

NATO Eyes the Indo Pacific Again!

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Are the threats that the US/NATO fears in the Indo Pacific justified?

NATO's agenda 2030 is to extend its 'global reach'. The priority is the Indo Pacific, which is now the formal part of the agenda. The primary target is China while the secondary target Russia, which NATO believes is in a spot and so appropriately dealt with.

The steps recently taken for the Indo-Pacific reach under US leadership include the creation of the QUAD (Quadrilateral security dialogue) with Singapore, Japan, India, US; the informal but overtly military alliance between Australia, UK and US - AUUKUS. And continuing close traditional NATO links with partners Australia, Japan, Korea, NZ.

Are the threats that the US/NATO fears in the Indo Pacific justified? The threat perception is over Taiwan and Tibet; South China Seas and keeping S.E. Asia is free to make strategic choices, but essentially containing China and retaining US and NATO primacy. US defense spending is three times more than China. NATO combines as a force multiplier. This is increasing militarization of Asia/ Indo Pacific and all military budgets in the region are on the increase.

China speaks of 'inclusive and collective security' repeatedly. It prioritizes prosperity over security. Yet it responds with reciprocal militarization and flexing muscles in South China Seas. Xi's recent speech on inclusive and collective security however does not touch on border and maritime claims.

The reaction and position of the Asian countries to NATO's Indo Pacific strategy is not continental, with few- mainly Singapore, Japan and South Korea, Fiji supporting NATO positions. Myanmar and Laos are with China. Thailand and Cambodia, Vietnam and Brunei remain in the middle ground. Malaysia and Indonesia- emerging powers and leaders in the region have expressed concerns about NATO and AUUKUS.

Other Asian countries like the Central Asian Republics, Mongolia and smaller countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal also want equidistant. In South Asia traditionally Pakistan was part the ISAF operations of NATO in Afghanistan during the war against terror. The regime's ties with China make them neutral between the two. India is a member of QUAD, yet remained neutral on the Russian aggression and war in Ukraine. Within QUAD, India is interested in military exercises, but wants to focus mainly on technical and trade cooperation, but would not like to be part of any confrontation between China and NATO.

Most of the ASEAN countries and islands of the Pacific are concerned about NATO's strategic push and are resisting the pressure to take sides as NATO/US want. Their overall view is that NATO's hyper activity in the region, containment of China, and expanding military and strategic alliances will lead to tensions and 'not benefit anyone' in the region. On the contrary it would lead to a regional arms race; power projection; nuclearization, which had been avoided in this entire region even during the Cold War.

Most Asian countries have benefited from China's global rise, infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative have extended communications and supported development in much of Asia,

despite several related problems. They have built valuable and harmonious ties with both the US/NATO and China and gained from these.

China has settled border issues with several neighbors- except India, while some issues like in the South China Seas they would like to resolve diplomatically. So the majority of Asian countries do not see China as a threat and do not want to be drawn into any pattern of tension escalation or geo strategic rivalries. Besides, there is a political consensus behind the Asian regimes on this issue and ASEAN wants to focus on domestic issues. Their external policy of restraints 'balancing' between great powers assists their domestic image.

China is not part of any military alliance structure. It calls itself a 'developing country' and part of the global South'. It treats Asian countries as partners and with equality; its development and foreign assistance is non conditional; China has begun to focus on non-military security and soft power. It is also beginning to trade in national currencies which is beneficial to these countries and Chinese trade is integral to value and supply chains here, that neither side would like to disrupt.

There is an understanding amongst Asian countries of the havoc that NATO caused in this region during the Cold War years. The South East Asian Treaty Alliance or SEATO as the extension of NATO worked here from 1955- to 1977 establishing a collective defense against communist China. Though it had no independent standing forces, it did provide a rationale for large scale US military intervention in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. US interventions and wars in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq are not seen sympathetically by the Asian regimes and people.

The UN Charter that outlines international law, commits states to the use of force only as the last resort after looking at a collective review and exhaustion of all alternatives along with the UN. Whereas NATO backed the US from 1954 onwards, and the US unilaterally took actions and intervention in Vietnam and elsewhere on its own economic and military capability.

There were thus many procedural and other questions that were bypassed by the US and backed by NATO. Richard Falk argued that the US approach to negotiations is that it seeks victory at the negotiating table only when it becomes unattainable on the battlefield.(Falk, International Law and the United States Role in the Vietnam War, PDF at <https://core.ac.uk> page. 1142)

At stake in the Indo-Pacific is the core issues of the South China Sea. Here the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has 168 parties, but the US took on the right to oversea and unilaterally interpret the UNCLOS. And the ASEAN regional grouping to develop a code of conduct with China has not progressed. So NATO backs the US aims of power, primacy, predominance, pre-eminence- basically unipolarity where the Indo-Pacific is the key.

Contemporary Asia is different to the one that US forces dominated over till the 1970s. Most countries here want a multipolar world where they will be able to leverage and negotiate. US and NATO policies of containment, exclusion, targeting, band wagoning, hub and spokes, and threats will not work in Asia that sees no reversal of a multipolar world. Asian countries have internal crises, rise of xenophobic nationalisms, internal oppressions, and hollowed out democracies which they need to democratically resolve. Militarization will not assist this process.

Lastly, civil society and experts in Asia oppose NATOs entry wherever they have the freedom to say so. But the minimalist position across Asia is for neutrality which ideally should adhere to international law and move towards a new non-alignment and the Common Security proposals as outlined by experts.

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- The Citizen. 25 MAY, 2022:

<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/21907/NATO-Eyes-the-Indo-Pacific-Again>

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