**Power games in the Asia-Pacific**

Waseem Shabbir

Tuesday, Oct 19, 2021

The geopolitical dynamics are rapidly shaping up in strategically important regions of the world – heralding no signs of peace, cooperation and interdependence among international power blocs in the near future.

At present, the dominant unipolar world order (three-decades after) has begun decaying by repeating its cycle and budging fast towards its transition to bipolar or multipolar order. The gradual shifts in the current unipolar world order have brought US hegemony into a state of jeopardy. Thus, the United States will not be averse to going to any extent to dispel these evolving shifts which are posing a great threat to its worldwide unilateralism.

In the wake of various paradigm shifts on the global stage, it is solely the economic, military and strategic rise of China through its billion dollars mega-project of connectivity called the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) spreading from south and central Asia to Europe to the African continent, which is becoming a formidable challenge to US hegemony, adding to its consternation.

Thus, after decamping from Afghanistan and several other countries including Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Libya in the Middle East which are no more relevant, the US, to shield and protect its global dominance and world unipolar political structure, has resorted to stage a new war theatre in the Asia-Pacific with the single objective to contain, hinder and coerce China’s advancements and ascendancy in the region with full cooperation from its allies.

While pursuing aggressive manoeuvres, on September 16 this year Washington forged a new trilateral security agreement with the UK and Australia named (AUKUS). Under the garb of "freedom of navigation", "free and open Indo-Pacific" and "rule-based order" this new coalition entirely aims at countering Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific. According to this pact of $ 66 billion, Australia will be assisted to build 12 nuclear-powered submarines. These efforts will enhance Australia’s naval power to impede and challenge China’s preponderance in the Asia-Pacific. China’s embassy in Washington accused the pact of being a coordinated effort towards a "cold war mentality and ideological prejudice".

However, the formation of AUKUS will be a humongous loss for France after it was replaced by the US and UK with regard to providing nuclear submarines to Australia. France’s foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian also views the new agreement a stab in France's back after it lost the deal to Australia. In fact, international alliances and pacts always stand brittle in the face of changing states' interests.

AUKUS will certainly give a boost to the nuclear race in the region which however violates the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty signed in 1968. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian stated that the deal would seriously undermine regional peace and stability and would severely intensify the "arms race". Now, after seeing the US forge new alliances and build military capabilities in the Ocean, China too will expedite its ICD "Integrated Counter Diplomacy" alongside building up more nukes, frigates, nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers in order to protect its stakes; thus making the region more volatile and vulnerable.

Possibly, China will also forge a powerful military and defence alliance comprising China, Russia, North Korea and Pakistan solely to counterbalance and neutralise the newly formed AUKUS. Also, China will further harden its stance on Taiwan with increased naval activities in the South China Sea where it is already aggressively asserting its claims on disputed territorial waters and here a little standoff can lead to the path of military confrontation between the US and China.

The world knows that Japan and South Korea survive under US influence even in today's age and they don't pursue their independent foreign policies. However, Australia was scapegoated for the first time by being dragged into this arms deal – solely for US interests – with an assigned role to counter China’s rising influence in the Asia-Pacific. Much resentment was seen among Australians, as highlighted by the number of demonstrations they carried out against their government for becoming America's partner in war and belligerence rather than focusing on solving the many other serious issues it faces including Covid-19, climate change and rising inflation.

It would be completely unjust not to mention the existence of another security coalition – 'QUAD', comprising the US, India, Australia, and Japan in the Indo Pacific. Anticipatedly, this security alliance will be vibrant and active in its naval activities solely to contain China. However, India here will be given a special role against China’s ascendancy. For that, the US-India defence trade cooperation is likely to expand with existing agreements – (LEMOA), (COMCASA) and (ISA) – between them.

China will certainly focus on Pakistan and strengthen it militarily to counterbalance India’s hegemonic designs. Now, Pakistan’s alliance with China and India’s with the US will further intensify the rivalries between India and Pakistan; the repercussions of this aggravated hostility would be devastating for the whole region.

Amidst this rising power contest, the US with full support of its allies and partners is likely to target China’s maritime and mainland projects of connectivity now. The certain sensitive geographic points which are on the US radar to be targeted are the Strait of Malacca, Taiwan Strait, the Kyaukpyu Port of Myanmar, Gwadar Port of Pakistan and the Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka. Among all aforementioned projects, the Strait of Malacca through which a quarter of all world trade flows is the most vulnerable point to be blocked by the newly emerged security coalition; this will be a great jolt to China to throttle its maritime trade. Currently, 80 percent of China’s oil alone also passes through the Malacca Strait, and this oil supply is becoming highly risky and unsafe by heavy militarisation by the US nexus with its allies in the Asia-Pacific.

However, the risk of naval confrontation between China and AUKUS will mount only if the vessels patrol the water and aggressive military exercises are actually carried out. Steve Crabtree, a research analyst at Gallup, asserts: "A war in the Asia-Pacific region involving the US and China in the next ten to fifteen years is plausible".

In a nutshell, American supremacy is suffering seismic blows. After failing on various international fronts, this new adventure is going to yield no sufficient leverage to the US over China. Today's China – unlike Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria and many other war battered countries – is much stronger, politically stable, militarily potent and economically powerful to counter all impending war-mongering and military posturing by the US. Furthermore, Asia-Pacific countries which benefit through both huge trade with China and investment flow from China will possibly not go against it in this dreadful game of power projection.

The writer is a freelance contributor. He can be reached at waseemshabbir78@gmail.com