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# BIDEN'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

A REGIONAL FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, the United States has considered the Indo-Pacific region to be of great importance. The first US president of the 21st century, President George W. Bush, closely worked and engaged with countries like India, China, and Japan, while President Obama prioritised Asia and the Indo-Pacific region in his foreign policy objectives, mainly through investment in economic and military resources. President Trump also stated the importance of the Indo-Pacific region by putting out a 64-page report on his administration's policy and strategy in the Indo Pacific region. And with President Biden being in office for more than a year, he has also promised to strengthen the American position and commitment to the Indo-Pacific region in Interim National Security Guidance, which was released in 2021. This was further solidified on 11th February 2022, when the National Security Council, under the Biden administration, released a report titled “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”. The report details the Biden Administration's plans of expanding its role in the IndoPacific Region, while simultaneously strengthening the region itself.<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, to show his seriousness towards his commitment to this region and his strategy, Biden proposed \$1.8 billion in his budget to implement the strategy, under the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we will analyse Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and discuss the core themes throughout the report, along with the challenges that Biden will face as he begins to implement this strategy and what the future holds for the US role in the Indo-Pacific region.

## The Indo-Pacific Region: Defining and Understanding Its Significance

To understand the strategy, we must first understand what constitutes the Indo-Pacific region and what is its significance. Over the years, there have been debates and disagreements on what exactly constitutes the Indo-Pacific Region. On a geospatial level, the Indo-Pacific Region can be defined

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<sup>1</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> "Biden Proposes USD 1.8 Billion For Indo-Pacific Strategy As Part Of Annual Defence Budget". 2022. *Thehindu.Com*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/biden-propose-usd-1-point-8-billion-indopacific-strategy/article65269661.ece>.

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as the intertwined space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and on a strategic level, the Indo Pacific region can be defined as a continuum across two oceans, that is the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, that is joined by the main trading channel, the strait of Malacca.<sup>3</sup>

The different allies that have invested in this region also present different interpretations of its constituents. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his keynote speech at the Shangri-la Dialogue in 2018, defined the region as "from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas"<sup>4</sup>, whereas the European Union (EU) defined the Indo-Pacific Region as "extending from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States" in its strategy report called "EU strategy for Cooperation in the Indo Pacific".<sup>5</sup> The United States defines it as the region "stretching from the Pacific Coastline to the Indian Ocean."<sup>6</sup> The places in the region defined by the United States include Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor Leste, United States, and Vietnam.

Second, it is important to understand why this region has gained such significance since the beginning of the 21st century. These are four key reasons:

1. The Indo-Pacific region is central to global economic growth, with the region holding four out of the top ten of the world's biggest economies: the United States, China and Japan in the top three positions whereas India, is in the sixth position.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Das, Udayan. 2022. "What Is The Indo-Pacific?". *TheDiplomat.Com*. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/what-is-theindo-pacific/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Prime Minister'S Keynote Address At Shangri-la Dialogue (June 01, 2018)". 2022. *Mea.Gov.In*. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018)

[Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018). <sup>5</sup>

"Questions And Answers: EU Strategy For Cooperation In The Indo-Pacific". 2022. *European Commission*. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709).

<sup>6</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, Yen Nee. 2021. "Here Are The 10 Biggest Economies In The World — Before The Pandemic Vs. Now". *CNBC.Com*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/21/coronavirus-worlds-10-biggest-economies-before-covidpandemic-vs-now.html>.

2. On a tactical level, the Indo-Pacific region is home to seven out of the twenty of the world's biggest militaries<sup>3</sup>: United States, Japan, China, India, South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan.
3. When it comes to the maritime domain, it is observed that the majority of the global trade passes through the Indo-Pacific region, with the two oceans, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, supporting the sea lines that allow the global trade to pass through.
4. While the sign has its pros, it also has its cons. The Indo-Pacific region serves up the potential for several armed conflicts: from North Korea's nuclear and missile program to China's aggression toward Taiwan and India, the border dispute between India and Pakistan to control over the South and East China Seas.

## Analysis of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

### Alliances and Partnerships

One of the core themes of Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy has been collective action to defeat threats. Throughout the document, it states that for the United States to thrive in the Indo-Pacific region, "like-minded" allies and close partners must come together, coordinate their values and beliefs, and work together to not only help the United States but also their allies to thrive. As stated in the report, one of the key aspects of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is to "build connections within and beyond the region",<sup>4</sup> which means that the United States wants to focus on building "collective capacity" to deal with the issues and challenges that are facing this region. This includes renewing

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<sup>3</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

and strengthening partnerships with countries like Japan, Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, and South Korea, all of which also have a US air or navy base in their countries, except for Thailand.<sup>5</sup> Even before the release of the strategy, at the start of the Biden presidency, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made his first foreign trip to Japan, along with Secretary of Defence Lloyd J.

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Austin to reaffirm and renew the American commitment toward Asia, while also signalling how serious Biden was about his commitment towards Asia, particularly the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> In addition to that, the United States not only wants to strengthen relationships with other countries but also to strengthen their partnerships with countries like Mongolia, New Zealand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and India. Along with that, the United States also encourages other countries in the region to renew and strengthen their relationship, particularly, the Republic of Korea and Japan, further discussed in detail in this paper. Another vital grouping that the United States wants to work with, in the Indo-Pacific region, is the QUAD, which consists of the countries: Australia, India, Japan and the United States as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The United States wants to work with these groupings to support and help them deliver on the region's most pressing issues. In addition to that, the United States is also exploring opportunities wherein ASEAN and QUAD could work together, which perhaps could be in the field of health security, disaster management or even commerce. The United States believes that it is best to not only empower themselves in this region but also take steps to empower their allies to take on leadership roles.

When it comes to working with allies beyond the Indo-Pacific region, the international organisations that come to mind are the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the United Nations (UN). In November 2021, the EU came out with its strategy on the Indo-Pacific Region titled "EU Strategy on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", wherein they stated that the main goal of the EU in the Indo-Pacific is to deepen its engagement with their partners in the region to work on various issues that are facing them and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region, a goal that is shared by the United States as well. The United States believes

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<sup>5</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "Secretary Blinken's Travel To Tokyo And Seoul - United States Department Of State". 2021. *United States Department Of State*. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-tokyo-and-seoul/>.

that these organisations, being the EU and NATO, can come together, align their approaches on various issues facing the Indo-Pacific region and build better relations with allies and partners and ensure the upholding of law in coordination with the United Nations.

In September 2021, the United States, United Kingdom and Australia announced their trilateral security alliance known as the AUKUS. In a joint statement, the leaders state that the goal of this

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alliance is to “strengthen the ability of each to support our security and defence interests, building on our longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to that, the leaders also stated that under the first initiative of this alliance, the United Kingdom and the United States will “commit to a shared ambition to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy”.<sup>8</sup> This alliance will make Australia the seventh country to own nuclear-powered submarine warheads, and the fourth country in the Indo-Pacific region, along with the United States, China, and India.<sup>14</sup> With this alliance, China will face another major security alliance in the Indo-Pacific region, as the United States takes another step in countering China’s global rise.

## The China Test

Another core theme of this strategy was China and how to counter its rise on a global level by starting on the regional level. The strategy document states that the United States will intensify its focus in the Indo-Pacific region to emerging challenges, mainly from China, as China merges its military, economic, diplomatic and technological power to influence, with an acute focus on the Indo-Pacific region, as American allies in the Indo-Pacific region bear the brunt of Chinese

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<sup>7</sup> "Joint Leaders Statement On AUKUS | The White House". 2021. *The White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Joint Leaders Statement On AUKUS | The White House". 2021. *The White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.<sup>14</sup> Zhu, Melissa. 2021. "What Is The Aukus Alliance, And What Does It Have To Do With China?". *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3151700/aukus-alliance-what-it-what-does-ithave-do-china-and-why>.

aggression with China acting as a major aggressor to Taiwan, continuing border disputes with India, and bullying the countries that surround the South and the East China Sea for the sole purpose of territorial leadership.<sup>9</sup> The United States plans on investing in efforts that will help them in their competition with China while defending American interests, as they do not want to change China, but rather to change the environment in which China operates that allows for a favourable and healthy competition between the US, its partners, and China.<sup>10</sup> In addition to that,

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the United States also wants to work with China on issues that are of great importance to both – climate change and nuclear non-proliferation. When Trump came into power, he abandoned the US policy on China and made China one of its main competitors, one that wanted to change the world order and become the leading global power. However, when Biden came into office, he stuck to Trump's approach toward China, by stating in his first major speech on foreign policy that China is one of America's most serious competitors.<sup>11</sup> In addition to that, during their first trip abroad to Japan, Secretary of State Blinken called out China, saying that the U.S. would "push back as necessary when China uses coercion or aggression to get its way." Along with that, in a joint statement with Japanese and American officials, it was stated that “China's behaviour, where inconsistent with the existing international order, presents political, economic, military and technological challenges.”<sup>12</sup> The United States has already begun taking the steps to counter China's rise. One of them includes launching the Build Back Better World initiative along with the leaders of G7 at the G7 conference in Cornwall, England. The Build Back Better World Initiative, mainly aimed at countries in the Latin American and Indo-Pacific region was set up to meet the infrastructure needs of middle- and lower-income countries and work with private sectors

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<sup>9</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Zongyou, Wei, and Zhang Yunhan. 2022. "The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy And China-U.S. Strategic Competition". *China Quarterly Of International Strategic Studies* 7 (1): 3-4. doi:10.1142/s237740021500068.

<sup>12</sup> “US, Japan warn against 'destabilising behaviour' by China”. 2021. *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/liveneews/20210316-us-japan-warn-against-destabilising-behaviour-by-china>.

in the field of climate, health security, gender equity, and digital technology.<sup>13</sup> The Build Back Better World initiative could be seen as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, as China has used this initiative to use tactics to put several middle- and lower-income countries in massive debts, while the Build Back World initiative works with other countries to ensure that they reap the benefits of their work.

Another step that the Biden administration took to counter China's rise is upgrading the security alliance QUAD to a summit level by hosting QUAD's first leader level summit in March 2021, only three months into his presidency, once again showing his commitment toward the Indo-

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Pacific region and feeding into China's concerns over its rise in the world as China believes that this grouping will thwart China's global position and rise. In turn, China has strengthened its relations with Russia, one of the United States' other rivals. While Russia looks to fulfil its goals on a geopolitical scale, China wants to fulfil its goals on a global scale.

## India's Position in the Indo-Pacific Strategy

With the release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, one of the few countries that have found a notable position in this strategy in India. The strategy clearly states that the United States will continue to support India's rise and regional leadership in the Indo-Pacific region. This will be done by building and strengthening the US-India strategic partnership, wherein both India and the United States can work together on the stabilisation of the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>20</sup> In addition to that, post the release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu along with Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink, in a telephonic press conference, discussed the Biden administration's stance on the Indo-Pacific region, with Lu saying that "India is more than just a partner. We work more

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<sup>13</sup> "FACT SHEET: President Biden And G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership | The White House". 2021. *The White House*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/factsheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>.



closely with India on a daily basis than any country in the region.”<sup>14</sup>, further solidifying India's position in the American Indo-Pacific strategy. During the nascent stages of QUAD, India was unlikely to join the alliance due to concerns over a conflict with China.

However, after the escalation of the two states' border dispute at Galwan Valley led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers, India was inclined to rethink its position in the region as well as its relations with China. In October 2020, after a meeting with the foreign ministers of QUAD countries, India invited Australia to its joint naval exercises with the United States and Japan. India previously

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chose not to invite Australia as they feared that it could offend Beijing, but with this step, India showed its commitment towards QUAD.<sup>15</sup>

## North Korea's Impact on the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy states that North Korea has continued to boost its nuclear and missile program, with a missile launch of a so-called “monster missile” taking place as recent as March 2022. But now the South Korean army has claimed that the "monster missile" was a Hwasong-15, a smaller projector missile that was previously tested in 2017, but despite that, the missile flew further and higher than any other in the history of Pyongyang's missile tests. This could have been done for two reasons. The first one is that, with the recent South Korean Presidential elections, North Korea is looking for a more vigorous alliance with South Korea. The other reason could be

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<sup>14</sup> "India More Than Just A Partner In For Open, Secure Indo-Pacific, Says US State Dept Officials". 2022. *The Print*. <https://theprint.in/world/india-more-than-just-a-partner-in-for-open-secure-indo-pacific-says-us-state-deptofficials/834946/>.

<sup>15</sup> Rudd, Kevin. 2021. "Why The Quad Alarms China". *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-06/why-quad-alarms-china>.

one on a global level. Now that the United States is focusing on the war in Ukraine, North Korea thinks that now is a safer time to test their missiles.<sup>16</sup> This incident highlights the importance of the US-Japan-ROK alliance. In their strategy, it is stated that the "U.S. will also encourage our allies and partners to strengthen their ties with one another, particularly Japan and the ROK."<sup>17</sup> The United States believes that Japan and South Korea play a vital role in the Indo-Pacific region, which is why they believe that these two countries must renew their relations to work on various challenges facing their region. The foreign ministers of the three countries met in Honolulu, Hawaii in February 2022, wherein U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated that Washington has "no hostile intent" toward North Korea, which means that the United States is offering to hold talks with North Korea with "no preconditions".<sup>25</sup> One of the main goals of this

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trilateral alliance is to counter the threats brought upon by North Korea, but in recent years, this alliance has proven to be vital in the Northeast Asian region and now the United States plans on incorporating this alliance into their Indo-Pacific strategy.

## Conclusion: What is the Future of the US Role in the Indo-Pacific?

With the recent war in Ukraine, the implementation of Biden's Indo Pacific strategy remains in question, but at the same time, it is also important to note that the war in Ukraine has had effects in every corner of the world, including the Indo-Pacific region. This was further solidified when

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<sup>16</sup> McCurry, Justin. 2022. "Testing Times: Why North Korea's Missile Launches Should Worry The West". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/testing-times-why-north-koreas-missile-launchesshould-worry-the-west>.

<sup>17</sup> 2022. *Whitehouse.Gov*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Shin, Mitch. 2022. "In Trilateral Talks, Japan, South Korea, US Reaffirm Alliance On North Korea". *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/in-trilateral-talks-japan-south-korea-us-reaffirm-alliance-on-north-korea/>.

the QUAD countries, amid the war, had a meeting to discuss the implications of this war in the Indo-Pacific region, which means that the QUAD is growing by tying itself to the European region.<sup>18</sup> With the war, the United States and the EU have placed the harshest sanctions on Russia, which has made ripples through countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India. In addition to that, the war has also shown us that despite the war being fought in Europe, the Indo-Pacific region will remain vital as the United States, along with the EU countries deepen their commitment to this region.

One of the goals of the strategy states that the United States wants to "build bridges between IndoPacific and Euro-Atlantic region", but with the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, it will prove to be difficult as the United States has to deal with both Russia and China, who have been great allies and have been assertive on this issue, which means that the United States, now more than ever, will need partners in Asia as well as Europe who are reliable.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mishra, Vivek. 2022. "India's Indo-Pacific Resolve In Spotlight". *Observer Research Foundation*.

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-indo-pacific-resolve-in-spotlight/>.

<sup>19</sup> Mohan, Garima. 2022. "The New US Indo-Pacific Strategy And Its Implications For Europe". *German Marshall Fund Of The United States*. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-us-indo-pacific-strategy-and-its-implications-europe>.

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