navigating the intensifying US-China rivalry. While the strategy provides alternatives to Chinese influence, many Southeast Asian countries remain economically dependent on China, complicating their ability to fully align with US-led initiatives. Furthermore, the focus on Quad-led frameworks risks

sidelining ASEAN's leadership role and undermining regional unity, as member states may struggle to reconcile divergent priorities. The militarization of the region, through increased naval deployments and joint exercises, raises concerns about potential conflicts and miscalculations, while non-traditional security threats such as piracy and climate-induced migration remain under addressed. Economically, competing infrastructure projects from the US and China can lead to unsustainable debt or implementation delays, complicating the region's development goals.

Balancing external influences is a critical challenge for Southeast Asian nations as they strive to maintain sovereignty and avoid overreliance on any single power. To fully capitalize on the opportunities of the Indo-Pacific strategy, ASEAN must strengthen its centrality, foster multilateralism, and prioritize the region's collective interests. By doing so, Southeast Asia can position itself as a vital player in the evolving regional architecture while navigating the complexities of great-power competition.

Comparative Analysis of China's BRI and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are two opposing geopolitical frameworks that represent the strategic goals of the US and China, respectively. The IPS is focused on security cooperation, alliance-building, and preserving an open and free Indo-Pacific, whereas the BRI is more concerned with economic connectivity, trade, and infrastructure development. Different strategies for forming the regional and global order are shown by their application in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Economic versus Security centric Approach

The main economic goal of China's Belt and Road Initiative is to encourage extensive infrastructure investment, development, and connectivity throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. China wants to link regional economies with its own and increase its economic might by investing heavily in ports, railroads, highways, and digital infrastructure. In contrast, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is primarily a security-oriented framework that prioritizes defense agreements, joint exercises, and military cooperation through alliances like QUAD, AUKUS, and ANZUS. By bolstering its military presence and urging neighboring nations to stand with China against its forceful geopolitical actions, the US seeks to offset China's economic growth.

Building Alliances vs. Engaging Bilaterally

Countries with similar security worries about China's growth can form alliances and multilateral agreements under the Indo-Pacific Strategy. In order to preserve regional stability and stop China's unilateral territorial expansion, particularly in the South China Sea, the US makes use of alliances with important regional actors including India, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative, on the other hand, mostly functions through bilateral agreements with specific nations, frequently providing financial support through investments and soft loans. This eliminates the necessity for official alliances and gives China the ability to influence smaller economies.

Military Power Projection vs. Soft Power

By providing financial aid, technical investments, and development projects in host nations, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) increases China's soft power and fosters economic interdependence. However, through increased naval presence, combined military drills, and strategic defense alliances, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy projects military might. This glaring disparity highlights how the US relies on deterrence and security pledges to influence regional events, while China places more emphasis on economic persuasion.

Southeast Asia's ramifications

Southeast Asia continues to be a crucial theater of operations for both tactics. Although China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gives poor countries much-needed infrastructure assistance, skepticism has been aroused by worries about debt dependency, transparency, and sovereignty difficulties. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy, on the other hand, appeals to regional nations worried about China's territorial ambitions, but its military-focused strategy runs the risk of intensifying tensions and pressuring nations to choose a side. For example, ASEAN countries must strike a balance between security alignment with the US and its allies and economic collaboration with China.

Conclusion

Global geopolitics and regional power dynamics are significantly impacted by both the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative. The Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to maintain regional security through strategic partnerships, while the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expands China's economic influence and soft power footprint. Their rivalry in Southeast Asia highlights a larger conflict between military deterrence and economic integration for

supremacy. The difficulty for regional countries is to combine the advantages of both approaches without being embroiled in significant power struggles. How well these conflicting approaches handle diplomatic engagements, security conundrums, and economic possibilities in a world growing more multipolar will determine the future of global power dynamics.

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