Conflicting views on Indo-Pacific concept

What is the issue?

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There are conceptual differences between India and US on the concept of Indo-Pacific.

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What is the conflicting perception on Indo-pacific?

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- The Indo-Pacific, as described in the National Security Strategy document of U.S., represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world.
- It stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States.
- There are prevailing views in India that through “Indo-Pacific”, U.S. has made India the central point of its strategy.
- India has tended to present the term “Indo-Pacific” as raising India’s strategic stature.
- But the NSS document of 2017, which outlined America’s top security concerns, have corroborated the Indian interpretation.
- U.S. has hailed Vietnam as being at the very heart of the Indo-Pacific at the APEC Summit last year.
- The NSS 2017 also views the ASEAN and APEC as centerpieces of the Indo-Pacific’s regional architecture.
- Thus, this part of the strategic vision does not cater to India’s interests.
- The NSS 2017 has omitted some of India’s most vital interests, including the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

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- Also left out is the Strait of Malacca, which links the Indian and Pacific Oceans and is India's gateway to trade with Southeast Asia, Japan and South Korea.
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- India too, in recent times, hailed ASEAN as the foundation of the Indo-Pacific and asserted that a geographical definition could not be a strategy to contain any country.
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What are the views regarding countering China?

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- The concept of the Indo-Pacific, as perceived by U.S., seeks to counter China's assertiveness in Asia.
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- China is the main security threat to U.S. primacy in Asia and it also has a long-standing border dispute with India.
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- This gives India and the U.S. a shared interest in countering China's growing military power and territorial revisionist tendencies.
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- The NSS 2017 recognises that China's military power rests on its economic progress.
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- To blunt China's competitive edge, U.S. focusses on –
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1. protecting American jobs through its "America first" policy
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2. ensuring reciprocal bilateral trade practices
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3. the key role of the private sector in directing investment
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- Thus, Business engagement with Asian countries is at the centre of the U.S.'s strategy for a "free and open Indo-Pacific".
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- However, for India, only defence cooperation is the most significant

dimension of the India-U.S. strategic partnership.
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- Also, maritime power is the key to international clout in the 21st century.
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- About 90% of India's trade passes through the Indian Ocean and while India has less than 20 submarines in service, China holds a larger number of 78 submarines.
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- Thus India demanded intelligence-sharing and drones from the U.S. at the 2+2 Dialogue to detect Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean.
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- Significantly, of India's three services, its Navy gets around 15% of the defence budget.
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- But the U.S. Navy and Marines get the lion's share of the U.S. military budget.
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- Moreover, in April 2017, China successfully launched its second aircraft carrier, which was domestically built.
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- But it will be many years before India's second home-built aircraft carrier becomes operational.
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- All these made the U.S. sceptical about India's capacity to counter the growing influence of China in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
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How useful is India to the U.S. in the region?

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- The NSS says that prosperous states are stronger security partners who are able to share the burden of confronting common threats.
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- However, China's economy ($14 trillion) is nearly five times bigger than India's, and its defence spending ($228 billion) is far more than India's $63 billion.
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- U.S. also wants India to offer more investment to Asian countries.
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- But India needs Chinese investment to upgrade its own infrastructure and is nowhere near competing successfully against China as an investor in Southeast Asia.

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- In 2016, two-way trade between India and ASEAN moved up to $71.6 billion.
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- In contrast, two-way trade between China and ASEAN stood at more than $452 billion.
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- Moreover, U.S.'s contemptuous labelling of India as the "tariff king" points to strong differences between the two countries over trade practices.
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- The U.S. has sold nearly $15 billion worth of arms to India over the last 10 years.
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- However, U.S. perceives Russia as a security threat and it stresses interoperability with U.S. armed forces.
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- It has also expressed displeasure at India's recent decision to buy the S-400 missile system from Russia.
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- This shows that U.S. aims to help American defence firms compete successfully against Russian and Chinese arms manufacturers.
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- But India depends on U.S. and Russia for most of its arms and on the U.S. and China for much of its trade.
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- This shows India's simultaneous efforts to cultivate good relations with the U.S., Russia and China.
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- All these highlights the conceptual differences between India and U.S. on the Indo-Pacific and on how best to counter China in Asia.
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Source: The Hindu

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