



US Department of Defense's Indo Pacific Strategy and Arctic Strategy Report: An Overview

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Abstract

The United States (US) Department of Defense (DoD) released both the US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report and the Arctic Strategy in June 2019. The two documents outline the United States' concept of developing interconnected security interests in the respective regions. . For the US DoD, the two theatres of operations are equally important. In fact, some security interests like maintaining freedoms of navigation and over-flight and the challenge posed by Russia and China are common to both. The two strategy documents emphasis the need to build partnerships based on shared views such mutual respect, sovereignty, transparency etc. To ensure that the two regions remain peaceful, prosperous, and secure in the future

Introduction

The US Department of Defense (DoD) released both the US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report¹ and the Arctic Strategy² in June 2019, articulating the US' security interests in the waters that surround it. The release of the two documents one after the other is indicative of the ways in which the United States is pursuing its defence and national security strategy in these two areas-the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic.

¹ The report is available at https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/31/2002139210/-1/-1/1/DOD_INDOPACIFIC_STRATEGY_REPORT_JUNE_2019.PDF

² The report is available at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>

The two documents together point to a long term policy perspective which underline where the DoD stands today, and it is policy planning and implementation process to achieve its goals for the future. The first policy document on the Indo-Pacific defines it as a free and open region with four principles that govern American policy here: (a) respect for sovereignty and independence; (b) peaceful resolution of disputes; (c) free, fair, and reciprocal trade; and (d) adherence to international rules and norms. The 2019 Arctic Strategy comes three years after the last such document was released by the DoD in 2016. This strategy document is significant in understanding the policy of the current administration in the high north, especially as the United States becomes critical of Chinese and Russian action in the region. This is in continuation of the criticism the United States has expressed in its National Security Strategy (NSS) document as well as the National Defence Strategy (NDS) about China and Russia. While there is a low likelihood of military conflicts arising in the Arctic in the near future, nonetheless, the long-term strategic investments and engagements of China and Russia, and some other Arctic states as well, has highlighted the potential vulnerabilities in American preparedness in the region.

The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy

The first strategy report on the Indo-Pacific identifies the region “...as a priority theatre.”³Based on America’s historical ties to the region it calls for cooperation in the common pursuit of “shared prosperity that comes from fair and reciprocal trade, open commerce, and freedom of navigation.”⁴The core of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy has been a *free and open Indo-Pacific*, based on the need to develop security architecture for the region, enhance economic cooperation and develop stable governance.

The strategy report understandably addresses the security aspect of the US Indo-Pacific engagements. In outlining the DoD’s strategy for the region, the document mentions that, “The Department seeks to cooperate with like-minded allies and partners to address common challenges. The US acknowledges that allies and partners are a force multiplier for peace and interoperability, representing a durable, asymmetric, and unparalleled advantage that no competitor or rival can match.”⁵ The strategy document identifies four challenges for the US in the region. First, China has been identified as a ‘revisionist power’ which is continuing to undermine the international system. It claims that “...the Indo-Pacific increasingly is confronted with a more confident and **assertive** China willing to accept friction in the region.”⁶ (emphasis added) The concern areas are the militarisation of the South China Sea and the belligerent relationship between the US and China. The goal of the DoD is to develop long-term relations with China that will contribute to regional peace and stability. The second challenge is the differences between the US and Russia as “...Russia is modernising its military in an attempt to re-establish itself in the Indo-Pacific. It is flying bomber aircrafts, conducting exercises and

³ US Department of Defence, “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region June 2019,” https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/31/2002139210/-1/-1/1/DOD_INDO_PACIFIC_STRATEGY_REPORT_JUNE_2019.PDF, Accessed on 07 June 2019, pp i

⁴ Ibid, pp 02

⁵ Ibid, pp 16

⁶ Ibid, pp 07

conducting reconnaissance missions in the waters of the Indo Pacific.”⁷The growing proximity between China and Russia across a wide spectrum of sectors is identified as a long term threat to American interests. Thirdly, North Korea is identified as a ‘rogue nation’ that continues to be a challenge for both the US and its allies and partners. And lastly, the threat posed by transnational crime, natural disasters in addition to weak and illiberal governance such as democratic backsliding in Cambodia and the lack of robust democracy in Burma, require the US to remain invested in the region.

Fig. 1-The US In`do-Pacific Command



Source: US Indo-Pacific Command (2019) <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>

To achieve its strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, the US will modernise its forces and increase its capacity to overcome its adversaries. It will also increase its presence and access to the region through its various military bases while evolving partnerships that allow for sharing of responsibilities and security burdens. In expanding its partnership, the 2019 strategy document identifies India as a valuable partner that is equally invested in the development of a rules based international order for the Indo-Pacific region. Based on the foundation of the Indo-US strategic partnership, the strategy document outlines the initiatives that are underway to strengthen defence cooperation and interoperability, such as the first Indo-US tri-services exercise scheduled for later in the year. The larger aim is to develop an Indo-US partnership that is not limited to just the Indo-Pacific region but includes convergences of views on global issues.

⁷ Ibid, pp 11.

and Russia as the principal challenge to long-term U.S. security and prosperity...”¹⁰ The latest report also make a clear articulation of United States national security interests in a concise manner, unlike the broad outline presented in the 2016 strategy document. The latter identifies three interests: (a) The Arctic as the US homeland, (b) The Arctic as a shared region and (c) The Arctic as a potential corridor for strategic competition. A possible reason for the last point is the focus in the document on the growing competition with China which is in contrast to its earlier policy document, which does not mention China.

The latest document, while acknowledging that China’s operational presence in the Arctic is limited, calls for US preparedness for future Chinese military and commercial presence in these waters. The 2019 document also highlights that despite having no territorial claims, China is seeking a role in Arctic governance. However, the recent document does not make any mention of climate change where as the previous document called for identification and assessment of climate change on DoD’s missions in the Arctic. A possible explanation for the omission may be the current administration’s low priority to the issue of climate change, with heightened focus on extraction of natural resources from the Arctic region and hard military preparedness.

The 2019 Strategy has laid emphasis on the rapidly altering security environment of the Arctic as a result of the changing physical environment as a result of climate change. The report also highlights the alterations taking place due to increased militarisation of the region by Russia, new shipping lanes emerging and increasing access to natural resources due to diminishing sea ice. The report claims that, “Russia’s commercial investments in the Arctic region have been matched by continued defence investments and activities that strengthen both its territorial defence and its ability to control the NSR (Northern Sea Route).”¹¹ It further states that Russia has announced that it will use force, if foreign vessels do not follow Russian regulations when transiting through the NSR. Polar sea routes are being looked by shipping companies as they to substantially reduce transit times, saving fuel and other operating costs. With ships being built for ‘Arctic conditions’ the new ships will also transport more cargo in terms of tonnage. The United States wants the NSR, which lies in Arctic waters and within Russia’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), to be a transport corridor open to the international community. The United States policy calls for freedom of navigation and the concept of “innocent passage” outside of territorial waters, as it routinely transits in the South China Sea. This policy is also to address China’s Belt and Road Initiative that is linked to its economic activities and its broader strategy for the Arctic. “China also continues to seek opportunities to invest in dual-use infrastructure in the Arctic. Despite China’s claim of being a “Near Arctic State,” the United States **does not recognize** any such status.”¹²(emphasis added).

The US Navy is making plans to send surface ships to the Arctic Ocean to protect American commercial interests and resources as the NSR opens. This would allow its fleet to pass through the NSR but outside of Russia’s territorial waters, signalling a challenge to Russia’s primacy in the region. There have been calls to develop a strategic Arctic port in Alaska to

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 02

¹¹ Ibid, pp 04

¹² Ibid, pp 05

monitor the passage. The US Coast Guard is building capacity and capability to provide support to commercial vessels in the future that may use this route. The goal as expressed in the 2019 document is “limiting the ability of China and Russia to leverage the region as a corridor for competition that advances their strategic objectives through malign or coercive behaviour.”¹³

Of late, the US administration has been criticised for its lack of preparedness to counter threats in the Arctic theatre. Both the US Coast Guard and the Navy are unprepared to respond promptly to contingencies in the region. Addressing this shortfall, the Department has emphasised on the need to acquire new capabilities that are best suited for the Arctic environment including cold weather training of personnel. Looking at possible future conflicts, the strategy document identifies the Arctic as “...an alternative vector for US power projection and manoeuvre as part of DoD operations in other regions. DoD will maintain access to the Arctic to support the global mobility and projection of US military forces.”¹⁴ As identified in its Indo-Pacific strategy, working with allies and partners has been identified as a key component of collective deterrence in the Arctic region. The DoD will also increase its cooperation within the NATO to help deter aggression.

Conclusion

The two documents, when taken into consideration with the US National Security Strategy Document and the National Defence Strategy, outline the United States’ concept of developing interconnected security interests in the two regions. In recognising the changing security environment, the United States is significantly expanding its defence and security ties with its partner nations. Improving security in both, the Indo-Pacific region and the Arctic, will allow the United States to pool its resources with like-minded nations enhancing its ability to respond to crisis and prevent conflict.

The United States identifies itself as both a Pacific and Arctic nation. For the US DoD, the two theatres of operations are equally important. In fact, some security interests like maintaining freedoms of navigation and over-flight and the challenge posed by Russia and China are common to both. The two strategy documents emphasis the need to build partnerships based on shared views such mutual respect, sovereignty, transparency etc to ensure that the two regions remain peaceful, prosperous, and secure in the future.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

¹³ Ibid, pp 05

¹⁴ Ibid, pp 12