

ASIA-PACIFIC STRATEGIC DIALOGUE – WEBINAR SERIES

by

Vice Admiral (Retd) Asaf Humayun HI(M)
Former Director General NIMA

The Indo-Pacific represents a historic crossroad for interchanging ideas, trade, culture, and people. Indo-Pacific has emerged in the contemporary world's economy and politics, first as Asia-Pacific and, then through the revival of the Indian Ocean rimland states. This has shifted the world's attention from the trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. Strategies by major powers have built new mechanisms for cooperation and competition. Thus, the Indo-Pacific has raised risks of further division and even confrontation along political, military, ideological, and economic lines.

Two non-profits, Asia Pacific Exchange & Cooperation Foundation¹ and Zhenghe Forum² joined hands and scheduled three webinars on Indo-Pacific in mid-December 2021.

a. Session I: “Indo Pacific Strategies: Causes, Contents, and Consequences” held on 13 Dec 21 (for Group One: countries/organizations that have developed their own Indo Pacific strategies.). This Session focussed on countries or regional alliances with specific Indo-Pacific strategies identifying their interests and concerns. This session also explored their mutual compatibility and disagreements.

b. Session II: Indo Pacific Countries without Indo Pacific Strategies: Causes, Dynamics, and Prospects was on 14 Dec 21 (for Group Two: countries/organizations that have stayed silent to Indo

Asaf Humayun is former Director General of NIMA and can be reached at asafhumayun@gmail.com

Pacific Strategies). This Session concentrated on the considerations and constraints of many regional countries and organizations that have stayed silent on the Indo Pacific strategies implemented by major powers or organizations. It also discussed the factors behind the silence and whether it is an indication of a lack of strategy or counterstrategy to maximize their national interests in the new context of the Indo Pacific. I participated in this important session and presented Pakistan's perspective on Indo-Pacific.

c. Session III: Alternatives to Indo-Pacific Strategies: Competition, Accommodation, or Innovation? on held 15 Dec 21 (for Group Three: countries/organizations that have concerns about Indo Pacific strategies). Discussion centred on Chinese and Russian perceptions and responses to these Indo-Pacific strategies and their impact on broader US-China and US-Russia relations.

He showpiece of the 3 webinars was the keynote delivered on 14 2021 by H.E. Dr Mahathir Muhammad ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia and the respected elder statesman. (<https://www.facebook.com/100075693134502/videos/2770971956544972>) He highlighted that many nations are trying to balance amid the mistrust between China and the US. The divide between the two powers encompasses all aspects of relations including socioeconomic differences. The common denominator, however, remains the paranoia of the nuclear-armed superpowers against each other. He said China has increased its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and in competition the B3W (Build Back better World) program of the US and G7 would do the same. He said that it was difficult to take the middle ground when deals such as AUKUS seemed belligerent and a threat to regional security. He said AUKUS was perceived as an Anglosphere union and raised suspicion, distrust, and anxiety. He also pointed out China's military assertiveness as unhelpful. He pointed out that the Muslim nations offered huge markets for China as well as the US and they could benefit from economic initiatives offered by the

contending powers. He advised that the Muslim states should not take sides.

After the keynote address, Pakistan's perspective was presented. Pakistan has had excellent relations with both China and the United States. In 1971, Pakistan paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States. Currently, the focus of the US Administration has moved from the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan to the Indo-Pacific region. The United States has been encouraging India – a country hostile to Pakistan -- to become the policeman of the Indian Ocean. Since 2009, the United States is supporting India to become the net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and even beyond. In 2017, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States started an informal Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Quad. It is noteworthy that each of these 4 states has strained bilateral relations with China. Maritime cooperation among these countries is a strong feature. The Quad countries now tackle a broader agenda including security, economy and even health issues. They have voiced shared concerns about China's economic, political, and military strength in the region. The Indo-Pacific symbolises more confrontation than collaboration. The Indo-Pacific contestation between China and the United States poses a challenge for Pakistan. The Prime Minister of Pakistan has stated, "Pakistan should not be part of any bloc as the world heads towards a new Cold War". For Pakistan, balancing its ties with Washington and Beijing will not be easy.

Agreeing with Dr Mahathir's comments, many countries including Pakistan don't want a new Cold War. In the eyes of many Pakistani diplomats and strategists, Pakistan can help lower the temperature between the US and China. The Indo-Pacific region can benefit immensely from collaborative investments in human capital, which can bridge the growing divide.

The participant from the United Emirates was the President of Emirates Policy Centre Dr Ebtesam Al-Ketbi. She also supported the same theme. *“Small countries like UAE see China as an economic partner. We cannot endanger the relationship with the US.”*

The guiding lights behind the “Indo Pacific Strategic Dialogue” are Dr Ma Haiyun and Mr Xiao Wunan. Their motto is *“Peace and Security through dialogue and cooperation in the Asia Pacific and the Indo-Pacific”*. This motto represents the best approach for all states to manage the Indo-Pacific in the future.