

3 | Taiwan's Security in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Order

Dr. Sana Hashmi



The past few years have seen dramatic changes taking place in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, such as China's rise, Beijing's increasingly assertive foreign policy, and the erosion of American supremacy. As the region's two major powers, the changing relationship between China and the United States impacts regional and international security dynamics and the affairs of small and middle powers. After all, most of the small and middle powers of the Indo-

Pacific region are reliant on—and have tilted toward—either of the two superpowers.

Amid growing competition between the United States and China, the Indo-Pacific region has gained significant prominence. Interestingly, the countries that are trying to avoid entanglement in the US–China confrontation—which are not interested in choosing one major power over the other—are also supporting the idea of the Indo-Pacific. The recently released Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) outlook on the Indo-Pacific region, shows a growing acceptance of the Indo-Pacific construct. Several other countries—including those of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—have embraced the Indo-Pacific as a means to preserve a rules-based order in the twenty-first century. These developments are shaped, in part, by the growing US–China competition that reached a high level during the Trump administration and is likely to be continued under Pres. Joe Biden.

Taiwan's security is directly linked with the United States and its relations with China. Any major change in the regional or bilateral dynamics will have a direct impact on Taiwan. Taiwan has been quick in sensing the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region on strategic, diplomatic, and economic fronts. As a result, Taiwan has expressed its willingness to play

an active role in shaping the region. While Taiwan is yet to devise its own blueprint for the Indo-Pacific region, such a step will likely materialize sooner rather than later. Taiwan's expression of interest in joining the Indo-Pacific region has been sufficiently showcased by Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen, who on several occasions has stated that Taiwan can play an instrumental role in the region. Speaking at the 2020 Taiwan–US–Japan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue on 8 December, Tsai urged the Indo-Pacific countries to work together toward a resilient and peaceful future. She stated, “Leveraging expertise and capabilities, Taiwan and its like-minded partners in the region can effectively address the challenges ahead.”¹

Taiwan—like other major rule-abiding stakeholders—advocates a rules-based order, inclusiveness, and transparency; its COVID-19 response is an important example in that context. Taiwan's emerging response seems aligned with the officially declared policies of the US (Free and Open Indo-Pacific), India (Act East Policy), and Japan (Partnership for Quality Infrastructure). So far, only the United States has formally included Taiwan in its Indo-Pacific strategy; while being open to the idea, other leading Indo-Pacific countries have shied away from officially mentioning Taiwan as a partner country. Nevertheless, the last

four years of Tsai's government have witnessed a stronger relationship between Taiwan and its Indo-Pacific partners.

A key aspect of Taiwan's strategic ties in the region is its relationship with the United States. Over the past four years, the Taiwan–US relationship has gained in considerable strategic weight. During the Trump administration, Taiwan became more prominent in US foreign policy pronouncements—even though at times Trump appeared to use Taiwan as a card in his China agenda. The pro-Taiwan initiatives brought forth by the Trump administration are, in all likelihood, going to be carried forward by the Biden administration. At least, recent statements by Biden's advisers are indicative of continuity. There has also been speculation that the Biden administration would pay more attention to Taiwan, as to give it a greater place in the Indo-Pacific deliberations. America's response has been amplified by Taiwan's proactive engagement with the Indo-Pacific countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A region as diverse as the Indo-Pacific should not forget the variety of mutual concerns and common interests that include traditional and nontraditional security issues. One such common concern has continued to be the rise of China. If the COVID-19 pandemic made countries of the region realize how interconnected they were on the

health front, then the perception of unprovoked Chinese aggression has led to an increasing realization of vulnerabilities on the security front. Over the past year—amid a global pandemic, no less—China's trade war with the United States, border conflict with India, trade boycotts of Australian goods, and the encroachment into Taiwanese and Vietnamese territories has portrayed China in an increasingly aggressive light on the world stage.

The idea of an Indo-Pacific region—spurred by former Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe's idea of bringing together the Indian and Pacific oceans—has created anxieties for China. China feels threatened by the emerging Indo-Pacific order—fearing marginalization. While support for the notion of an Indo-Pacific region derives from much more than just shared concerns over China's rise, it is true that China has played an instrumental role in shaping countries' respective visions of what the Indo-Pacific region needs to look like. In August 2020, Tsai used her keynote address at the 2020 Ketagalan Forum to state:

It is time for like-minded countries, and democratic friends in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, to discuss a framework to generate sustained and concerted efforts to maintain a strategic order that deters unilateral aggressive actions. We need a strategic order that encourages cooperation, transparency and problem-solving through dialogue, not threats of war. We need a strategy that

avoids war, yet clearly conveys our resolve to protect our democracies.²

Such statements by world leaders were common throughout 2020, as they struggled with how to deal with the pandemic. Simultaneously, countries such as India, Australia, and Canada during this time began to feel the brunt of China's aggression. The Indo-Pacific construct has resulted in giving countries a platform to deal with common challenges in a seemingly intractable situation. The Indo-Pacific is not premised on an overtly anti-China component and is even open to including China as a responsible stakeholder in the future. Nevertheless, it is true that growing Chinese aggression has been a common concern for those countries advocating for a rules-based order. It is somewhat puzzling, despite convergent interests and shared concern in the face of the "China threat," that Taiwan—a democratic country that is aligned with the United States and its other allies—is still not often a part of the Indo-Pacific official discourse. Protecting Taiwan's integrity is vital to preserving a rules-based and inclusive order where peace and stability are of the utmost important values.

As the Indo-Pacific region evolves, it will open new opportunities for Taiwan to diversify its partnerships and expand cooperation with countries of the extended region. It is equally important for Taiwan to gather support

from fellow democracies in the Indo-Pacific region. While Taiwan has been able to secure bipartisan support in the United States in recent years, the Biden administration's focus, for at least the first few months, is likely to be on containing the pandemic and other domestic issues. This does not mean the Biden administration will lose interest in the Indo-Pacific. The appointment of an "Indo-Pacific czar" and other renowned foreign policy and security experts in the new administration demonstrates that the United States is attempting a renewed "pivot" to Asia. The Indo-Pacific region will continue to remain the top priority in US foreign policy. It will be critical for Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific countries to reorient its joint focus. It is in the interests of regional powers to facilitate Taiwan's greater participation in collective diplomacy—leading to a robust security network against common threats.

In the twenty-first century, countries are seeking beyond traditional ways of cooperation to elevate relationships. New technologies and new challenges have led to this novel, yet challenging phase in international relations. Some countries are opting for "minilateral" mechanisms within the Indo-Pacific region. The Global Cooperation and Training Framework should be expanded beyond its current membership of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, to include more Indo-Pacific

countries. This will allow more regional powers to learn from Taiwan's best practices and for Taiwan to demonstrate its acclaimed "Taiwan model." Like other major stakeholders, Taiwan's policy has been open, transparent, and inclusive. Its participation in regional frameworks will only strengthen the rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Most importantly, Indo-Pacific nations must recognize that, if China escalates a military conflict with Taiwan, then such a move would disrupt the peace and stability of the entire region. This scenario is not in the best interests of the countries of the region. Integrating Taiwan more formally into regional deliberations and processes would make countries more aware about the shared risks of a cross-Strait conflict. In turn, this might pressure the region to find ways to avoid such a situation. As far as Taiwan is concerned, a clearly articulated Indo-Pacific policy would serve its interests better, placing it amid all critical debates of the region. ■

Dr. Sana Hashmi

Dr. Hashmi is Visiting Fellow, Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation. She is the author of *China's Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects*.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.

Notes

¹ “President Tsai Attends Opening of 2020 Taiwan-US-Japan Trilateral Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue”, Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan), 8 December 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.

² “President Tsai attends the Ketagalan Forum — 2020 Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue”, Office of the President of Republic of China (Taiwan), 8 August 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/>.