**Evolving power dynamics**

Amna Ejaz Rafi

Monday, Nov 14, 2022

China has established its footprints in the Indo-Pacific region while the US is trying to retain its stronghold. Other emerging players like Japan, Australia and India, as part of alliances, are also trying to gain influence in the region.

The interests of various political actors in the region have instigated competitive tendencies. America’s strategic manoeuvring in the region is targeted at a potential challenger, China. And its bid to thwart China has a growing convergence of interest with India which is trying to obstruct China’s influence in the Indian Ocean.

The US’s ‘rebalance strategy’ and India’s ‘Act East’ policy are branches of the same tree. A new diplomacy called ‘minilateralism’ is also gaining ground in the Indo-Pacific. The quadrilateral alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India is one such example; these countries have formed a coalition based on their shared interests. China has called the Quad an ‘embryonic alliance’ targeted at constraining its rise. Other minilateral arrangements arising in the region include the ‘US-India-Japan’, ‘India-Japan-Australia’ and ‘Australia-India-Indonesia’.

The Indo-Pacific power narrative intersects the interests of four major players, China, India, Japan and the US while regional countries including Australia, South Korea and ASEAN states are also stakeholders. At present, the most influential political actor in the Indo-Pacific region is China.

China’s expanding economic and political clout in the region in the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) accompanied by its military presence in the Indian Ocean indicates that China has impacted the Indo-Pacific strategic system. Its strong naval presence in the South China Sea and its fleet of destroyers, marines and submarines in the Pacific and Indian Oceans are an example of its growing influence.

The security environment of the Indo-Pacific, amid military deployments and modernization, explains one thing: states have strengthened their security apparatus to ensure a smooth flow of trade through the sea lines of communications (SLOCs) amid the threats of piracy, terrorism and climate change. However, the dividing lines and competitive tendencies among major players – the US-China competition and the scepticism of regional countries, Japan, India, Australia and Vietnam, over China’s naval posture in the Indo-Pacific – is another angle on this military buildup.

China’s naval presence has reached the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Pakistan’s Gwadar seaport has also provided Beijing with an alternate trading route and lessened its dependence on the Strait of Malacca. China’s vision of regional connectivity has allowed it to tackle all regional impediments. With the BRI in progress, the country has secured new allies in the shape of strategic and economic partners.

China has also won the race of connectivity and is the lead player in infrastructural development and the building of seaports in the region. China, in line with the prevailing strategies of soft power and narrative building, has used ‘persuasion and attraction’ tactics to not only enhance its regional image but also pacify opposition. Its outreach to the Indian Ocean is a strategic move to diversify its trading links. With the launch of the BRI, China’s image has been branded as a global power. In this regard, seaports along the Indian Ocean are projected as strategic moves to reinforce footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

It is more than evident that seaports and regional connectivity within the umbrella of the BRI will result in desirable political gains. China will be connected with at least 60 countries across four continents. The sea component of the BRI (Maritime Silk Road) will connect China and Europe crossing Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa.

China’s economic intervention in South Asia has had a bigger strategic impact. China has also reformed its maritime military strategy to ‘active defence’, and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has deployments all across the Indo-Pacific. The economically deprived South Asian region has welcomed China’s vision of connectivity. This elaborates the point that regional countries, in pursuance of their political objectives, have looked up to China to gain advantages. This also implies that China’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific has been a success. China has so far reached Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Sittwe in Myanmar. Its access to seaports along the Indian Ocean proves that the ultimate decision of a state rests with its geopolitical interests.

Neither Bangladesh nor Sri Lanka stopped China whose conventional and nuclear submarines were docked at the Chinese container terminal in Colombo (2014) and Karachi (2015). China also has a plan to operationalize 18 to 19 naval bases in the Indian Ocean. This will provide Chinese carrier battle groups (CBGs) with land-based support.

Chinese military posturing in the Indian Ocean portrays the country’s desire to emerge as a dominant Indo-Pacific power. PLAN ships counter-piracy missions in the IOR now include conventional and nuclear submarines. In August 2017, PLAN ships deployed in the Indian Ocean carried out live firing drills.

It appears that the PLAN strategy in the Indian Ocean has gradually been transformed from ‘selective sea denial’ to ‘sea-control strategy’. On the geostrategic account, China has overtaken India in the South Asian context. All regional countries except Bhutan have joined the BRI.

India needs to rethink its regional choices and, instead of opposing the regional connectivity projects involving China and South Asian countries, should try to be part of the region’s evolving architecture.

The writer is a research associate at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI).