



## CLASH OF STRATEGIES: CHALLENGE OF PRESERVING THE INDO-PACIFIC EQUILIBRIUM

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### ABSTRACT

*The Indo-Pacific is witnessing fierce strategic competition as an outcome of employing Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategies by several leading players to gain pre-eminence. These strategies tilt the geostrategic balance in one's favour, dividing the critical ocean space led by the U.S. and China. As no other maritime space has a diverse geostrategic and geopolitical environment like the Indo-Pacific, these strategic clashes have the potential to impact global peace and stability. This paper focuses on analysing how the clash of Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives introduced by several players could impact the Indo-Pacific equilibrium leading to global instability? The impact of major players led by the U.S., China, regional organizations, and other players was analysed to comprehend the resultant impact on the Indo-Pacific peace and stability. The paper also examined the policy and strategy implications encountered by island nations like Sri Lanka, in attempting to strike a balance while responding to the Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives introduced by the two major blocks led by the U.S. and China. The above understanding would assist policymakers in characterizing the Sri Lankan Indo-Pacific strategy and strategizing future foreign policy options.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific Strategies, Regional Stability

### INTRODUCTION

In 1920 Karl Haushofer, a German geopolitician accurately forecasted the renaissance of Asia through the reflection of Indian and Chinese interactions in the greater Indo-Pacific Ocean, which he named the *Indopazifischer Raum* or the Indo-Pacific Space (Haushofer, Tambs and Brehm, 2021). However, the Indo-Pacific concept drew wider attention in recent geopolitical discussions following a speech made by the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Indian Parliament in 2007 (MOFA-Japan, 2007). Since then, the Indo-Pacific concept has gathered momentum and is currently seen as one of the most vibrant ocean spaces in which major powers continue to engage in fierce competition. Current dynamics in the Indo-Pacific span from the West African shores to the Eastern shorelines of the U.S. Robert D. Kaplan (2010) argues the criticality of the Indian Ocean as well as the broader Indo-Pacific to the U.S. One could expect the discussions pertaining to the Indo-Pacific to continue especially considering the dynamic nature of the geopolitical competition as well as the global economic significance the Indo-Pacific holds.

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<sup>1</sup> Views expressed here are that of the authors and do not reflect that of Sri Lanka Navy.



The Indo-Pacific will remain as the core where the future direction of the world will be largely dependent on. This attracted major players to the Indo-Pacific led by the U.S. and China. These two players are attempting to gain the strategic edge in the Indo-Pacific by competing and attracting others to join them. While some players have opted to be part of the above dynamics, others have opted out, because of the influencing power of the two major players. Employment of dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives by major players has been identified in influencing the remaining players in the region and achieving the former's strategic objectives.

The reiterations of Prime Minister Abe's 2007 speech (MOFA, 2007) elaborated on the 'broader Asia' and 'dynamic coupling' between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans as 'seas of freedom and of prosperity' (Abdollahpour, 2021). Abe (2021) ensured that his leadership will stand by for the preservation of the common good in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and that Japan will play significant role in it. Since then, players in the Indo-Pacific as well as have introduced dedicative Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives. While these strategies broadly focus on ensuring free and unrestricted access to all, they however focus on fulfilling strategic objectives that are unique to a nation or a block.

Even though the stated policy and strategic objectives of the Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives aim at making the region free and open to all, ground realities resemble a different picture due to the fierce competition that has been unveiled. The U.S., China, Japan, India, Australia, some European Union (EU) countries, organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) either have dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies or initiatives. There are obvious concerns among the Indo-Pacific players of each other's motives as the region is divided into two leading power blocks led by the U.S. and China.

Existing Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives are used to gain regional supremacy. Accordingly, the two leading players require the acceptance of the other players as they remain a vital pillar in executing the former's intentions in the region. While the United States and China continue to use their strategies and initiatives in this game of chess to gain a lead, the remaining players are influenced to accept the former's strategy over the other and make strategic moves against the opponent. Certain regional states are aware of the evolving dynamics and have the potential to rebalance due to their superior position. However, countries with less influencing powers have either been influenced or forced to align with one of the blocks.

It is in the above context that the strategies and initiatives of major players continue to clash in a quest to gain dominance. The interest shown by distant Indo-Pacific countries in its affairs have added a new dimension making the already complicated and geopolitically sensitive Indo-Pacific playing more complex. The Indo-Pacific, therefore, has become a highly volatile region, because of the continuous pressure being exerted on the regional states as well on the leading players that seek to gain a strong foothold by tilting the balance of power in one's favour. As the competition continues, the strategy clash has an exceedingly high potential to impact regional equilibrium as leading players focus on preventing the opponent from gaining a strategic edge. As no other maritime sphere has

such a diverse geostrategic and geopolitical environment like the Indo-Pacific, the above strategy clash has the potential to influence global peace and stability.

This article illustrates the key facets of Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives introduced by some of the major players, organizations and their impacts on regional equilibrium leading to global instability. Further, at a time where Sri Lanka has been identified by many regional and global players as a strategically vital partner in fulfilling certain objectives of respective Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives, the outline of Sri Lanka's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy is also briefly presented.

## THE U.S. AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

Despite the introduction of three key documents, the U.S. is yet to fully employ a broader actionable framework to yield the expected strategic ends highlighted in the documents. While there is strong attention towards the dynamics that evolve in the Indo-Pacific, the environment has offered a unique opportunity for the U.S. to strengthen economic and strategic engagement in the region.

A shift from the previous Asia-Pacific stance to the present Indo-Pacific shows that the U.S.' focus on the region is strongly cemented in their policies (Heiduk and Wacker, 2020). The U.S. has also understood the strategic significance of the Indian factor when engaging in the Indo-Pacific and to use the maritime space to challenge the Chinese behaviour (CNAS, 2020). Since former U.S. President Trump's speech in Vietnam in November 2017, in which he elaborated on the broader U.S. vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, the U.S. has made it clear that their wider strategic aim is to gain pre-eminence in the region.

The U.S. National Security Strategy published in December 2017 notes that "a geopolitical competition between *free* and *repressive* visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region [emphasis original]" (U.S. Government, 2017). This statement essentially divides the Indo-Pacific region into two competitive blocks hinting that the 'free' vision is held by the U.S. and the 'repressive' vision by China. The document further highlights that Beijing's intention is to displace the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific and reorder the region in favour of Beijing (U.S. Government, 2017).

The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* published in June 2019 (Department of Defence, 2019), draws attention to forming partnerships and allegiances. The opening remarks denote that "increased investments...will sustain American influence in the region to ensure favourable balances of power and safeguard the free and open international order" (Department of Defence, 2019). Identifying the region as the priority theatre also reflects that the U.S. is focused on countering China's attempts to "reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations" (Department of Defence, 2019, p 4).

The third document launched in November 2019 titled *Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, describes how the U.S. is planning to collaborate with its allies and partners (U.S. State Department, 2019). This document states that the "Indo-Pacific



nations face unprecedented challenges to their sovereignty, prosperity, and peace” and reaffirm that the U.S. “will compete vigorously against attempts to limit the autonomy and freedom of choice of Indo-Pacific nations” (U.S. State Department, 2019, p 5). In addition to renaming the U.S. Pacific Command as the USINDOPACOM, the U.S.-India partnership is considered vital to implementing the U.S. Indo-Pacific vision. To compete with China’s range of infrastructure initiatives, the document fills a vacuum by introducing a series of infrastructure projects that were not discussed previously.

The arguments of the above strategy documents revolve around gaining pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific over China. While the current administration has also given greater weight to Indo-Pacific affairs and the active U.S. involvement in the region, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives are largely focused on competing with China. While the U.S. strategy documents spell out promising plans and initiatives that attempt to ensure freedom of navigation, rules-based order, focus on allies and partners, the prime objective of the U.S. is to contain China. While this general notion gathers momentum, whether the U.S. is truly capable of rallying partners and allies in the region is yet to be proved. While analysts predict greater U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific especially after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is imperative to note here that what makes U.S. presence in the region is not additional boots on the region, but its potential in harnessing a stronger framework. The strategies have so far divided the region into two blocks and have also resulted in motivating passive players in the region to align with the U.S. initiatives in the face of China’s ever-growing influence and presence in the region.

## **CHINA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been widely regarded as Beijing’s global and grand strategy (Akimoto, 2021). China believes that the BRI can improve the global governance system and the initiative is even capable of assisting disadvantageous countries (Minghao, 2018). Further, the BRI has implied that its focus is centered on economic cooperation, and that it does not entail security objectives (Minghao, 2018). It has been able to establish vital nodes at strategically important locations in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, Beijing’s critics accuse that it is monopolizing some of the strategically vital chokepoints.

Apart from the growing tensions between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea, Beijing is of the view that Washington is attempting to prevent the implementation of the BRI (Huang, 2018; Liu, 2019). It is observed that the U.S. is attempting to gain control of the Eurasian continent in the post-Cold War era by preventing the rise of a country or group that has the potential to challenge the U.S. (Yang, 2019). On the contrary, Beijing sees the BRI as a novel concept that promotes an updated version of international relations as the initiative can bring tangible benefits to Indo-Pacific countries (Meng, 2018).

Beijing’s reluctance to use the Indo-Pacific term in their policy documents and the notion that China does not belong to the region reflects the contradictory nature even on using the Indo-Pacific term by China (He and Li, 2020). Furthermore, Beijing criticizes the U.S. of attempting to create competition in the region by creating different blocks, resulting in a major division. Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted that “stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting block confrontation will find no market” (Ministry of Foreign



Affairs, 2018). However, the BRI, like its competitive initiatives in the region requires the assistance and the acceptance of the other players. When compared with other Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives, the BRI has covered a considerable area in the region through a range of projects that challenge the U.S.-led block. This tension is expected to escalate to a level that could make the region geopolitically unstable.

## **JAPAN AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

While Japan's intentions immediately after the World War II was to expand its shipping industry and fisheries, attention to maritime security sparked following Beijing's gradual expansion in the maritime space that has a direct impact on Tokyo's security objectives. The intention to play a vibrant role in shaping the regional dynamics is a result of a range of manoeuvres that China has conducted in the strategic realm making Japan uncomfortable. While attempting to employ a wide range of mechanisms to ensure security, Japan together with the U.S. has charted a course in the Indo-Pacific with the intention of reshaping global perceptions.

Former Prime Minister Abe is credited with introducing the Indo-Pacific concept in 2007 and the subsequent introduction of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which combines two continents-Asia and Africa, with two oceans-the Indian and the Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Japan, 2017). The FOIP aims at promoting stability in the region by strengthening partnerships with India, East Africa, Australia, and the U.S. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Japan, 2017). Beijing's engagement in the Indo-Pacific influenced Japan to shift from its 'check book diplomacy' to take more initiative (Green, 2018). However, Beijing continues to view the FOIP as a containment strategy (Kistanov, 2018).

One of the key pillars of Japan's FOIP strategy is economy, and it seeks all possible avenues that could displace China from the equation in the Indo-Pacific affairs by way of expanding two critical sectors namely, energy, and infrastructure (Paskal, 2021). Keeping an uninterrupted energy supply is not only essential for Japan but equally important for all the players in the region. While the slightest disturbance in the sea lanes of communication could impact Japan in a major way, attention is also focused on becoming a leading liquefied natural gas provider in the region. The Japan-U.S. Strategic Energy Partnership from 2017 (White House, 2017) adds a strong pillar to Tokyo's FOIP strategy and position in the region as an alternative energy supplier as well.

As a countermeasure to Beijing's BRI-led infrastructure projects, Tokyo also focuses on capitalizing their potential in building high-quality regional infrastructure that shows the ambition to compete with China. The attempt to become the flag bearer in regional infrastructure development and the focus to play a leadership role in the growing strategic and economic relations in the Indo-Pacific reflects that through the FOIP Japan is ready to challenge Beijing and partner with the U.S. in displacing China from the Indo-Pacific.

## **INDIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

The strategic significance of the Indian factor in terms of preserving the strategic balance in the region has been accepted by all the players. This critical position India holds in Indo-



Pacific affairs makes New Delhi a vital partner that need to be taken on board by the major players continue to compete in the region, and to those who focus on gaining supremacy over the others by employing varying Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives. The current political leadership leads New Delhi in a direction that can frame a robust, initiative-taking, and sustainable mechanism that helps India to take the middle path without aligning with the U.S. or confronting the China factor.

Prime Minister Modi's Indo-Pacific strategy not only aims at reaping the full potential of the Indo-Pacific but attempts to strike a balance between the U.S. and China, as the slightest intention of aligning with either one of them would not only have irreversible impacts on the economic and security aspects of India but would result in tilting the strategic balance in favour of either the U.S. or China. As the pragmatic balancing act may seem challenging, New Delhi favours working with Washington and Beijing to build a resilient maritime security framework and focus deeply on the geo-economics front. To achieve the above, New Delhi has introduced initiatives such as the Act East Policy, and the Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo-Pacific strategy that help to connect strategically vital nodes in the Indian Ocean.

India's 'Act East' policy aims to engage with the Asia-Pacific to promote economic cooperation through bilateral and multilateral dialogue (Ministry of External Affairs-Government of India, 2015). India's 'Free, Open, and Inclusive' Indo-Pacific strategy highlighted the importance of inclusiveness when addressing Indo-Pacific affairs (Chaudhry, 2018). The 'Act East' policy has not been viewed as a strategy to counter China. Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (Panda, 2017), the 'Neighbourhood First Policy (Tourangbam, 2019), and 'Security and Growth for All in the Region', (Kapur, 2019) are the prominent Indian strategies that aim at maintaining the crucial balance in the Indo-Pacific.

Yet, tensions in the long-disputed border in the Himalayan region, increased Chinese activities and presence in the Indian neighbourhood have made New Delhi uncomfortable. Analysts highlight that the increasing Chinese presence in countries including Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Pakistan not only fuels New Delhi's suspicions over the true ambitions of China but makes it important to understand how the behaviour of states could have wider strategy impacts on New Delhi's Indo-Pacific vision.

## **AUSTRALIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Despite a whole of government approach towards Pacific islands, Southern Ocean, and Antarctica (Brewster, 2021), Australia has so far failed to frame a comprehensive Indian Ocean strategy (Bateman and Bergin, 2010). Australian policy documents such as the Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP) and the Defence White Paper (DWP) attempt connect nodes to the Indo-Pacific. The Australian FPWP highlights the importance of peaceful evolution respecting the fundamental principles of Indo-Pacific players (Australian Government Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017). The Australian DWP highlights the value of strengthening the Australia-U.S. alliance and the necessity of U.S. leadership in protecting regional interests (Australian Government-Department of Defence, 2016). However, neither the FPWP nor the DWP have taken into consideration the impacts on the Indo-Pacific or on the regional stability due to aligning with the U.S. to contain China.



The Indo-Pacific strategic space is of vital importance to Australia's long-term ambitions in the region. Eventually, Australia will benefit due to the opportunities available to deal with regional players, opening of a path to counter China, and to address maritime security concerns (Panda, 2019). With Australia's future military ambitions and its willingness to play a vital role in the Indo-Pacific, Canberra is seen as an attractive security partner for regional players. The recent interactions and direct security cooperation with countries such as Japan and broader engagement with Southeast Asia, South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean exhibit Australia's interest in engaging and contributing to each other. However, the recent developments which sparked following the announcement of the 'AUKUS', an alliance among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., is seen as a major challenge for Australia in its own neighbourhood and the Indo-Pacific. The new alliance has been criticized by different entities for making the region further divided and seen as a mechanism to counter Beijing through different fronts.

### THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

The strategic value of the Indo-Pacific region to the European Union (EU) has been increasing in the recent past. The economic potential, geopolitical dynamics, and importantly the maritime trade and energy network that connects through the Indo-Pacific remain critical for the EU's future progression. In addition to being one of the leading trade partners in the Indo-Pacific, 'over 70% of the global trade in goods and services, and over 60% of foreign direct investment is being held by the Indo-Pacific and Europe (European Commission, 2021).

Like all other major global players, the EU countries also have identified the intense geopolitical rivalry and the increased pressure that is mounted on global trade and security. The above reasons have largely led the EU to deeply engage with the Indo-Pacific considering the importance of strategically engaging to achieve long-term EU objectives. The EU has elaborated on the importance of having a common position in the region and of playing a significant role in the security domain as well.

President Macron in a speech delivered in Sydney in May 2018 presented France as an Indo-Pacific power while outlining its strategy towards the region (Morcos, 2021). Interestingly, France's Indo-Pacific concept is much wider as it stretches from Djibouti to Polynesia. Paris is also deeply concerned about the China factor and its impact on the global commons. Therefore, France is focusing on preserving the equilibrium in the region as there is a possibility of the current tensions leading even to a military conflict. While attempting to strike a balance between the leading players, Paris sees itself as a 'mediating, inclusive, and stabilizing power' focusing on promoting a 'stable, law-based, and multipolar order' in the Indo-Pacific (Morcos, 2021). In doing so, Paris is keen on improving the military balance while supporting Europe's active interaction with the Indo-Pacific.

Germany introduced policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific in September 2020 titled 'Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping 21<sup>st</sup> Century Together' (Bordoloi, 2021). It is interesting to note that the document does not present a Germany Indo-Pacific Strategy; instead, it provides a set of guidelines that urge the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to engage with Southeast Asia. Berlin understands that the shifting geopolitical power

structures in the Indo-Pacific have the potential to impact Germany in the future. At a time when Europe is seriously considering the issues that are likely to surface due to the China factor, Germany makes it a point not to take sides and to give due prominence to strengthening multilateral mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific.

The Netherlands launched their policy note on the Indo-Pacific in November 2020 titled 'Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia' (Government of Netherlands, 2020). The Netherlands also understands the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific for the future progression of the EU. While speaking strongly on the tensions that take place in the South China Sea, and violations of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, the policy note seek cooperation to ensure maritime security in the region while highlighting the value of deepening ties with regional powers. Like any other European nation, the Netherlands is increasingly worried about the Indo-Pacific region becoming destabilized because of intense competition and intends to assist the partners to manoeuvre in an extraordinarily complex environment by becoming a valuable partner that could help ease the tensions (Hejimans, 2021).

### **ASEAN, QUAD, AND THE INDO-PACIFIC**

Of the organizations that are active in the Indo-Pacific affairs either directly or indirectly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) remain important. The two leading power players along with their respective blocks continue to interact with the remaining players in the Indo-Pacific especially taking these two structures as key nodes for engagement.

The *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (2019) an outlook for cooperation, promotes peace and stability, assists the regional rules-based order, economic cooperation, enhances ASEAN-led initiatives, and explores other areas such as maritime cooperation. The ASEAN centrality in the region has been seen as a key factor that has the potential to play a vital role. While some argue that ASEAN is also facing a challenging situation in preserving its centrality in the current context, critics have also cited the inadequacy of the ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms in addressing the increasing division in the region. However, the potential of ASEAN is seen as a major factor in resolving many issues as experts cite that ASEAN remains a critical link for external players to progress in the Indo-Pacific.

The QUAD even though not a formal alliance in the recent past has focused on economic and security issues, especially in the backdrop where tensions with Beijing continue to rise. While the four players, Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. have agreed to work on a strategy that promotes free and open ocean and respect for a rules-based order, the grouping has been cited to challenge the China factor. Beijing's relations with the members of the QUAD were seen becoming relatively tense during the pandemic period and the China officials have criticized Tokyo for bringing the 'Cold War mentality' to the region through the QUAD (Smith, 2021). Despite QUAD leaders agreeing to ensure wider cooperation in the region, this alliance is viewed as a mechanism to contain China through military means (Smith, 2021).





While it is too early to predict the dynamics and impact on the region due to the recently introduced AUKUS and how QUAD will be affected, it can be deduced quite easily that the two forums are designed to counter Beijing's influence in the Indo-Pacific, impacting the regional stability to a greater extent.

### **THE IMPACT ON THE INDO-PACIFIC EQUILIBRIUM**

The world order has today polarized heavily on the Indo-Pacific like never in history. While having a firm grip on the affairs of the region over the other players has been identified as a critical factor towards gaining unprecedented control of global affairs, major players led by the U.S. and China have introduced several strategies and initiatives to monopolize the ownership of the Indo-Pacific. The salient features discussed above relevant to such strategies and initiatives reflect that even though they speak broadly of ensuring security and prosperity in the region, the underline factor undeniably remains as to pivot the regional balance of power in favour of a particular block.

The analysis of the above-discussed strategies, initiatives, and even the recently introduced new alliances such as the AUKUS too reflects that the world is revisiting a new Cold War era, and the Indo-Pacific remains as its epicentre. While the AUKUS reflects the latest development in terms of the strategy clash in the region, the already introduced Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives have resulted in dividing the region into two clear groups, and one could only expect this division to further expand. Further, the formation of similar alliances such as the AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific and in other parts of the globe is also expected, and such initiatives are only expected to tilt the already imbalanced Indo-Pacific region.

One block is criticized by the other for attempting to contain and block their activities. Like the rest, the U.S. too requires the acceptance as well as the support of regional players and small island states in effectively implementing respective strategies. Analysts cite that the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific initiatives are yet to make a notable impact in the region when compared with Beijing's initiatives. Further, the nationalist approach adopted by the U.S. during the previous administration has indicated that even though the significance of allies and partners are strongly worded in their strategy documents, the right opposite is reflective when it comes to implementation.

China on the other hand continues to expand its grand strategy Belt and Road Initiative taking strategic advantage of all the viable options in addition to the Indo-Pacific theatre. Beijing's BRI strategy has been a success when compared with the U.S. as the former has been successful in establishing some of the strategic nodes in the Indo-Pacific, which are considered critical if any player requires making considerable influence, militarily or otherwise. It is also worth noting that China has been careful not to form different alliances like the U.S. in achieving long-term strategic objectives but, continues to focus on vigorously expanding the BRI globally.

Apart from ASEAN and the QUAD, organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM),



ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), etc. play a significant role in the Indo-Pacific dynamics. The implementation of a range of frameworks and action plans by these organizations focusing on areas such as maritime security, maritime trade, defence cooperation, climate change, and marine pollution, among many other facets are either directly or indirectly resonate with the Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives of the two leading blocks. While the possibility of the above players employing regional organizations to achieve a particular group's objectives cannot be ruled out, looking at some of the organization's behaviour in the regional affairs, it is evident that even these regional organizations are aligned to a different block in one way or the other.

The 'small states' are also an integral element of the strategic game of chess that is being played in the Indo-Pacific. The strategies that have been already launched by the major players are implemented mainly through the small states. Therefore, gaining access and acceptance from the small states for the success of respective strategies is seen as a critical factor. It is in this context that the two major players compete to gain acceptance of the small states in one's favour through a range of initiatives. This situation has put the small states in a dilemma as accepting a particular major player's strategy or initiative results in disturbing the other major player, and certain regional players. This is the 'small state's dilemma' encountered by countries in the region which adds yet another dimension to the Indo-Pacific dynamics.

Apart from aspects that have been impacted due to Indo-Pacific strategies launched by different players, focus on the freedom of navigation is seen as an area that has attracted the attention of many. While the leading players continue to criticize each other for issues that centre around the South China Sea, it is important to note that the sea lines of communication that span across the Indo-Pacific are considered as vital lifelines that ensure uninterrupted trade and energy flow. The situation becomes tense among the rest when Beijing is cited as having a certain degree of involvement in 17 ports and the direct involvement in constructing 13 ports out of them (Faridi, 2021). It is paramount that the key players in the Indo-Pacific understand the regional and global implications that should result to take control of any strategically vital maritime chokepoints in the region.

The above discussion shows that the 'Stability Matrix' (Figure 1) in the Indo-Pacific includes components such as; major players (U.S. and China-led), respective Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives, other players (Australia, India, Japan, etc.), and organizations. The complex interactions among each of the above elements and the intensity of the reactions create a force by each block. The resultant force created, therefore, dictates which block has the potential to make the most impact over the other to gain dominance. The past and present regional dynamics have shown that even though the stated intentions of major players are to retain stability, security, and cooperation in the region, their actions over the years have contradicted when it comes to ground realities. As an outcome of the two leading group's intense dynamics, a force is generated by each block which seeks to gain even a slight edge over the other in regional affairs. This continued contest results in instability as destabilizing the regional balance is the only way a particular block could gain supremacy over the other.

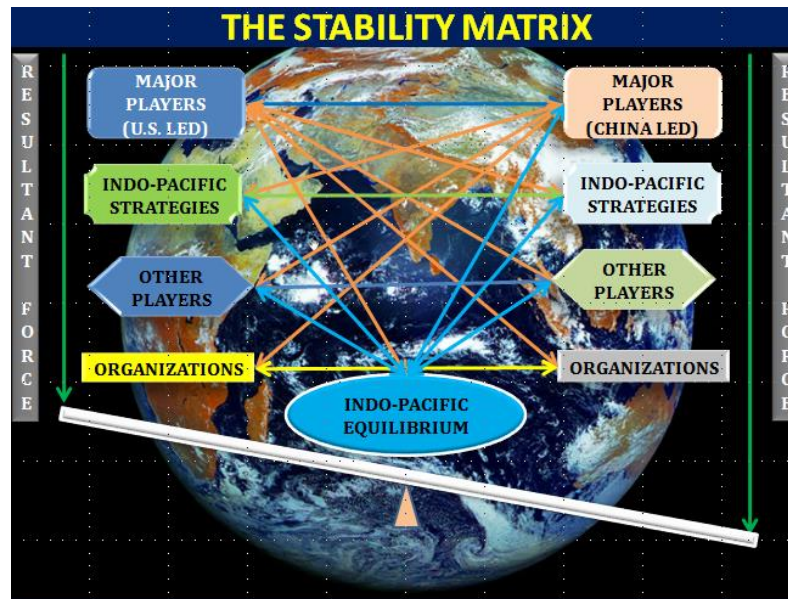


Figure 1: Stability Matrix

Source: Author

### SRI LANKA'S FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Even though Sri Lanka has not officially announced a dedicated Indo-Pacific strategy or initiative, Colombo has committed to ensuring freedom of navigation and adherence to international rules and regulations in the Indian Ocean and broader Indo-Pacific. Despite the above, Sri Lanka has become a key partner in the strategies and initiatives launched by the two players. Sri Lanka being a small island state in the Indian Ocean, the strategic location is one of the leading factors that attract key players to take Sri Lanka on board as an important player in their strategic manoeuvres in the Indo-Pacific. Admiral Harris, the former U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander at the 2016 Galle Dialogue International Maritime Conference underlined the importance of Sri Lanka's 'location' in deciding the strategic significance (U.S. Embassy-Colombo, 2016). When the former Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon called Sri Lanka 'an aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles of the Indian Coast' (Menon, 2016), he highlighted the strategic importance of Sri Lanka's location to India.

The above situation drives Sri Lanka to a challenge when it comes to making key strategic decisions. As a nation that embraces a nonaligned foreign policy, it is vital to keep all players equally engaged. Further, it is also equally important not to make any indication to hint that Colombo is aligned to either country A, B, or C, which is a mammoth diplomatic exercise that requires precision handling of affairs. In this quest, it is vitally important to understand the sensitivities that surround India as well. Sri Lankan policymakers such as the President and the Foreign Ministry Secretary on several occasions have reassured that Sri Lanka will not allow any action to take place on her soil that impacts India.

At a time when many players prefer to engage with Sri Lanka through maritime-centric cooperation initiatives, policymakers are required to map out plans that enable Colombo to carry out strategic manoeuvres with all players. While Sri Lanka has the freedom to engage with any partner, the Indian factor remains critical. The assurance given to India that 'Sri Lanka would not be used for any activity that could pose a threat to India's security' (NDTV,



2021) recently by the Sri Lankan President himself speaks the sensitivity of the Indian factor. Therefore, the author highlights that it is important for Sri Lanka to focus on a 'Right Alignment' policy, which gives freedom to align with any partner willing to collaborate in achieving the country's strategic maritime vision especially in the Indian Ocean and broadly in the Indo-Pacific.

In the above context, it will be important for Colombo to unveil Sri Lanka's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (SLFOIP) strategy. While agreeing upon freedom of navigation and international accepted rules-based order, the SLFOIP should focus on *strategically* engaging with all players in the Indo-Pacific. This strategy should essentially centre on the Indian Ocean with a broader view of the Indo-Pacific. Further, the strategy requires embracing '*inclusiveness*' to avoid Sri Lanka being aligned with any block to exclude any player or compete with another block which could impact Sri Lanka negatively. This is where the criticality of making the most appropriate strategic manoeuvre becomes challenging to a small island state like that of Sri Lanka.

Due to the location and the past experiences in dealing with maritime security-related issues, the strategy should focus on presenting Sri Lanka as a vital partner that has experience in addressing maritime security issues. Further, it is imperative to highlight the role Sri Lanka can play in protecting the global trade and energy arteries that span across the surrounding ocean space. Such a strategy would not only position Sri Lanka as a vibrant maritime partner in the wider Indo-Pacific but would also help to achieve strategic maritime ends that Sri Lanka wishes to achieve as the maritime space remains the last frontier due to the enormous potential it holds.

## CONCLUSION

Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives that have been introduced by leading players have resulted in the division of the region into two leading blocks. While the two blocks continue to compete to gain an edge over the other, the much-needed stability in the Indo-Pacific is disturbed to a greater extent. As a result, maritime trade and energy transportation, maritime security, and regional cooperation have encountered rough seas and fierce winds.

The continuous attempt to tilt the Indo-Pacific balance in favour of one block or a couple of countries through above-discussed strategies and initiatives is expected to continue dramatically in the coming few years. The recently introduced defence alliances and any other similar future initiatives will only make the already complicated environment a complex one. Some observations have been made regarding some of the regional organizations as they too tend to incline towards certain blocks in achieving their objectives. This makes the situation further tense.

Based on the above discussion and the current developments that take place in this strategically vibrant maritime space, it can be argued that even though the already introduced Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives state that they focus on ensuring freedom of navigation and respecting rules-based international order, ground realities reflect that the two blocks led by the U.S. and China are engaged in a fierce competition that attempts



to seek regional primacy. The rapid pace of the changing geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific indicates that the two leading blocks will continue to fiercely arm the region through similar strategies and initiatives making the Indo-Pacific the most volatile region that holds the potential of becoming a theatre that exhibits true military manoeuvres, both on land and out at sea, making the beginning of a fierce conflict.

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