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## President Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A 'Collective' Endeavour



Dr Joshy M Paul  
Research Fellow, CAPS

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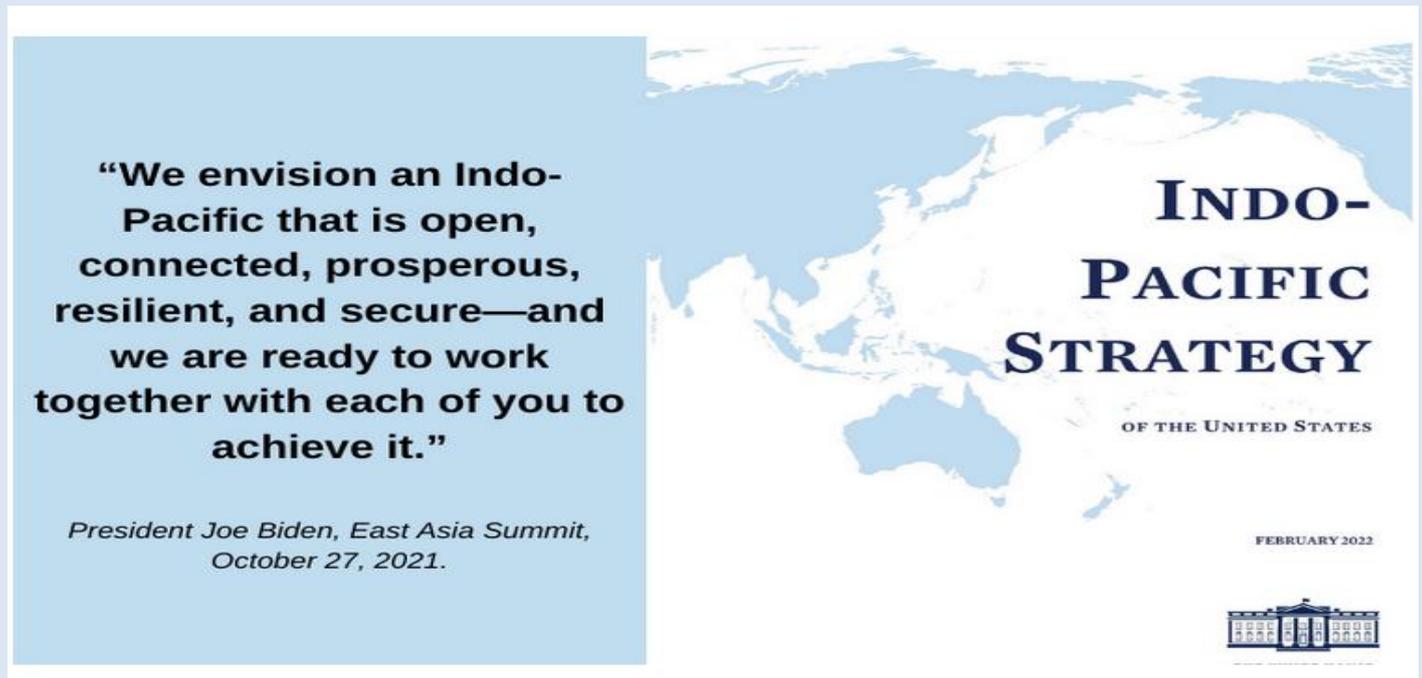


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After one year of taking office, the Biden administration's much-awaited Indo-Pacific strategy was released on February 11th, 2022,<sup>1</sup> amid the US' foreign policy being entangled in the Ukraine crisis and East Asia. During many visits by senior government officials to the Indo-Pacific region, they indicated that the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy would focus on economic and strategic aspects to counter China's economic and military dominance in the region.<sup>2</sup> China's military challenge to the US has long been a concern for the US. However, the Covid-19 crisis has emboldened China's economic stewardship in Southeast Asia, especially in the areas of the digital economy, supply chain management, foreign direct investments, and Covid induced assistance.

The strategy document underlies the US' committed focus on the Indo-Pacific region, allying to the concerns of the allies and partners of the US's resilience against China through "integrated deterrence" and building strong partnerships with the regional countries, and its efforts to drive "Indo-Pacific [economic] prosperity" through trade, investments, and economic assistance. It "will be principled, long-term, and anchored in democratic resilience". The US will rely on the strength of the "collective capacity" of its and the regional countries - five treaty allies and partners - especially the regional heavyweights of India, Australia, and Japan, which can be accrued through bilaterally as well as under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partnership. The document uses the word "collective" eight times which include "collective capacity", "collective efforts", "collective strength", "collective action", "collective military advantage", "collective regional capabilities", and "collective cybersecurity." This signifies the increasing level of cooperative efforts between the US and the regional partners to promote peace and stability in the region. Instead of depending on the US' sole material capability to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific, it seeks the material capability of regional countries to contribute to regional security. It also shows that it is not the US' unilateral vision enforcing upon the regional countries, rather the US attaches considerable importance to the choices of regional countries such as India's strategic autonomy, Japan's economic priority over security, ASEAN's centrality in Asian multilateralism, and Australia's balancing acts between the US and China.

### **Salient features**

"Salient features" of the strategic document are:

- The geographical area of the Indo-Pacific region comprises four regions: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, including the Pacific islands.
- The US sees two levels of challenge from China: global and regional. China seeks to challenge the US' global supremacy by "combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to

become the world's most influential power". The US criticises China for much of the regional tensions "from the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbours in the East and South China Seas".

- The thrust area of the US' engagement with the region will be in a manner of "sustained and creative collaboration with allies, partners, and institutions, within the region and beyond it", and consider them as "like-minded" partners.
- The US is trying to embark on its early post-war model of 'security-prosperity' concept to contain China, which tends to follow a unilateral and authoritarian style of leadership in the region. The 'security-prosperity' theory was rooted in democratic principles that had been propagated in Western Europe against Soviet communism in the post-war era.
- US' engagement with the region is comprehensive in nature which includes maritime security, regional prosperity, disaster management, climate change, Covid-19 pandemic, non-proliferation issues, critical and emerging technologies, the internet, and cyberspace.
- It seeks to create a new "Indo-Pacific economic framework" based on the principles of aborted Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) touted as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in which China is the dominant anchor.
- The US is committed to helping Indo-Pacific partners close the region's infrastructure gap through the 'Build Back Better World' initiative and also with the G7 grouping. Build Back Better World was launched by President Biden in June 2021 as an "alternative to the BRI for the infrastructure development of low- and middle-income countries".
- The US will enhance the deterrent capability in the Indo-Pacific through its mechanisms of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) and the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). The PDI is a new deterrence mechanism launched by the Biden administration to counter China's A2/AD capabilities,<sup>3</sup> while the MSI is an Obama era approach that aims to "increase maritime security and maritime domain awareness of foreign countries along the South China Sea and into South Asia".<sup>4</sup>
- In case any military alliances are needed to diffuse the crisis in the region, then the US might seek support largely from its traditional military partners such as NATO rather than creating a military coalition in the Indo-Pacific. The document explicitly states that the US will harness the capabilities of outside partners such as NATO to implement the US' "initiatives" in the region."

The Indo-Pacific has become a focus area in the US security strategy since the George W. Bush administration due to the pacing challenges posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Initially, the US pursued a policy of 'engagement' with China but later resorted to following strategic competition because the PRC used the benevolent environment to enhance its own power in the region, without considering the rights and interests of other countries in the region. China wants the US to strategically withdraw from East Asia and accept Chinese suzerainty in the region. It argues that the US has been an erstwhile power while China is the new great power; the former one will have to give way for the new one to rise without any contest. However, the US has a commitment to protect the sovereignty of as many as five countries (including Taiwan) through bilateral security treaties, so the US tries to counter China's rise and seeks to embolden its deterrent mechanism to counter China. Also, the freedom of navigation rests on the US's concept of global commons and takes responsibility to guarantee it.

On the other hand, China is not just focusing on military superiority over the US in the western Pacific theatre but is also attempting to make sure that it is the leader in all areas, from trade to investment and to economic assistance, and upholds benevolent, and cultural superiority over others. The major challenge for the US is that hardly any country from the region is willing to take on China, as Beijing has ensured that the region is integrated with China. In this regard, the latest US strategic document attempts to give considerable care to the strategic dilemmas of the regional countries and tries to accommodate their vision of Indo-Pacific security.

The document says, "We support a strong India as a partner in this positive regional vision", suggesting Washington accords higher priority to place India in its vision for Indo-Pacific security. The US considers India a Major Defense Partner, a "leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean", and supports India's "role as a net security provider" in the Indian Ocean region. Washington recognises India's military capabilities to ensure a stable Indian Ocean and expects an increased military contribution not only for Indian Ocean security but also for the larger Indo-Pacific under the Quad framework.

The US plans to launch Quad Fellowship in 2022, and 100 students will be recruited for the first batch from the member countries to pursue graduate degrees in STEM fields in the United States, beginning in 2023. "The objective of the fellowship is for cutting-edge joint research in critical domains of science and technology, a key area in Quad's emphasis to counter China's advancement in new generation technologies. Gradually, India could become a partner of joint development of new defence systems under the US initiative".

The US has also termed India as the “driving force of the Quad, and an engine for regional growth and development,”<sup>5</sup> given New Delhi’s close association with the ASEAN countries and other like-minded US allies and partners. In short, the US expects India to assume regional leadership in the Indo-Pacific as most other partners are either militarily weak or dependent on the US for their own security.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, February 12, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>. Accessed on February 12, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Takashi Nakano and Taisei Hoyama, “U.S. pushes for Indo-Pacific rules on digital trade, AI”, *Nikkei Asia*, November 18, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade/U.S.-pushes-for-Indo-Pacific-rules-on-digital-trade-AI>. Accessed on February 12, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Trevithick, “This Is The Pentagon's \$27 Billion Master Plan To Deter China In The Pacific”, *The Drive*, March 5, 2021. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/39610/this-is-the-pentagons-27-billion-master-plan-to-deter-china-in-the-pacific>. Accessed on February 12, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI)”, Department of Defence, US Government. <https://www.dsca.mil/section-1263-indo-pacific-maritime-security-initiative-msi>. Accessed on February 13, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> PTI, “India driving force of Quad, says White House”, *The Hindu*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-driving-force-of-quad-says-white-house/article65051307.ece>. Accessed on February 16, 2022.