**Indo-Pacific power struggle**

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Islands in the Indo-Pacific region are in the news due to the Chinese foreign minister’s visit. Let us understand the importance of Indo-Pacific region, South China Sea and Islands of Indo-Pacific region. The region comprises of the Indian Ocean, the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, Seas and also includes the region of South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia and Oceania. It is home to 60 percent of the global population, global wealth and 25 percent of all international maritime trade passes through the Strait of Malacca alone. The region is becoming the focus of attention for competing interests of the US and China.
The US aim is to contain China’s growing power which has challenged its supremacy. Therefore, the US is taking pre-emptive measures to contain China. The Obama administration introduced the ‘Pivot of Asia’ strategy to contain China through its allies in Asia. The region has become the center of rivalry between China and the US and this has led to the formation of new alliances with the sole objective to contain China.
Outside of this, the US also wants a free and open region to ensure security for its trade. Within the region, the most important is the South China Sea which borders Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. The South China Sea has geo-political, economic and military significance as it controls sea trade routes and shipping lanes. More than half of the world’s fishing vessels operate in the South China Sea and millions of people are attached to it. It also accounts for at least a third of the global maritime trade, 40 percent of China’s trade and 6 percent of US trade passes through. 90 percent of all fuel imported by South Korea and Japan passes through the sea. According to the Anadolu Agency, the region is full of unexplored oil and natural gas reserves in its seabed.
The US has objections to Chinese South China Sea claims, therefore it supports the regional countries in their dispute with China. The South China Sea is considered to be a buffer for China and base of operations if attacked by the US and its allies. Thus, it is very important for China to maintain its control to counter any US plans through the sea. India also showed its presence as a US ally last year when four of its warships participated in an exercise as part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) followed by bilateral exercises with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. Another interest of India in the sea is that i55 percent of its trade with Indo-Pacific countries passes through the South China Sea.
The Chinese Foreign Minister visited ten small islands namely Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSR), Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Kiribati. These islands historically have close ties with the US. Some of the Islands have some links and relations with Taiwan. China has already signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands in April this year and according to the pact, China will be able to send armed police and warships to the island to maintain peace, train local police, and also plan for fisheries, trade and also setting up cultural Confucius Institutes.
The security plan between China and Solomon Islands has been objected to by the US, Australia, Japan and New Zealand. The visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister to the region has alarmed the Australians and Americans. They are afraid this will give a foot hold to China in the islands of the region and China will wrest control from them. The US and its allies are afraid this could facilitate China to send its troops to the Solomon Islands to establish a base. The Chinese presence in the islands will pose a threat to the US interest and its reaction capabilities and also to Taiwan. The Australians are afraid of the Chinese in the region and they also want China to lift the trade sanctions on its exports worth of billions of dollars.
China has emerged as a power to match the US influence in the world and it has the second largest economy and a strong military force. There are several alliances signed by the US to contain China and one such alliance is the QUAD. Its first official meeting was held in 2017 in the Philippine with the objective of keeping the strategic sea routes of Indo-Pacific free of the political and military influence of China and to reduce its dominance in the region. India has been given the role to contain China in South Asia which seems to be difficult after its recent disastrous performance in occupied Ladakh.
Pakistan is also part of this power struggle being a part of CPEC which connects China from the Khunjerab Pass to Gwadar and cuts a distance of 13,000 to 2500 kilometers to the Persian Gulf. Therefore, India being an ally of US has subjected Pakistan to terrorism through its proxies to damage CPEC. Pakistan has to make the best foreign policy decisions in its interests without damaging its relations with any country and has to safeguard its interest at all cost. Tensions and stakes between US and China are high but war less likely because of US-China interdependence on each others economy.