

*A.S.M. Tarek Hassan Semul***BALANCING GAME IN THE (INDO)ASIA-PACIFIC: FROM 'THUCYDIDES TRAP' TO MULTIPLE DISCOURSES?****Abstract**

The (re)emergence of China and the relative decline of the power of the United States (US) as the unipolar super power has shifted the geostrategic centre of gravity towards the Asia-Pacific region, also known in its extended form as Indo-Pacific region. Multiple new and frozen flashpoints have emerged in this region as China is increasingly seeking to tilt the power balance in its favour and the US is growing doubtful and impatient regarding the Chinese intentions. To mitigate the China threat, the US has already rebalanced its foreign policy under the Obama administration from the Middle East to the Pacific and current President Trump has extended the geographical reach of his new grand strategy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific to bring the Indian Ocean into play. One of the most predominant discourses that tries to explain this emerging great power relation and power transition is the 'Thucydides Trap'. This discourse maintains a binary understanding that in a bipolar setting, the rise and decline of great powers make war inevitable. However, this oversimplified assumption may lead to a limited understanding of a region which has emerged with the support of the liberal order and slowly replacing the West as the epicentre of economic progress. This paper argues that there are 'other discourses' where middle and smaller regional powers not necessarily stranded between great power rivalry, rather they renegotiate the order in the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region to create multipolarity. On the contrary, the interdependence of the US and China in a globalized world compels the great powers to find ways to keep peace in the troubled waters of the Indo-Pacific. To find out to what extent all these discourses are intertwined and influence each other is another objective of this paper.

Keywords: (Re)emergence of China, Thucydides Trap, Great Power Rivalry, Pivot to Asia, Indo-Pacific Strategy

1. Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, the thesis of the 'end of history' received significant currency among the policy makers and academics in projecting the future trajectory of the global system. The prophecy regarding the triumph of Western liberal order was apparently fulfilled as democracy and capitalism were hailed to be the only

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future for a unipolar world order. However, only a couple of decades later, following the relative decline of the United States' (US) 'unipolar moment', the (re)emergence of China, brought an uncomfortable competition over the power transition between the two great powers which has been famously summed up as the 'Thucydides Trap'. In this power rivalry, while China is expanding its global clout, relatively diminishing global influence of the US is visible. The misadventures of post-9/11 War on Terror and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and military engagements in Libyan and Syrian war can be attributed to American waning global war fighting capacity and exhaustion. By 2010, Washington started to shift its foreign policy focus towards Asia as the policymakers felt the need to counterbalance the growing Chinese presence in the Asia-Pacific. In the fall of 2011, the Obama administration announced a strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region.

The rebalancing policy entailed a gradual shift from the US military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan to a deeper strategic involvement in the Asia-Pacific, which brought the disputed South China Sea into the ambit of the policy as well.¹ Conversely, as promised during his election campaign, shortly after taking office, President Donald Trump has relinquished multiple pillars (i.e., US withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership) of the Obama administration's 'rebalance' approach to Asia. Washington replaced 'pivot to Asia' with 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy, a regional policy first coined by the Japanese policy makers. In consistency with the Indo-Pacific strategy, Trump administration is trying to revitalize Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or 'Quad' in order to counterweight China's growing assertiveness and military prowess in the Asia-Pacific. However, coupled with global financial recession of 2008 and Washington's relative isolationist foreign policy (preferring unilateralism over multilateralism) approach under Trump administration, strenuous military campaigns in the Middle East have left a question mark on Washington's worn-out capability as a unipolar superpower to lead the free world.

Therefore, (re)emergence of China has contributed to the predominant 'bipolar' type discourse regarding the distribution of power in the Asia-Pacific region which is the US-China competition. The realist tradition of international politics describes the global structure as a place for the continuous struggle for power. Within this structure, a rising power or challenger to the existing status quo (whether a rising power like China will challenge the status quo or maintain the status quo depends on its own interests and the potential hazard the change in the balance might incur on its adversary) such as China will seek to maximize its security by expanding its clout over its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. China can expand this clout or influence, once it has the general capacity to influence the behaviour of other states or the ability to get other states to do what they otherwise would not do and

¹ Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O' Hanlon, "Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 3, 2012, p. 33.

this capacity and ability has been defined by the realists as the ‘power’.² As China increasingly perceived as the challenger to the US led order, in particular within the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region, the ‘Thucydides Trap’ discourse has not only set the US and China on a collision course, it has brought the other regional powers and small states in the realm of this balancing game. According to the realist tradition, such a balancing game in this region will join alliances in order to either balance (ally in opposition to the principal source of perceived danger) or bandwagon (ally with the state that poses the major threat).³ However, the paper argues that this simplified discourse of balancing game or ‘Thucydides Trap’ fails to take ‘other discourses’ and actors, i.e., Japan, India, Australia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into cognizance. Hence, ignoring emerging factors of leverage in the region or the geopolitical complexities of changing relationships will paint a limited and superficial understanding of the region. Therefore, this paper argues that there are multiple discourses in the Asia-Pacific region other than the US-China relationship. This paper seeks to go beyond this pre-dominant bipolar discourse to find if there is any correlation among these discourses and to what extent the other ‘discourses’ are intertwined with the predominant discourse of ‘Thucydides Trap’ in the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region.

The second section of the paper will try to look into the buildup of this predominant ‘Thucydides Trap’ thesis in relation to China’s rise, while third section will deal with the grand strategy taken by the US during the Obama and the current Trump administration. Finally, the fourth section will focus on the ‘Thucydides Trap’ discourse in relation to other discourses in the (Indo) Asia-Pacific region.

2. (Re)emergence of China as a Great Power

The recent rise of China has invigorated much interest among the social scientists and historians as they criticize the Eurocentric scholarship and question the discourse of Europe’s ‘technological superiority’ over China’s so called ‘oriental backwardness’ which forgets China’s technological global leadership between 1100 and 1800 AD. In contrast to this Eurocentric thesis, empirical evidences suggest that European Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution in Europe were only possible by borrowing and assimilating Chinese innovations.⁴ Hence, the recent Chinese emergence has often been narrated as (re)emergence or (re)rise of a great power that used to be at the apex of the global power structure for the most of the last millennium.⁵

² Suisheng Zhao, “A New Model of Big Power Relations? China-US Strategic Rivalry and Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 93, 2014, p. 378.

³ Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power”, *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1985, p. 4.

⁴ John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 190-218.

⁵ Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, California: University of California Press, 1998.

Contrary to China's historical ascent on the global power structure, current Chinese global economic clout is not accompanied by any imperialist undertakings. Ironically, it was Washington's power projection capability that has underpinned the stability and global norms to ensure free flow of energy supplies and other key commodities for Chinese factories. Consequently, the US nurtured a liberal and benign politico-economic world order in which Beijing could integrate itself and reap the best of an intensely globalized world. Hence, much of the post-Cold War era (at least until 2012) was marked by China's strategy of 'peaceful rise'.⁶ During this period, policymakers in Beijing tried to forge an accelerated economic growth through intensified global trade of manufacturing goods while maintaining a relatively passive posture in the security arena. However, this 'going under the radar' strategy has gradually shifted once Xi Jinping assumed the role of Chinese President since 2012 as he started to describe China's role more of a 'Great Power' (*daguo*) or a 'Strong Power' (*qiangguo*).⁷ Since the global financial recession of 2008-2009, the US has failed to control the 'liberal slump' that has brought Brexit, fuelled the populist movement across Europe and put an inward-looking American President to the Oval office. This has provided Beijing with strategic opportunities to fill the global leadership void as the US and China in particular seem to be shifting in their roles on the global stage.

This shift has been well manifested under the leadership of Xi Jinping, where Beijing has not shied away from presenting the Chinese development model as an alternative to neo-liberal norms of path to development. The Chinese model is based on its own impressive modernization project that entails colossal state-funded infrastructure development ventures to kickoff industrial development. President Xi rooted for the Chinese model at his first speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015, as he said, "It is important for us to use both the invisible hand and visible hand to form a synergy between market forces and government function and strive to achieve both efficiency and fairness."⁸ The 'China Model' offers an alternative path to modernity to the developing states which is sceptical regarding neo-liberal policies and do not want to let go state control over the economy. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides international acceptance of Chinese state-market relationship as it calls for Government-to-Government (G2G) loans to spur major infrastructure projects and policy coordination between China and loan recipient states. However, China is more interested in seeking global legitimacy for its norms of economic governance rather than exporting it as the West did.⁹

⁶ T. V. Paul, "When Balance of Power Meets Globalization: China, India and the Small States of South Asia", *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2018, p. 3.

⁷ Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "Xi Jinping's marathon speech: five takeaways", *New York Times*, 18 October 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-party-congress.html>, accessed on 02 December 2018.

⁸ "Chinese president advocates new type of int'l relations", *Xinhua*, 28 September 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/29/c_134670372.htm, accessed on 18 June 2018.

⁹ "China Will not 'export' Chinese Model: Xi", *Xinhua*, 01 December 2017, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/01/c_136793833.htm, accessed on 27 June 2018.

Conversely, China has been more assertive in overhauling old international institutions and building new ones as it has established or been a party to establishing at least twenty-two multilateral institutions. This signifies the existence of a norm based alternative global politico-economic architecture that competes with the Bretton Woods organizations.¹⁰ For example, initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has already been instrumental in funding infrastructure projects along with Western multilateral lenders. Other multilateral initiatives such as the New Development Bank under BRICS, Contingency Reserve Agreement and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) manifest Beijing's emergence as the new source for global finance.

With the growing economic clout, China is showing all signs of a great power as it has used a series of multilateral fora to portray its role as a responsible great power. It has hosted the G20 summit in Hangzhou in September 2016, promoted the BRICS grouping and played the central role as a broker for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and the 2016 Paris Agreement on climate change. This trend will likely to continue, especially when the unilateralist foreign policy of Trump administration provides an opportunity for Beijing to showcase its capacity for global leadership. President Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress, sets the tone for China to exert greater influence over global governance in the coming years: "China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance."¹¹ Although it was only since Xi's era that Beijing's growing assertiveness in global governance and specifically in the Asia-Pacific region was visible; however, since the time of the Obama administration, the US has adopted rebalancing strategy on its Pacific flank to curtail Beijing's growing regional influence. The following section will discuss how the Asia-Pacific region has emerged as the 'pivot' and the inclusion of the Indian Ocean within the realm of the US grand narrative and eventually contributing in making 'Thucydides Trap' the predominant lens to explain the (Indo) Asia-Pacific region.

3. From 'Pivot to Asia' to 'Indo-Pacific Strategy': Balancing Game

Since the attack on the Pearl Harbor during the World War II, the US has been deeply engaged on its Pacific flank as the Asia-Pacific region is home to its Pacific alliance system including Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and the Philippines. While the Cold War era has seen substantial support extended to its Pacific allies to undermine any Soviet influence in the region, the post-Cold war era

¹⁰ Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016, pp. 99-100.

¹¹ "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress", *Xinhua*, 03 November 2017, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm, accessed on 27 June 2018.

has not been any different for Washington and its regional allies to protect their vital interests in free and unhindered commercial and military access across the Pacific. Hence, denying any strategic edge to any potential great power and sustaining liberal norms in the region has been ever so important in the backdrop of (re)emergence of China. In the post-Cold War era, although Clinton Administration officially regarded China as a 'strategic partner', however, Beijing-Washington relations were not so smooth since the mid-1990s due to the Taiwan Contingency Crisis in 1995 and other contentious issues.¹² On the contrary, by the early 2000s, the Bush administration started to perceive Beijing as a 'strategic competitor'.¹³

3.1 *Pivot to Asia: Rebalancing Strategy*

In 2009, when Obama administration assumed the Oval office, at home the US was in the brink of a financial disaster due to the global recession and at abroad, it was haemorrhaging trillion of dollars and lost six thousand of US soldiers due to the Afghanistan and Iraq war.¹⁴ On the contrary, the resurgent China influenced the Obama administration to change its grand strategy to promote the 'rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific' strategy. The strategy entails global retrenchment and Asia-Pacific engagement in order to relieve Washington's burdens on a global scale, to shift the deployment of its strategic resources from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, to repair its economy, to cope with rising China, to safeguard America's continued predominance in the region and to maintain its global leadership position as the sole hegemon. Therefore, in the fall of 2011, the Obama administration overtly identified the Asia-Pacific region as a geo-strategic priority for the US as highlighted by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011:

"[A]s the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point In the next ten years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest ... so we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values."¹⁵

At the initial stage, the policy was more dependent on military initiatives in the region. However, in response when Beijing started to flex its naval muscle in maritime territorial disputes with the US allies in the South China Sea, the Obama administration readjusted to play down on military initiatives and strengthened the economic and diplomatic elements to forge a closer relationship with China.

¹² Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith, Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

¹³ Martin A. Smith, *Power in the changing global order: The US, Russia and China*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

¹⁴ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2010, p. 1.

¹⁵ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific century", *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>, accessed on 16 December 2018.

Despite that, the most significant and concrete ‘rebalancing’ under this strategy took place in the military sector as the US tried to readjust its military focus on the Asia Pacific, as it reinvigorated its traditional alliance and looked for new military cooperation in the region. In that regard, by 2012, the US decided to deploy 60 per cent of its naval assets under the US Pacific Command in the next 10 years.¹⁶ Additionally, in 2010, Pentagon published a report detailing a plan to invest US\$ 12 billion to improve combating abilities of the US troops in this region by comprehensive upgradation of Guam Military Base and constructing several military bases centering Guam.¹⁷ Furthermore, under the rebalancing strategy, new combating concept of Air-Sea Battle was proposed as counter measures on China’s enhanced anti-access and area denial capabilities (A2/AD) in the region.¹⁸ The US-South Korean security cooperation was strengthened since 2010 as they held several large-scale military exercises on the Korean Peninsula. Following the third North Korean nuclear test in 2013, this bi-lateral security cooperation got stronger to deter North Korean nuclear threat on the Peninsula. On the other hand, since the US treats US-Japan alliance as the ‘indispensable pillar for the regional and world security’, it deployed Osprey aircraft to Okinawa and brought the Diaoyu Island under the US–Japan Security Treaty umbrella. Following the 2013 nuclear test by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Washington deployed the new X-band radar in Japan. In the Tasmanian sea, Washington stationed 200-250 US Marines in Port Darwin to reinforce the ‘second island chain’ and to consolidate joint defence treaty between the US and Australia. During the same time the US air surveillance got increased over the Philippines and troops got stationed on the land, while littoral combat ships were anchored in Singapore.¹⁹ Along with that, the US went beyond its traditional regional partners to forge newer security alliance as it signed its first formal military agreement with Vietnam in 2011.²⁰ India became a key security ally during Obama’s presidency as it held more annual military exercises with the US than any other country and both the nations signed the military logistics agreement.²¹ Therefore, the US strengthened its military presence to rebalance the Asia-Pacific.

On the diplomatic front, Washington tried to rebalance through non-military manoeuvres as it got engaged with the plethora of existing multilateral and regional

¹⁶ US Department of Defense (US DoD), “Shangri-La Security Dialogue: A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises”, available at <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1681>, accessed on 02 January 2019.

¹⁷ Dario Agnote, “Makeover to turn Guam into key U.S. fortress”, *The Japan Times*, 12 January 2010, available at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2010/01/12/national/makeover-to-turn-guaminto-key-u-s-fortress/>, accessed on 06 January 2018.

¹⁸ Mark E. Manyin, Stephen Daggett, Ben Dolven, Susan V. Lawrence, Michael F. Martin, Ronald O’Rourke and Bruce Vaughn, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s “Rebalancing” toward Asia”, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012, p. 17.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ernest Z. Bower, “The fifth U.S.-Vietnam political, security, and defense dialogue”, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fifth-us-vietnam-political-security-anddefense-dialogue>, accessed on 03 January 2018.

²¹ Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), “U.S.-India security and defense cooperation”, available at <https://www.csis.org/programs/wadhvani-chair-us-indiapolicy-studies/past-india-chair-projects/us-india-security-and>, accessed on 10 January 2018.

mechanisms in the Asia Pacific region. Signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN is one such example, which paved the way for the US to get involved with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). In addition, Washington increased its regional engagement by taking interest on regional issues, such as nuclear non-proliferation and disaster preparedness. The rationale behind these regional engagements was to keep an eye on China from the inside of the region and increase its legitimacy to intervene on regional security matters to safeguard its interest as the 'Pacific Power'.²² Over the months, Washington's policy of 'non-intervention' on the maritime territorial dispute in the South China Sea region has changed. Upto 2011, the official US position was not to take sides on the sovereignty disputes as it was affirmed by the then US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the 2010 Shangri-La Dialogue and at the 2011 EAS by the US President Barack Obama.²³ However, that stance of 'neutrality' started to change as South China Sea (SCS) regional territorial disputes became the new pivot for the US to rebalance towards the region and Washington sided with Vietnam and Philippines by military means such as naval exercises and defence arrangements and challenged China's 'nine-dash line' in the SCS.²⁴ Therefore, Washington's approach took more consolidated shape as it started to extend diplomatic assistance to its allies vis-à-vis China in the SCS region.

China, being the economic driving force and at the centre of economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region, economy was the cause and mean for the US to rebalance towards the region. Apart from that, the region has a significant share of global GDP and has the potential to become the global economic hub in very near future. Therefore, to boost US economic engagement, the Obama administration tried to put forward a new regional economic cooperation mechanism in the form of Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The US-centric and 'anyone but China' spirit of this initiative envisage dictating the economic cooperation scenario in Asia-Pacific as Washington's economic interests in the region has significant diplomatic and military implications. Deeper economic engagement in the region provides the US with more justifiable reasons for its claim for freedom of navigation and for engaging in regional territorial disputes over the SCS region.²⁵

The rebalancing strategy provided the US with certain strategic leverages (at least during the early phases) in the field of military, diplomacy and economy as Washington established credibility in the region regarding its commitment in protecting liberal order and putting strategic pressure on China. The US intervention in the region had a

²² Evelyn Goh, "The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States East Asian Strategy", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 17, No.1, 2004, pp. 49-54.

²³ Ralf Emmers, "US rebalancing strategy and the South China Sea disputes", 04 September 2012, available at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/1827-usrebalancing-strategy-and-th/#.WOo_gIWcHic, accessed on 04 November 2018.

²⁴ Robert S. Ross, "The Revival of Geopolitics in East Asia: Why and How?", *Global Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2014, p. 14.

²⁵ Mark E. Manyin, op. cit., p. 21.

direct impact through instigating claimant countries such as Japan, Philippines on their territorial disputes with China. Security commitments to its allies in the East Asia gave the US the perfect justification to interfere in the regional security system of the Asia-Pacific.²⁶ Diplomatically, the US successfully intervened the regional multilateral mechanisms and swung the focus back on security and geopolitical issues from economic integration and cooperation. Furthermore, the strategy worked in favour of the US as the regional powers such as Japan and India got engaged in strategic confrontations with China. As a result, disputes over the Diaoyu Islands between China and Japan got escalated and India got concerned regarding India's oil interest in the SCS as well as the Chinese naval modernization project.²⁷ Moreover, the US has exploited the maritime disputes in the East China Sea (ECS) and the SCS to turn many of the claimant Chinese neighbours against China. Hence, the US allies such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan are now willing to take part in the strategic manoeuvres against Chinese preponderance in the region and that has complicated and polarized China's ascendance as a great power. However, the rebalancing strategy came at a few costs as well. To match its commitment, the US had to redraw its military deployment in Asia-Pacific which could put a considerable amount of pressure on its already underperforming economy due to 'massive debts' and 'improper industrial structure' during that time. In retrospect, although at the initial phase, the rebalancing strategy paid off strategic benefits to the US, however, at the later stage of implementation process, the strategic costs outweighed the initial benefits. The centre of gravity of international politics has already been tilted towards the East and with rebalancing so has the focus of the US grand strategy. Hence, after the triumph in the US election, Trump administration did not change the geographical focus of its new grand strategy rather adjusted to bring the Indian Ocean and its actors in the play.

3.2 *Indo-Pacific Strategy*

Since the implementation phase of the rebalancing strategy, US policymakers realized the limitation of using the term 'Asia-Pacific' to complement its grand strategy in Asia. Ever since the US withdrawal from the TPP (one of the cornerstone of Obama's Pivot to Asia) by the Trump administration, it was imperative for the policymakers in Washington to come up with a clear strategy to assure its Asia-Pacific allies that the US is not retrenching from its security commitments in the region. Additionally, the Indian Ocean has gained substantial significance as a geopolitical and geo-economic nerve centre and replaced the Atlantic Ocean to become the world's busiest and strategically most important maritime sea-lane. In this backdrop, China is expanding its politico-strategic purview from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean, for example, setting up a military base in Djibouti and intensified ties with countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives proves stronger Chinese

²⁶ Robert S. Ross, op. cit., pp. 11-13.

²⁷ Ross Colvin, "Indian navy prepared to deploy to South China Sea", *Reuters*, 03 December 2012, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/south-china-sea-india-navy-oil-ongcidINDEE8B209U20121203>, accessed on 31 December 2018.

presence and intent in the Indian Ocean region. Furthermore, India became an important cog in American security architecture in this region. Hence, this led to the expansion of the term 'Asia-Pacific' to initially 'Indo-Asia Pacific' to merge both the entire Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Later, the term was changed to only 'Indo-Pacific' (Figure 1) to prioritize the US security considerations vis-à-vis China.²⁸ The US National Security Strategy, published in December 2017, defined the Indo-Pacific territory as stretching from “the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States”. Moreover, the strategy describes the nature of the Indo-Pacific where “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place” and where “China is using economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”²⁹ In this backdrop, plethora of official statements and addresses started to come up in clarification of the strategy.

Figure 1: Expansion of the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific Region



Source: Angelo Wijaya, “Reconfiguring Foreign Policy Focus: time for an Indo-Pacific region?”, available at <https://medium.com/@angelowijaya/refocusing-strategy-time-for-an-indo-pacific-region-deae9b1ba6d1>, accessed on 05 July 2018.

²⁸ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Challenge in the Spotlight at 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue”, *The Diplomat*, 05 June 2018, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/trumps-indo-pacific-strategy-challenge-in-the-spotlight-at-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>, accessed on 28 June 2018.

²⁹ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Trump’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Confronting the Economic Challenge”, *The Diplomat*, 31 July 2018, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/trumps-indo-pacific-strategy-confronting-the-economic-challenge/>, accessed on 01 August 2018.

In 2017, during his inaugural Asia tour, President Trump introduced the new US strategy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) or Indo-Pacific in the APEC's conference in Vietnam. Later on during 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, address by the US Defence Secretary James Mattis provided more clarity as the strategy envisage a 'free' and 'open' region based on US-led rule-based international order and deter any threat from any regional power shifts, revisionist powers and rogue regimes. The strategy also entails freedom for sovereign nations and in their shared interests to pursue openness of various domains, including sea and air, trade, investment and infrastructure.³⁰ On 30 July 2018, the US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo revealed the economic component of strategy in his address at the US Chamber of Commerce. In his address, Pompeo pledged an initial fund of US\$ 113 million and identified cyber security, energy and infrastructure as the priority sectors for the US economic engagement in the region and emphasized on engaging ASEAN-led multilateral institutions. However, the immediate challenge for the Trump administration is to separate FOIP and explain how this strategy will work in relation to other competing actors and projects such as China and BRI.³¹

In this backdrop, there has been a deliberate effort to reinvigorate the Quad-Plus Dialogue from the ashes of the first official Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (QSD) which took place in May 2007. Although, it was established in the post-tsunami scenario to increase humanitarian cooperation, following its first Malabar naval exercise in September 2007, Japan and Australia two of the Quad members drifted apart due to their domestic political changes. However, with Trump administration at helm, Quad has found some common grounds as the Quad members refused to endorse China's BRI and continuously getting weary of Chinese intentions in the region. On November 2017, based on the US and Japanese vision for FOIP, the four member states reformed their QSD. From 2007-2017, the QSD states carried on security cooperation, military exercises and intelligence sharing arrangements at the bilateral level. For example, in 2007 while India did not own any American military hardware to speak off, a decade later, now it owns from advanced US artillery to missiles and planning to purchase armed-drones and fighter jets.³² On the other hand, China threat has enabled Japan to reinterpret its constitution to seek the path of stronger defence cooperation with the US and other regional allies. Hence, a decade later of its inception, the Quad member states now have more in common regarding their ideas and vision on the region and have a common power to counterbalance.

4. From 'Thucydides Trap' to Multiple Discourses

A bipolar US-Chinese discourse like 'Thucydides Trap' may not only lead to an oversimplification of a complex regional dynamics, but it also has two possible

³⁰ Prashanth Parameswaran, op. cit.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jeff M. Smith, "The Return of the Asia-Pacific Quad", *The Heritage Foundation*, available at <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/the-return-the-asia-pacific-quad>, accessed on 09 July 2018.

dangerous ramification for the security of the region. Explaining the region's primary security dynamic as a bipolar standoff may lead the policymakers in Washington and Beijing to think they are part of a zero-sum game scenario where only defeat can avert a conflict for them otherwise war is inevitable. This seeing 'ghost', where there might be none might led to a false strategy and prompt a 'containment' approach on the part of the United States and its allies resonating of the adversarial dynamic of the Cold War.³³ As a result, other regional states may find themselves choosing one between the two competing great powers and thereby undermining their own interests and security and reinforcing the narrative the new 'Cold War'. This sort of misperception and miscalculation has a dangerous implication that may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of US-China war. Hence, it is imperative to understand the changing power distribution in the Asia-Pacific region, which is marked by growing geopolitical and economic complexity. Due to this complexity, often the enormous changes that the regional environment is going through, may lead to severe debate regarding what constitutes order and stability within the (Indo) Asia-Pacific region. Part of this discourse is the reflection of the changes in the internal dynamics and external aspirations of individual nations; part of it is the role of the evolving character of regional institutions and another part manifests the influence of non-state actors and global forces such as globalization. While both the competing great powers, the US and China are in the state of flux, this analysis is true for a number of other emerging or re-emerging powers such as India, Indonesia, Australia and Japan as well. Hence, it is imperative to take all the possible discourses into cognizance to understand the geopolitical complexities that this region poses. However, the following sub-sections of the paper will first try to analyze the predominant discourse of 'Thucydides Trap' and then move on to look into other discourses to find any potential interplay among them.

4.1 *'Thucydides Trap' in the Asia-Pacific*

Harvard Professor Graham Allison coined the term 'Thucydides Trap' for the first time in 2012 and later on the comparison with the 2,500 year old concept was endorsed by Joseph S. Nye as they compared the challenge that two great powers (China and the US) are faced with the 'Thucydides Trap'.³⁴ In his explanation for the war between Athens and Sparta, Thucydides wrote, "what made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta". Although both the Athenians and Spartans had disputes against one another, in those disputes Thucydides did not find any reason for war. Rather, Thucydides noted that Athenians' rise and the fear among the Spartans regarding Athenians' rise has triggered the war. This dystopian analogy arose from the growth of Chinese capability and the fear that China will challenge

³³ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011, p. 95.

³⁴ Graham Allison, "Thucydides' Trap has been sprung in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, 21 August 2012; Graham T. Allison Jr., "Obama and Xi Must Think Broadly to Avoid a Classic Trap," *The New York Times*, 06 June 2013.

the status quo and alter it against the US and that might lead to war.³⁵ However, the Chinese President Xi Jinping firmly overruled this fearful apprehension as he claimed, “there is no such thing as the so-called ‘Thucydides Trap’ in the world. But should major countries time and again make the mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves.”³⁶ However, Graham Allison differs with the claim from the Chinese president as he based his speculation on the ‘offensive realist’ tradition and warned that “the preeminent geostrategic challenge of this era is not violent Islamic extremists or a resurgent Russia. It is the impact that China’s ascendance will have on the US-led international order, which has provided unprecedented great-power peace and prosperity for the past 70 years.”³⁷ On the other hand, Allison and other analysts received significant currency for their ‘Thucydides Trap’ thesis as the National Security Strategy of the US, published under Trump administration in December 2017, explicitly labeled China and Russia as ‘strategic competitors’ and ‘revisionist powers.’³⁸ It also goes on to accuse China bluntly, “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.”³⁹ These claims find its justification in the growing Chinese power and dissatisfaction in the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region. By building up a larger share of global power, China has become more assertive to make the world order more ‘just and reasonable’ in accordance with Chinese interests. For example, the US always maintained that China should follow international norms that are based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea region. However, Beijing discarded this calling based on the US’s double standard in the compliance with the international rules as the US Congress itself did not ratify the UNCLOS. Hence, there has been a sense of discontent among the Chinese policymakers with the ‘inequality’ of the order heavily in favour of the US’s interests at the expenses of Chinese interests. Therefore, to make this ‘order’ right and ‘just’ for China, many believes that Xi Jinping has discarded the earlier Chinese approach of ‘grand strategic patience’ that it has developed under Deng Xiaoping and has vowed to provide Chinese solutions, Chinese wisdom and Chinese voices to reform the global governance.⁴⁰ Furthermore, other smaller states in the region may be provoking China into aggressive behaviour since they want the US to remain engaged as the Pacific power.⁴¹ There is motivation for the Chinese as

³⁵ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of The Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York: Random House, 1988; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton, 2001.

³⁶ “Xi offers ways to build new model of major-country relationship with US”, *Xinhua*, 23 September 2015.

³⁷ Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China headed for war?”, *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015.

³⁸ White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: White House, 2017.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ J. Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China’s Foreign Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴¹ Robbie Gramer and Keith Johnson, “China Taps Lode of Fire Ice’ in South China Sea”, *Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2017, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/19/china-taps-lodeof-fire-ice-in-south-china-sea/>, accessed on

well to expand to fuel its continued rise and it feels the need to guaranteed access to certain resources essential for its continued growth. The most recent warming up of the frozen flashpoint like the Taiwan Strait is one such example. In his 2019 New Year's Day Address, Taiwanese President Tsai talked about four imperatives for Beijing as it must recognize the island's existence, respect Taiwan's freedom and democracy, deal with it peacefully and on equal terms and only communicate through government-authorized channels. This has turned into a duel as President Xi responded at the 40th anniversary of China's 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan' by referring to the 1992 Consensus, which allows 'different interpretations' of 'One China' and stressed on 'one country, two systems' as cross-strait political framework. For him, this will allow one China to have different governments across the Taiwan Strait. However, this interpretation was discarded by Taiwan as President Tsai in her response said, "we have never accepted the 1992 Consensus" and Taiwan "absolutely will not accept 'one country, two systems'".⁴² Therefore, adding to the tally of the flashpoints in US-China relations, Taiwan Strait will put strain on the already strenuous relationship in the Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, on 04 January 2019 in a meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC), President Xi underlined "the importance of preparing for war and combat" and ordered the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be prepared for war.⁴³ He reminded the PLA regarding the unprecedented "period of major changes", and China's "important period of strategic opportunity for development."⁴⁴ How this message to the PLA will be interpreted by the policymakers in Washington has to be seen in coming days, however, this may fuel the 'Thucydides Trap' thesis and may bring further uncertainties to the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region.

4.2 Other Discourses

When a discourse such as 'Thucydides Trap' get conceived in order to predict relations between a declining great power and emerging great power which might lead to 'order' changing conflict, often historical evidences get picked up without considering the context. Hence, such comparison may lead to incomplete or wrong interpretation of the puzzle. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has been able to establish a liberal democratic order, where invisible hands not only determined the rules of the market rather integrated the economies of the world regardless of their ideological inclination. This unprecedented integration of markets, manufacturing, finance, labour, culture, ideas, values, norms were possible due to a force called globalization. Realists claim that a functional nuclear deterrence has compelled both the US and the Soviet Union from going into an all out war. Along with nuclear deterrence, the inter-connectedness and interdependence of the

10 December 2018.

⁴² Derek Grossman, *No Smiles Across the Taiwan Strait*, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/no-smiles-across-the-taiwan-strait/>, accessed on 10 December 2018.

⁴³ "Xi orders PLA to step up war-preparation efforts", *Global Times*, 04 January 2019.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Chinese and the US economy play a major role in shaping the relationship trajectory of these two great powers. It is imperative to understand China's interest for stability in order to sustain its continued economic growth, which was possible due to a regional stability created by the US led order. Hence, by the realist logic, as long as the cost of cooperation does not surpass the cost of conflict, will motivate both the countries to avoid any 'inevitable conflict'. On the other hand, while Washington or Beijing still may have been able to adopt more aggressive balancing strategies toward each other, but forces of globalization increased the short-term incentives for continued cooperation. Hence, making it harder for the policymakers to contemplate paying the short-term costs of disrupting that relationship. The most recent evidence of such a case is the backing off by both the countries from a disastrous trade war which might have resulted in another global recession.

China's incentive for a stable global order is often get overlooked. After the rise of populist Trump as the US President, speculation has been made that an isolationist US will not only remove itself from its commitment to liberal economic order, it will disrupt the globalization process. The US withdrawal from Paris accord and TPP are strong evidences to back this thesis. In this backdrop, the address made by the Chinese President Xi at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017, explains China's motivation for taking this liberal order forward. In his speech, Xi called for world leaders to "keep to the goal of building a community of shared future for mankind"⁴⁵ and argued that "while developing itself, China also shares more of its development outcomes with other countries and people".⁴⁶ He argued that "rapid growth in China has been a sustained, powerful engine for global economic stability and expansion ... And China's continuous progress in reform and opening-up has lent much momentum to an open world economy."⁴⁷ In short, Xi Jinping pledged to be a defender, promoter and leader of global capitalism and free trade.

The 'Thucydides Trap' thesis often conceives the (Indo) Asia-Pacific as a region increasingly dominated by adversarial power relations between the United States and China, potentially leading to military conflict. By doing that, the discourse undermines the predicaments of many **smaller states and middle powers**, who are stranded between the two 'poles'.⁴⁸ Although most of the regional states perceive the US as the security guarantor and China as the leader of economic growth and depends on both of them, these smaller states have agency and the capability to make choices. This bipolar discourse also fails to see the power distribution of the region through the Asian lens. The declining US and the rise of China does not automatically mean that power has diffused to another great power. From a larger context, the emerging economies

⁴⁵ James Pennington, "One year on from Xi Jinping's 2017 Davos speech", *The Telegraph*, 02 February 2018.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Brian Bridges, "From ASPAC to EAS: South Korea and Southeast Asia", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2014, p. 34.

of Southeast Asia signals the rise of Asia and relative decline of the West. Hence, the US-China relationship needs careful scrutiny from the Asian century perspective as well where there has been a relative shift in power from developed economies to emerging economies.⁴⁹ In support of this argument, Global Trends 2030 report can be placed which predicts that by 2030, Asia is likely to have surpassed North America and Europe in global power and that the health of the global economy will depend mainly on China, India, Brazil and other emerging markets.⁵⁰

The **renegotiation of order** in the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region often gets obscured.⁵¹ There has been a rise to a plethora of regional institutions and multiple emerging power constellations in this region. In a bipolar setting, the realist understanding of power balance often narrowly and mistakenly undermines them either as balancers or bandwagoners. For example, Chinese and the US diplomacy with India can be interpreted from a different perspective where both the great powers are trying to negotiate regional order, rather than as a zero-sum struggle for primacy. This has brought the argument to see the region from the perspective of an emerging multipolarity. While the centre of the bipolar narrative has been on the US and China, this narrative often misses the emergence of large power, such as India, the 'middle powers' such as Australia, Indonesia or South Korea and smaller powers with significant clout in economy and often politico-strategic affairs, such as Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Therefore, the concept of multipolarity is perhaps the discourse that most accurately depict this trend. On the other hand, multilateral forum such as ASEAN provides smaller nations with a collective voice as a power in the evolution of Asian regionalism since the 1990s. In stark contrast to the idea of a bipolar, zero-sum game, the US and China, often act collectively with other regional players in tackling regional issues such as environment, combating piracy, terrorism and disaster management. Obama administration's 'rebalancing' of the US foreign policy towards Asia is an appreciation of the fact that multiple numbers of large and small actors play within the power dynamics of the region. During this period, the US interaction and relations with traditional allies and partners such as Australia and Singapore has deepened. At the same time, Washington has extended its diplomatic engagement with new or historically important actors such as the Philippines and Vietnam. Thus, thinking in terms of multiple power centres' multiple perceptions on the trajectory of US-China relationship is a useful lens to decipher the unpredictability and dynamic nature of the power structure in this region.

From China's perspective, Chinese President Xi Jinping has proposed a **New Type of Major Power Relations** based on a peaceful, positive-sum game of mutual benefit and respect rather than the zero-sum game of traditional great power rivalry and war. Through this concept, Beijing is seeking the very status of great power that

⁴⁹ Michael Pilsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015.

⁵⁰ US National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, Washington, D.C.: US National Intelligence Council, 2012.

⁵¹ Evelyn Goh, op. cit.

will reshape the hierarchical US-China relationship reflective of the current relationship. However, the US is not yet inclined to give the parity to Beijing.⁵² Despite that, both the US and China acknowledge the cost of non-cooperation to avoid a great power standoff in the (Indo) Asia-Pacific region and thus how to peacefully manage the great power relations has been one of the key focus of their strategic narrative.

5. Conclusion

The new strategic narrative to regulate the relations and free the great powers from the 'Thucydides Trap' will require the US and China to agree on the implicit and explicit norms. This will establish rules of the potential geopolitical engagement that can lead to mutual restraint and help to decelerate the strategic competition. However, the discourse like 'Thucydides Trap' paint a disappointing and dystopian outlook for the (Indo)Asia-Pacific region. It also increases the danger of self-fulfilling prophecy for both the US and China as the analysts, policymakers may put these nations on a collision course. The (re)emergence of China does not merely represent a challenger to the existing order; the complexities of the globalization process compel China to sustain the order in certain spaces where the US is an unwilling leader. However, as the US becomes increasingly worried about Chinese intentions, it will be difficult for the policymakers in Washington to ignore the inclination to prevent China now while they still can. However, the cost of such a venture outweighs the benefits as it also faces multiple immediate challenges ranging from Russia to the greater Middle East. Hence, the paper tried to argue that the predominant discourse of bipolarity or 'Thucydides Trap' between the US and China is not the complete reflection of the power dynamics in (Indo)Asia-Pacific region. Developing a more accurate and complete understanding of this region requires careful investigation of other discourses which influence and interplay with this predominant construction. Therefore, alike to the multipolarity of discourses, the multipolarity of power and forces such as globalization paints a far more complex and complete understanding in comparison to the contribution of a bipolar narrative.

⁵² François Godement, "Expanded Ambitions, Shrinking Achievements: How China Sees the Global Order", *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 09 March 2017, available at: http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/expanded_ambitions_shrinking_achievements_how_china_sees_the_global_order, accessed on 11 January 2018.

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