



## Power transition process in the Indo-Pacific region with reference to the U.S., China and India

Jenny Marini<sup>1</sup>, S James<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defence Studies, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of Defence Studies, Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India

### Abstract

The notion of change in the power structure forms the key to analysing historical transitions. Over centuries nations have undergone the cyclic process creating different phases of polarity, bipolar, unipolar or multipolar. The theory of power transition holds that countries undergo the cyclic events once it fulfils certain criteria. The Indo-Pacific region has of late come under the hierarchy transition dilemma. The question asked is whether or not history will be repeated in this particular region with reference to occurrences of war. It is with extreme precaution that countries under the zone of being affected by such great transition have considered their gains and losses. The paper delves into the nature of power transition and the applicability of the criteria of satisfied-dissatisfied powers vis-à-vis the dominant power in the Indo-Pacific Region. The hierarchy specifies a dominant power, great powers, middle powers and small powers. In this case the analysis singles out one country from top three of the hierarchy – the U.S., China and India respectively. China's rise has become a perplexing topic for both the U.S. and India. For the U.S., China's rise threatens its strategic strongholds in the Indo-Pacific and for India, it means putting greater effort in maintaining a stable neighbourhood. The power transition process given the current multipolar order means any challenger country for dominance will face stronger opposition in the form of alliances. So, the capability to manoeuvre the diverse strategic obstacles is at an increasing level, both for the supporters of status-quo and those challenging it, compared to past transitions. The U.S. has enjoyed its super power status for a very long time and still holds the privilege of diverting resources to its advantage in preventing great power such as China in utilising such benefits to achieve power parity. India's position is as complex as it is – with its own ambition to reach the dominant status in the near future and the prospects of having to deal with its immediate neighbour, China. This also calls for aligning with the U.S. and its allies in the region even if it means compromising its freedom to pursue its foreign policies.

**Keywords:** Power transition, hierarchy, dominant power, great power, middle power, U.S., China, India, Indo-Pacific, challenger, status-quo, satisfaction-dissatisfaction, super power, complex, prospects, allies, foreign policy

### Introduction

The emerging power structure in the Indo-Pacific region bears an alarming truth with regard to how far rising state actors will go to achieve global or regional dominant status. The complexity of power struggle in all dimensions has also given rise to the recently developed concept known as the Indo-Pacific region, which is a shift from the previously exclusive Asia-Pacific region. This framework has led to the understanding of the fluid nature of power transitions. The Indo-Pacific offers a wider and new scope for countries vying to climb up the hierarchy. It also provides hope for dominant power such as the U.S. to venture into the region in the hope of reinforcing its influence through new strategic partnerships and alliances. In the following sections, the paper will be dealing with the application of the power transition theory and the criteria for a transition to take place. The analysis is in reference to the dominant power U.S., great power China and middle power India. The three countries mentioned are considered for the analysis due to their positions as strategic powers in the Indo-Pacific region. The study of one of these powers cannot be done without the recognition of the other two. The key to understanding the hierarchy and the transition process will require a study on the strategic relationship the three countries have with the region and with each other.

### Power transition theory

Alexander F. Karcz Organski introduced the power transition theory in 1958. This theory acknowledges the

presence of a hierarchical power structure within the international order. It attributes peace to the dominant nation's power advantage and the support for the international order from satisfied nations. Power transition theory differs from realist theory in several ways: a) It views the international order as hierarchically organised rather than anarchical. b) Nations are likened to domestic political groups engaged in continual competition over scarce resources within the international order. c) It conceptualises international competition as driven by maximising the potential net gains from conflict or cooperation, with nations aiming to maximise net gains rather than power. d) Although both theories share a similar understanding of power as a critical determinant of the international order's functioning, they diverge in that power transition theory does not adhere to a power maximisation model, contrary to realism. Additionally, the power transition model expands the traditional measures of national power beyond military and economic factors, suggesting that national power also stems from the development of socio-economic and political resources. <sup>[1, 2]</sup>

Major features of the theory include: a) The theory avoids labelling the dominant power as a hegemon. b) Decision-making is typically in the hands of national elites. c) The dominant or pre-eminent nation strives to oversee the global system by forming a coalition of stable, contented supporters. d) Alliances between the dominant power and other major powers are contingent upon shared interests, trust, ideology, and mutual foreign policy objectives. e) The

dominant nation leads by fostering satisfaction rather than instilling fear, promoting cooperation over conflict, sharing resources instead of dictating resource allocation, and asserting dominance rather than hegemony. <sup>[3]</sup>

Based on the criteria for initiating a power transition, A.F.K Organski and Jacek Kugler <sup>[4]</sup> point out key criteria for peace and conflict in a transition process: a) The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction often hinges on the distribution of benefits and the governing rules between dominant and major powers. Conflict arises when certain powers, especially great powers, become dissatisfied with either the international order or the way resources are distributed and including the leadership of the dominant nation. b) Typically, major nations that lend support to the international order align themselves with the dominant nation. Hence, alliances are perceived within this theory as steadfast and dependable tools in maintaining a status-quo resistant to short-term alterations. However, this alignment does not always signify an unequivocal acceptance of the status quo and the rule of the dominant power. Often it may be a result of their perceived inability to challenge the dominant power directly, or due to the uncertainty regarding whether the potential gains outweigh the foreseeable losses. Consequently, they refrain from risking war or destabilization that might disrupt the prevailing stability. they may perceive themselves as better off maintaining the current status quo than they would be under an alternative system led by a different dominant nation, which might introduce different rules and norms to govern the international system. For instance, they may face a choice between a U.S. led democratic system or a system led by communist China. c) Conflict becomes inevitable if a challenger great power achieves relative parity with the dominant power in terms of military, economy and political influence leading to the challengers' desire to carve out a new position within the international order. The dominant nation's threat perception intensifies when the power gap narrows, as challengers become increasingly unwilling to accept a subordinate role within the rules-based order established by the dominant country.

### Power hierarchy and transition process

The concept of hierarchy is employed to depict the overarching power dynamics on a global scale. Hierarchies undergo fluctuations over time, each trying to navigate the competition for limited resources in a peaceful manner. Stability of the hierarchy depends on the dominant power's capability to secure support and by crafting mutually agreeable regulations that ensure international security and trade. Unlike the realist perspective, peace is maintained through the formation of predominant, contended coalition. <sup>[5]</sup> The power hierarchy in the region can be deduced from the nature of power contestation rationale. The number of countries in the Indo-Pacific region usually ranges between 38 to 40 based on the type of analysis. The Indo-Pacific region also known as Indo-West Pacific or Indo-Pacific Asia, stretches from West Asia, the littorals of East Africa, the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia to the Western Pacific (broadly covering the continental regions of Asia, Africa, Australia, America and two oceans –the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean). As former Japanese Prime Minister acutely described the Indo-Pacific as the merging of two oceans. They share 44 per cent of the world surface area, 65 per cent of world population, 63 per cent of world GDP and

46 per cent of world's merchandise trade. <sup>[6]</sup> It is also home to diverse mix of ethnicities, cultures, political systems, religions and economies. <sup>[7]</sup> It is noteworthy that majority of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region are Asian nations, with a significant presence of second and third world countries alongside a handful of first world countries including the dominant country i.e. the U.S.

Power hierarchy or global ranking is measured taking in various measures of power such as military strength, economy, social standards, political influence and international alliances. Other factors include human development index and advancements in science and technology. The United States is considered to be the dominant power both globally and in the region while China is considered to be a great power and India a middle power. A dominant power has considerable influence in all spheres globally and has a very strong support base comprising great powers. It determines rules of the international order under which all other powers function. It has a major say in international organizations such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and issues pertaining to regulation of global security (traditional and non-traditional). Referring to the overall global power rankings based on the aforementioned metrics, the U.S. holds the top position, with China following closely in second place, and India ranking twelfth. The U.S. maintains its position as the world's foremost military power, boasting the most extensive combat experience, highest levels of total spending and investment in modernization, and the strongest strategic partnerships. <sup>[8]</sup>

Meanwhile China ranks third and India fourth in these aspects. In terms of GDP rankings, the U.S. leads with a whopping \$25.5 trillion, China in second place with \$18 trillion, and India making a significant leap to fifth place, surpassing the United Kingdom in 2023 with \$3.7 trillion and predictions to eventually surpass Japan and Germany by 2030 with a \$7.3 trillion GDP. <sup>[9]</sup> However the true test lies in their actual influence and their ability to maintain or improve upon their respective position. A great power and middle power are distinguished from each other based on the degree of development, influence over regional and global issues and its capability to garner support and recognition from other powers in the hierarchy. Great powers are also often defined as countries with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. They exert economic, political and military dominance over the world akin to dominant power. Important great powers in the Indo-Pacific region include China, Japan, Australia and middle powers include India and most of South Asia, Southeast Asia, South Korea, and Middle East countries. Middle powers may sometimes be referred to as emerging or rising powers in geopolitical context. It has been keenly observed that there is a proliferation in the number of middle powers and they hold a strategic place in determining the weight of regional balance. Certain countries may exhibit characteristics of great power status based on their capacity for influence, but they lack the ability to shape the security order in the manner that the U.S. or China can.

Peaceful power transitions in history are quite rare. In the current situation, the region under analysis is facing the dilemma between a peaceful and chaotic transition process. The Indo-Pacific region sees the U.S., China and India vying in a triangular competition to assert their influence over neighbouring states, clearly demonstrated through their

respective national interests for example as seen in the case of a great power such as China with national interests to rise as a developed country by the year 2029, its rejection of the U.S.' Indo-Pacific policies and dominance in the region. Based on the power transition theory, the stability of a region's status –quo depends on satisfaction or dissatisfaction level of regional powers over the dominant power. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, great and middle powers have the potential to create ripple effects on the region's security and status-quo. With the rise in ambition and development strategies, the three powers concerned have also deepened their respective interests toward the Indo-Pacific, mostly overlapping, thus creating a conundrum in the power hierarchy. The region presents itself as a crucial nexus for resources, strategic military arena and sea lanes of communication – all of which are under new security threats amid the ongoing shifts in power dynamics. With regard to the triangular competition among the three countries under analysis – the U.S., China and India – dominant, great and middle power respectively – it is observed from the official documents and diplomacy, the Indo-Pacific strategy of both the U.S. and India are more on the friendly terms of agreement if compared with that of China's Indo-Pacific policy. While the U.S. and India support a free and open Indo-Pacific, China has refrained from acknowledging the concept of Indo-Pacific based on the suspicion that the concept was originally framed as a way of containing China. India, along with other great powers in the region form a group of countries which support the regional status-quo i.e. the U.S. as the dominant power and leading the security structure. In this regard it is safe to say that the U.S. and India have no outright contentions with each other at the moment when it comes to the criteria of a dissatisfied power vis-a-vis dominant power. It is important to acknowledge that India, as it ascends as a burgeoning middle power, holds its own aspirations to evolve into an advanced developed nation over time, all while maintaining its longstanding commitment to an independent foreign policy implying that India has no interest in tagging along with the U.S. led formal alliance system except in the case of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) which is an informal strategic forum. India as a middle power projects considerable influence in the India Ocean Region and the Western Pacific zone through its soft diplomacy outreach and reliable allies. Since the dominant power U.S. and middle power India have retained the cordial relations, the question of India as challenger to the dominant power is not within immediate concern in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the U.S. does not hesitate to use this friendship to its advantage as it faces its China challenge. India is also in a position where the presence of the U.S. and its allies in the region is beneficial for its policies as it will absorb the abrupt changes in status-quo owing to China's rise. The complexities arise when China is a shared adversary for both the U.S. and India.

We will first deal with the China-U.S. rivalry since the theory outlines the possibilities of conflict between dominant and great power for a transition to occur. Based on the criteria for conflict, China fits into the descriptions of a challenger great power. China has for the most part benefitted extravagantly from its opening up to the globalization process in the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping – and also partly to blame the U.S. for the error of welcoming the communist country into the capitalist system

in the hope of transforming China into a western style liberal capitalist country. China's fast paced development has created threat environment in the region owing to what other powers call an offensive, aggressive, and revisionist policy that is not aligned with regional stability.

Hence it is clear that the U.S. already faces growing competition from China. A lot hinges on the U.S.' capacity to bolster its strategic alliances with nations such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and other Asian countries. <sup>[10]</sup> Threats to security also stems from China's vehement advancements into the Indian Ocean Region, apart from its traditional zone of influence in the Western Pacific Ocean. If unattended this will lead to the eventual climax towards power transition. That being said tensions regarding territorial and political disputes in the South and East China seas, Senkaku islands, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Maldives, North Korea nuclear issue, India-China border disputes and the extension of the rivalry in the maritime domain point to the truth about rising security instability and greater intervention of the U.S. in regional disputes involving China.

As part of the criteria for a stable status-quo in the Indo-Pacific region, the dominant power must have the support of regional powers or at least a majority. Till date the U.S. enjoys that privilege. As China's competitors in Asia grow larger and stronger, the potential for a favourable stability in the region for the U.S. becomes increasingly promising. But the concern is the gradual waning of the U.S.' influence in both the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean in comparison with China's increasing hold over the region through its dual-purpose projects (economic and security) such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). These projects involve massive infrastructure and financial assistance to host countries in the region in return for acquiring access to the region's major trade and strategic ports including regular navigations along the major sea lanes of communications connecting Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Madagascar, other East African littoral countries, West Asian counties have come within the ambit of China's growing expansionism.

China's offshore military bases have been gaining grounds as in the case of Djibouti and Cambodia causing security concerns to its neighbourhood. According to Pew Research, the majority of countries surveyed indicate that China wields a significant level of influence over their economic matters. The view among the Asia-Pacific nations such as Japan, South Korea and Australia hold the opinion that China has considerable influence on their country's economy. <sup>[11]</sup> China's dissatisfaction regarding the U.S.' rules-based order can also be seen through its disenchantment towards security groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), Australia, United Kingdom and United States (AUKUS) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). China has also made sure that it is also a part of the influence in matters of security. Its support for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN Regional Forum (ASEAN-ARF), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) show its policy of not just refraining from U.S. dominance but also cooperation with neighbouring countries as a part of what it calls a responsible great power. Part of the criteria for the U.S. as the dominant power is being responsible for providing peace

and security. The security groupings initiated by the U.S. in this context can be taken to mean that the dominant power is keen on strengthening its position in the Indo-Pacific and also ensure its allies have the equal responsibility of checking threats. The U.S. has been consistently stressing on the role of India as the net security provider in the region. This is an essential part of strengthening the status-quo by maintaining the security structure intact. Another aspect of the theory involves the dominant nation perceiving itself as threatened by the challenger's increasing capabilities. With the advancements in military technology and non-conventional types of warfare the outcome of a war in the near future between the U.S. and China is unpredictable. The U.S. has encountered challenges in promoting the Indo-Pacific framework to reshape twenty-first century geopolitics. Even its proposal for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has faced delays. China has assumed leadership with its Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative. <sup>[12]</sup>

With regard to the respective approaches towards regional security, the U.S. and China have divergent views on how a security structure should be established and maintained. While the U.S. advocating for more stringent China containment policy, China opts for a non-western dominance type of structure. In this case the ASEAN centrality holds a positive standing. President Xi Jinping in 2014 delivered a speech calling for Asian nations to prioritise Asian security subtly suggesting a reduction in American influence in the region. In a more recent address, Chinese foreign Minister Wang Yi advocated for the establishment of an 'Indo-Pacific Community of Common Destiny'. <sup>[13]</sup> Some suggest that the best response for the U.S. to China's growing power is to negotiate a shared leadership of Asia requiring mutual consent from both sides similar to the European concert of power model. However according to China, the historical injustices it faced over the prolonged decades during the great world wars as a mere pawn among great world powers had left a mark on its history and would not welcome the concept in any positive light. <sup>[14]</sup> America's strategy seeks to prevent any major shift of influence and authority within the Asian international system towards China. which requires the U.S. to construct a strong military and diplomatic coalition among states in close proximity to China. Both the U.S. and China understand the importance of having a visible presence in all three zones - the Atlantic, Pacific and the Indian Ocean, to be considered a global power. Both the U.S. and China recognise that the end of the rigid bipolar system signifies a departure from the traditional framework, with little likelihood of a new bipolar system emerging. <sup>[15]</sup> At the moment China has no desire to risk a major war against the U.S. to complete the power transition.

Reading into its national interest goals of achieving developed status by 2049 on the occasion of marking its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, China knows it must have a peaceful stable environment to bring about the all-round development of the nation. Power parity is a crucial indicator of dissatisfaction or satisfaction between dominant and great power. As statistics show, China has been able to obtain second position in almost all spheres of global power – military, economy, political, diplomacy etc. The question however remains - is it due to the diminishing power of the dominant power that has simply given China a better chance at coping

up with the U.S. or is it actually China's predominant position that has lessened the U.S.' global power?

The question of transition in the case of the dominant power U.S. and that of the challenger great power China is still in its nascent stages. China faces significant constraints concerning its military capacity and its ability to provide public goods. It lacks both a compelling ideology and adequate geopolitical moderation toward neighbouring countries which limits its regional legitimacy. <sup>[16]</sup> We cannot however rule out the possibilities of a turbulent transition within two or three decades given the records of fast paced development of China while the other outcomes depend on the interactions among great powers and middle powers. The collective mutual agreement of other regional powers on the question of status-quo, on which country should remain dominant, whether or not a security architecture is necessary to prevent any other power to destabilize the region's hierarchy and other matters concerning their respective and common goods become unavoidable issues.

India as a middle power still has ample potential for growth and to catch up with China within a few decades is foreseeable. In the present scenario, India has a comfortable level of influence in the Indian Ocean Region, whereas China in the Western Pacific Ocean zone. The contention emerges when both these powers cross over into each other's traditional zone of influence considering their need for resources and seeking to shape security and economic institutions in one's own interests. With this in mind it is in India's regional interest to ensure that the important sea routes stretching from the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz in the west to the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea in the east are free from any state actor(s)' hegemonic influence. And on the global stage India remains firm in its support for liberal economic system which would facilitate India's development. <sup>[17]</sup> Thus an open free Indo-Pacific is beneficial not just for the U.S. and India but also for the collective development of the region. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development forecasts that India could contribute nearly 20% to global GDP by 2060. The contemporary Indian establishment is desiring a more multipolar world where India assumes a prominent role alongside other poles, without ceding pre-eminence to China. <sup>[18]</sup>

## Conclusion

The power transition theory can only be said to have been successfully applied if there is the overtaking of the dominant power by the challenger country. While the transition process is underway it is notable that the continual overlapping of national interests and rise in disputes, the current relation among the three contenders under analysis along with other regional great and middle powers have been directed toward operating under a mixture of three diverse types of power management – collective security system, balance of power and a concert of power. While the balance of power and collective security system reinforces each other through effective groupings of like-minded countries in checking any state actor perceived as a creating disruption to the stability, the concert of power functions through the mechanism of dominant and challenger great powers making compromises for the survival of the international order.

The Indo-Pacific countries mostly fall under middle powers and small powers but the number of great powers is also on

the rise. This interplay of multiple power hierarchy has led to the notion of a strong multilateral world order and going by this fact, the region's response rate to any revisionist state will be faster in comparison to the type of system under bipolar or unipolar world order. The need for any of the three types of systems as mentioned earlier arises when challenger nation or a rogue state threatens the region's peace. Although countries like India would only resort to coming under such systems knowing it will have to abide by the norms, giving up part of its freedom but also having the opportunity to work with the collective voice in checking China's rise. The multipolar world order gives enough space for middle and small powers in the hierarchy to create effective hedging mechanisms to avoid the extremities of coming under either the dominant or challenger country while exercising the freedom to implement their respective foreign policies that best serve their national interests.

In the case of Beijing and New Delhi, both nations have become more receptive to regional cooperative mechanisms. While Beijing and New Delhi are not prepared to sacrifice autonomy in favour of multilateralism, both have actively engaged in building multilateral institutions that they can influence. Additionally, Beijing and New Delhi have initiated formal consultations on maritime security issues with other major powers seeking to counterbalance each other's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The vastness of the Indo-Pacific strategic space and the differing strategic priorities – China focussing on the Pacific and India towards the Indian Ocean indicate the potential emergence of numerous sub-regional orders.

For decades, the U.S. has served as the primary security provider in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Although, its capability to maintain security in the two ocean region has been in question ever since its declining hold over security matters in the wars concerning West Asia since the late 2000s. [19] There are certain puzzles in the triangular power relation in terms of the three variables under analysis – the U.S., China and India. In the event of India achieving its great power status will both China and India as great powers challenge the dominant power? Will it be a shared power system amongst the three countries? Or will China achieve its desired dominant status before India and eventual decline as other hierarchies have manifested across centuries.

It is also worth noting that the overtaking of the U.S. may not mean the complete overtaking at the global scale. Even if the U.S. loses significant grounds in the Indo-Pacific region it does not necessarily mean it has lost the global ranking. China and India will still have to struggle for dominance in the region zone wise –i.e. the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean. Given the present standing of the dominant power U.S. and great power China, the U.S. would still have the greater advantage over China in terms of both logistics and alliance support.

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