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Examining Us Maritime Strategy in the Indo-Pacific (2017-2024)

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Abstract*— One of the most important and highly recurring term in the lexicon of American naval strategists is the Indo-Pacific. Highly coveted by all powers in the current international order, it has emerged as a flashpoint for maritime supremacy and intense geopolitical rivalry in the 21st century. The United States, its allies, partners and its principal adversary, the People's Republic of China are the major players in this theater. China has rapidly expanded its dominance in this region and the US has sharply responded by a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) intended to contain Beijing's footprint. While existing literature encompasses Washington's substantial efforts and energy to neutralise its nemesis in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea, IOR and Oceania, it has inadequately addressed America's answer to increasing Chinese overtures in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), a critical region for the US. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this paper to explore what strategies can the US employ to counter China in the Western Indian Ocean Region through a qualitative case study methodology and thematic data analysis. The study found out that the US can cooperate with other Indo-Pacific Powers such as France, UK, India, increase its interactions with WIO littoral island states, strategically use its Diego Garcia base to effectively tackle China from consolidating this region and preserve the rules-based order.

***Index Terms*— Western Indian Ocean, US, China, Indo-Pacific, FOIP**

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the United States of America has emerged as the global hegemon and sole superpower of the international order. It is the strongest military, economic and technological giant with great power projection capabilities all across the globe. However, with the ascendance of the Peoples Republic of China, the US is now facing an adversary which is challenging it in multiple spheres and world regions. One such region where the US and China are at loggerheads with one another is the Indo-Pacific. The US has been a dominant entity in the Indo-Pacific for decades and supports freedom of navigation and a rules-based order in the region, whereas its arch-rival, Beijing, is seeking to rapidly eclipse America's position and enforce its own threatening, assertive order which is in complete contrast to that of Washington and its democratic allies.

Beijing pursues an aggressive foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific Region. In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which is an important component of the Indo-Pacific maritime theater, China has adopted a policy known as the String of Pearls. As part of its maritime strategy, China has continuously developed close strategic ties with littoral states and maritime nations of the IOR. It has developed port facilities in Pakistan (Gwadar), Maldives (Male), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Bangladesh (Chittagong), and Myanmar (Coco Islands) The String of Pearls begins from China's Hainan Port in the Middle East, passes all the way through the IOR and the South China Sea and culminates at the eastern coast of China (Guangzhou). This is a strategy to encircle, isolate India in the IOR as well as reducing American influence in the region as well. China has also expanded its diplomatic reach by opening embassies in six nations of the IOR which are Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Mauritius.

Similarly, in the South China Sea (SCS), which is also a critical subregion of the Indo-Pacific, Beijing has resorted to a coercive strategy. First, it uses cartographic aggression to claim all of the SCS as its own through an artificial demarcation called the Nine Dash Line. Second, it has militarised the region by building and dredging artificial islands and constructing military infrastructure over them in the form of aircraft hangers, airstrips, naval bases, ports, docks for submarines etc. It uses its military and economic might to prohibit other littoral nations of the SCS such as Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei from fishing and energy exploration in the SCS. **(Devi and Singh 2024, 10-13).**

To neutralise China's aggression and preserve the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific Region, the US under President Donald Trump has spearheaded a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, which stressed on Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in SCS, naval cooperation with India, reinvigorating the QUAD (India, US, Japan and Australia) and combating China's technological primacy. The impetus of Trump's FOIP was carried forward by his successor Joe Biden who incorporated more elements into the existing strategy such as expanding QUAD, launching initiatives such as Build Back Better World, I2U2, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) However, current literature on US Indo-Pacific Maritime Strategy from 2017 to 2024 focuses exclusively on American efforts and strategies to reduce Chinese expansionism in the SCS and IOR **(Raj 2025; Pant and Mann 2023; Pant and Parpiani 2020),**

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thereby leaving the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), a critical region of the Indo-Pacific inadequately addressed and underexplored. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to investigate what strategies can the US adopt to counter China in the WIO through a qualitative case study methodology.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Trump Presidency

President Donald Trump launched his Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy (FOIP) in November 2017 at the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit (APEC) at Hanoi, Vietnam. Trump emphasised the need to establish fair, reciprocal trade relations based on the principles such as respect for intellectual property rights, free trade, protection of private property, fair competition and open markets. Other core elements of the FOIP include respect for the sovereignty and independence of all states, peaceful conflict resolution, respect for international rules including freedom of air and sea transport. Free in the FOIP stands for freedom of all states to exercise their sovereignty without interference by other states. Open refers to free access to international waters, airspace and digital space, open access to markets and fair, reciprocal trade. **(Heidux and Wacker 2020, 13-15; Kumar 2019, 3)**

The US alliance and partnership network has been the centrepiece of American strategy in the Asia since the end of World War II and is the principal measure by which the US maintains collective security in the Indo-Pacific. A key feature of the Trump administration has been its strategy to on expanding US engagement with smaller nations in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Island nations. In South Asia, the US has strengthened relationships with nations such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, by offering new high-level dialogues and assistance that includes $500 million USD grant towards infrastructural development to Nepal and a high endurance Coast Guard Vessel to Colombo. In Southeast Asia, the US has sharpened engagement in the Mekong region including a new US-Japan Mekong Power Partnership and additional funding to counter non-traditional security threats such as transnational crime and trafficking. In addition, new forms of technical assistance and advice have been provided by the US to countries such as Myanmar.

Other principles which form the bedrock of the US Indo-Pacific strategy including promoting shared principles including respect for state sovereignty and independence, free trade, peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for international rules such as freedom of navigation and overflight. It has reinforced these principles on multiple fronts such as organising Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in contested areas of the South China Sea, increasing maritime capacity building support for Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations, working alongside G20 nations to promote New Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment and launching a new $400 million USD Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative. The US has also tightened its relationships with allies and partners on this front and developed initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network (BDN) which will work with Japan, Australia and others to promote high standards in infrastructure development which will be an effective answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Trump administration also launched the BUILD Act (Better Utilisation of Investments Leading to Development Act) to provide private sector capital to developing nations. This Act inaugurated the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) which is an update on the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, to provide private sector capital to countries in need. **(Ford 2020, 5-6)**

There are three core efforts behind this FOIP strategy. The first is combat readiness. The US Department of Defense is working to enhance American combat readiness in times of most urgent contingencies through investing in training facilities, installations, advanced missile defense systems, as well as enhancing strategic deterrence capabilities. The US is also building and developing future deployed forces in the Indo-Pacific and balancing major forces in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. The second element is partnerships. The US is strengthening and modernising alliances with South Korea, Japan, Australia, Philippines, Thailand, and expanding its engagement with Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand and Mongolia along with India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal. The US is also solidifying its relations with Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam, commitments with Pacific Island nations as well as outreach to other powers such as France, UK etc. America also wants to establish a networked region in the Indo- Pacific through trilateral partnerships such as South Korea-Japan-US; Japan-Australia-US; India-US-Japan. It is strengthening regional institutions through multilateral commitments with ASEAN, encouraging emerging security relationships in Asia such as Vietnam-Australia, Japan-Vietnam, India-Vietnam and India-Japan-Australia **(Hiep et al. 2024, 5)**

America's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Joe Biden Administration

Trump's successor, Joe Biden launched his Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022. In this strategy, the Biden administration stated that the US would prioritize its single great asymmetric strength, its network of security alliances as the primary means of supporting regional stability. Apart from collective security, the Biden administration has been focused on providing additional public goods to the region, including climate resilience, health security and humanitarian aid and disaster relief. To that end, the strategy advocates for greater coordination with US allies and partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Thailand, India and Taiwan.

Biden has also reinforced the QUAD, incorporated critical technologies and vaccine diplomacy in its framework, strengthened the trilateral relationship between the US, Japan and South Korea. In September 2021, the US launched the

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AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) trilateral security partnership to deepen diplomatic, security and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS will not only enhance Australia's nuclear submarine capability, but also improve interoperability among the three navies. Beyond military coordination, the AUKUS also plans to develop advanced dual use capabilities in quantum computing, artificial intelligence, electronic warfare. On the economic front, Joe Biden and a dozen Indo-Pacific partners launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which focuses on four pillars: digital trade, supply chain resilience, sustainability and anti-corruption.

In June 2021, Biden, along with G7 leaders, launched the B3W (Build Back Better World) Partnership to meet the tremendous infrastructure needs of low- and middle-income nations by investing billions of dollars in the coming years. In contrast to the BRI, the B3W intends to abide by high labour, transparency and sustainability standards. **(Haenle 2022; Thanh 2021)**

American and Chinese Interests in the WIO

For the US, two military commands cover the WIO. The first is AFIRCOM, which covers the littoral regions of Africa in the Indian Ocean and parts of the Red Sea Coast. The second is CENTCOM which covers the North and Eastern coast of the Red Sea including Egypt as well as the southern states of the Arabian Peninsula like Yemen and Oman. Pakistan, along with Iran are also covered by the CENTCOM. These two commands, and a consequently substantial US military presence in the WIO represent US strategic power in the WIO. America's strategy towards West Asia, Africa and Indian Ocean coalesce in the WIO and its military base in Djibouti is at the centre of this engagement. The security of the Seal Lanes of Communications (SLOC) passing through this region remains a vital US interest. The US also maintains a military presence in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Seychelles. These bases are not as large as Djibouti, but nevertheless significant for projecting US combat power in the WIO to neutralise threats, existing as well as potential.

Concerning China, it has been progressively building closer economic and infrastructural ties with the WIO nations like Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Sudan. Over the years, China has emerged as the largest trading partner of African countries and depends on West Asian and African energy resources transported through the IOR for its continued economic growth. Beijing is developing massive ports (Lamu in Kenya, Bagamoyo, in Tanzania), and railways in Kenya-Ethiopia and Djibouti) in the WIO region and enjoys close ties with Zimbabwe and South Africa. Thus, the WIO is a key component of the Chinese BRI. Beijing has also expanded its diplomatic presence in the region such as close ties with Somalia, Madagascar and Seychelles. Its first overseas base in Djibouti opened in 2017 is a clear expression of Chinese growing interest in the WIO. The base at Djibouti is the first operating forward base of China and it allows Beijing to monitor the WIO especially, the activities of US, its allies, support anti-piracy missions and protecting Chinese assets/citizens in the region. **(Gurjar and Dutta, n.d.)**

From a global strategic perspective, the Middle East and the WIO region serves as a vital nexus point, allowing ships to transit from the Atlantic and Mediterranean to the Middle East and on to Asia in the shortest amount of time via the Suez Canal. It is the primary link between Europe and Asia and maintaining freedom of movement and navigation in the region is critical to US Navy's ability to move forces from the Atlantic and Europe to Asia during any contingency or emergency crisis. For instance, US Naval ships, transiting at a rate of 15 knots from Naples to Japan via the Suez Canal will arrive in roughly 23.5 days versus 38 days if they use the Panama Canal or 39 days if they travel across the Cape of Good Hope. Thus, in any conflict in the Indo-Asia Pacific, the Middle East and WIO serve as a vital hub enabling US naval forces in Europe and the Mediterranean to flow into the INDOPACOM (Indo-Pacific Command) AOR (Area of Responsibility) in the shortest amount of time. Three critical choke-points are located in close proximity to the WIO. These are the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal, all of which are strategically important for global energy trade, transport and commerce. **(Becker et al. 2019)**

Chinese Aggression in the Indo-Pacific

China's aggression started in 2009 with the embarkation of Chinese government expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, encompassing almost 90 percent of the sea termed as the nine-dash line imprinted on the 1940s map. Since then, China has aggressively built up its military installations on the SCS islands to legitimise and defend its sovereignty claims. Several threats arise from China's military aggression such as deliberate infringement of littoral states sovereignty, neutralising opposition of other disputants by use of military threats through intensification of its aggressive policy of encroaching into other states exclusive economic zones, use coercive power to ensure submission of other disputants, besides tempting them with financial aid, China often stops or threatens to stop commercial deals to compel other states to change their policies towards China. Beijing also resorts to colonisation of disputed territory through massive and determined militarisation on numerous natural and man-made islands within disputed territorial waters equipped with comprehensive military facilities and installation of offensive weaponry. Many view this development as an act of colonising neighbouring territories and violating international ruling with potential escalation into wider areas in the future.

China also resorts to economic assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The primary and the most popular foreign policy instrument used by Beijing is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The key national security threat is the loss of sovereignty by host countries resulting from inability to service sovereign debts taken for BRI projects such as Debt Trap Diplomacy. It is a well-crafted strategy where a benign

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China offers economic and financial assistance through its government linked enterprises to host nations. Often developing nations, mostly low- and middle-income nations are attracted to relatively cheap and easy term loans offered by China to undertake transformative infrastructure projects that alter the economic landscape and provide economic mileage to political leaders. The trap comes into picture when these countries fail to honour repayment commitments on time and Beijing will offer another way to barter out, exchanging debt reliefs with strategic state concessions or other advantages, which is a clear threat to sovereignty.

Other threats from China in the Indo-Pacific include cyber espionage. The BRI enables Chinese government linked companies to build and, in most cases, provide continuous maintenance services giving them access to strategic and vital intelligence of host nation's security preparedness, capacity and capabilities which is a serious threat to national security. Additionally, the dual use nature of the BRI infrastructure enables military usage, creating a strategic choking point along key maritime and energy routes from Persian Gulf to Pacific Ocean with full port capabilities supported by shipbuilding and maintenance facilities, resupply services, transportation and communication connectivity. A chain of these infrastructures with high probability to fall into China's ownership via debt trap diplomacy poses significant threat to regional security. As to date, China has taken control of several of these strategic choke points enabling the Chinese Navy (PLAN) to station its assets and manpower to patrol these areas. (**Zulkifli et al. 2023, 5-8)**

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study, a qualitative case study design has been adopted. The data for this paper was mainly collected through secondary sources such as media reports, websites, think tank publications and research articles. The collected data was coded manually and then subjected to content analysis. No form of statistical techniques, nor any type of mathematical calculations or software were used to analyse the data. The methodology is purely qualitative. A key limitation of this paper is that it lacks primary data and primary sources such as surveys, questionnaires, interviews etc.

IV. RESULTS

The following findings were obtained after coding and analysing the data:

1) Increasing Cooperation with Indo-Pacific Partners

In order to counter China's overtures in the Western Indian Ocean Region, the United States must adopt a cautious and careful approach. Excessive military or naval activity in the region can lead to fears and apprehensions of militarization amongst the island nations. Washington must cooperate with strong and viable partners in the Indo-Pacific Region such as India due to its immediate proximity to the WIO. Coordinated Indo-US action can sustain and support a rules-based order in the maritime theater. Moreover, the relations between the US and Indian navies should grow beyond traditional naval to naval ties and focus on comprehensive partnerships with East African littoral states. Additionally, the I2U2 (India-Israel-US-UAE) can jointly engage in the Gulf Region and bring maritime issues to the forefront. **(Saha 2022)**

2) Strategically Using the Diego Garcia Base

Situated at the heart of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the Diego Garcia base offers strategic advantages to the US. It is 3000 kilometres away from the Bab-e-Mandeb Strait near the mouth of the Red Sea and the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea (SCS). It provides the US military ability to project power across the WIO, reassure allies and deter adversaries. The base has large airfields with extended airstrips and runways which can allow strategic aircraft such as the B-52 Stratofortress Bombers, Reconnaissance Aircraft, Tankers, fighters and transport jets to conduct sorties. It houses major radar stations, fuel storage facilities and control towers along with a deep-water port for docking, resupplying and maintaining numerous naval vessels such as destroyers, frigates, battleships and above all submarines. It also links three critical American military commands, which are CENTCOM, AFRICOM, INDOPACOM respectively. **(Erickson et al. 2010)**

3) Diversifying Engagement with Indian Ocean Maritime States

The two most prominent entities in the IOR are the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (an initiative by the Indian Navy). IORA is composed of 23 member states and 12 dialogue partners of which the US is one. While most of the 23 member-states of the IORA actively participate in the IONS, America's meagre involvement in the IONS hinders its engagement with countries of the IOR. The US has only three embassies and two defence attaches encompassing the seven island nations of the IOR which cripples the US from effectively engaging diplomatically with these states. Moreover, America's economic ties with the IOR nations are very low as compared to China's. The US must incorporate IOR maritime nations into its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. **(Saha 2023)**

4) Increased Defence Cooperation with India

India and the US have a robust defence cooperation. Numerous strategic military agreements have been signed between Washington and New Delhi for logistical cooperation, such as Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), secure communication-COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) and geospatial intelligence sharing- BECA (Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement) which can enhance operational capabilities in the WIO. Moreover, through Joint Exercises,

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intelligence sharing and the above strategic agreements, India and the US can enhance Maritime Domain Awareness, develop capabilities to respond to threats, ensuing secure passage and sea lanes of communication for commercial vessels. A prominent example is the Tiger Triumph Naval Exercise between India in 2024, which involved all three wings of the Indian Armed Forces. Drills were conducted for improving inter-operability in HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operations). In addition, the QUAD MALABAR Exercise between US, India, Japan and Australia must grow in the WIO region focusing on counter-terrorism and maritime security. **(Singh 2024)**

5) Develop a Comprehensive Vision for the IOR

The US must develop a comprehensive strategy for the IOR. A step taken towards this domain is the Indian Ocean Strategic Review Act introduced by the American Congress in May 2024. This Act defines the US conception of the IOR as including the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the other littoral areas of the WIO. This law reflects the US imperative for articulating a clear, strategic approach to the IOR in the heat of great power competition. This Act outlines the WIO a secondary theater to Beijing's interests and highlights that China's expanding commercial footprint, growing network of ports and increasing Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) activities foreshadows a long-term concern not just for the US but also for India. This legislation calls for supporting governments and non-governmental organisations in disaster management, building resilient infrastructures, increasing maritime domain awareness along with cooperating with allies such as Japan, France, UK to uphold a rules-based order.

The Act also outlines in depth economic, diplomatic, security engagement with WIO states. This is to be realised by building closer political relations through regional organisations and exploring economic opportunities in tandem. This Act also stresses on protecting trade routes and shipping lanes to ensure freedom of navigation and additionally address non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, armed robbery, smuggling and illegal unregulated fishing. Above all, the Act seeks to embolden intra-departmental coordination between the US Department of Defense, State Department and the United States Agency for International Development to implement an effective WIO strategy. **(Mishra 2024)**

V. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the primary strategies the US needs to adopt at the moment to counter China in the WIO are to maximise the strategic potential of its Diego Garica military base in the IOR and also comprehensively engage with India. Due to their geographic proximity to the WIO, both India and the Diego Garcia installation become the first responders to any aggressive Chinese postures in the region. Through the LEMOA, India and the US can dock and berth each other's naval vessels and submarines in their military bases and facilities which will enable quick response to Beijing's overtures in the WIO. COMCASA's superior, high-tech communication will magnify interoperability amongst American and Indian navies. BECA will provide real time intelligence about PLAN (Chinese Navy's military movements to US and Indian naval commanders and thus necessary preparations can be made beforehand. Joint military exercises like Tiger Triumph, RIMPAC and MALABAR will intimidate and reduce Chinese naval muscle flexing intensity to large extent. Second, the US military maintains stocks of defence equipment such as tanks, armoured vehicles, munitions, fuel and spare parts on prepositioned ships at Diego Garcia which can provide Washington with tremendous contingency and crisis response capabilities. The US Army and Marine Corps can be mobilised in 24 hrs at Diego Garcia and position assets in the theater anywhere within a week's time. The atoll's airfield can support tactical and long-range aircraft. The island also plays a critical signals intelligence function, which can monitor and intercept communications from across the littoral regions and has nine stations that the US uses to command military satellites. Besides undertaking military measures, increasing diplomatic, political and economic engagement with the WIO island states and East African states like Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar through multilateral Indo-Pacific frameworks can and forging strong relationships with other allies in the WIO such as France, UK can result in a strong bulwark to China's assertiveness. Finally, the American government must also pay equal attention towards the WIO as it does to other maritime domains within the Indo-Pacific.

VI. CONCLUSION

The main aim and objective of the study was to determine the strategies which the US can use to counter China in the Western Indian Ocean. The overall outcomes of the study were as follows: First, the US has to cooperate with other Indo-Pacific partners and powers near to the WIO such as India, France, UK. Second, it also has to increase its interaction and participation with the East African states as well as island nations of the WIO. Third, it has to judiciously and strategically use the Diego Garcia base to its maximum advantage. Fourth, the US needs to economically engage with the WIO and East African littorals, which is an area where the US is lagging behind China. Lastly, Washington must devote substantial time, energy and efforts plus develop more capabilities (military, economic, technological and political) to negate Chinese influence as well as prohibiting it from gaining a foothold in the WIO region. The findings from this study will be of immense use to students of US-China Relations, Indo-US Relations and researchers specialising in maritime security or maritime studies.

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