

China's Rise and the Future of Sino-US Relations: How Countervailing Strategies like the Quad are Defining Sino-US Competition in Asia

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Abstract

The defining nature of strategic developments since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-08 is a rising China making territorial assertions in the South and East China Seas and along the India-China border and coercive manoeuvring by the PLA Navy off the coast of Taiwan – all part of a broader effort to supplant the United States as the preeminent power in Asia. These trends have been exacerbated after the COVID crisis that broke out in November 2019. In response, the US has focused on its Indo-Pacific Strategy, strengthened its alliance and partnerships and established a web of trilateral and 2+2 dialogues for better policy coordination between US, Japan, Australia and India. The Quad - recently elevated to the summit level - sits at the apex of these dialogues. The Quad should be seen as part of the countervailing strategies adopted in the Indo-Pacific to counter an aggressive, assertive and expansionist China. China, on the other hand, regards the Quad and mini-laterals as quasi alliances aimed at itself. The article also explores how India has responded to these developments and what direction India-Japan cooperation could take in the future. The article concludes by exploring the nature of the new Sino-US competition from a “realist” perspective.

Keywords

China, US, COVID, QUAD, Asia

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What is the Strategic picture in the Indo-Pacific? First, after the Global Financial Crisis (2007-08), there was a relative decline in US power and China made the most out of a “period of strategic opportunity”ⁱ by occupying the strategic space left vacant by a United States, preoccupied with the domestic economic crisis and the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to US intelligence several Chinese elites with close ties to the CPC thought China had a sinister goal: “China’s not going to be the only one to suffer from this”.

Second, China began to act aggressively with neighbours on her periphery, asserting historical territorial claims unilaterally, first through cartographic aggression, and then by creeping occupation - as was attempted by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at Doklam, Bhutan, in June-August 2017, and by land reclamation and militarization of reefs in the South China Sea. Chinese provocations were similarly a cause of rising tensions between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea since 2010. This was accompanied by *soft coercion* through threatening statements made by Chinese official spokespersons and the official media. Chinese fishing fleetsⁱⁱ were also used to assert territorial claims in the South China Sea

against Vietnam and the Philippines, on the Senkaku Islands against Japan, and the Natuna Islands against Indonesia.

Since the onset of the COVID crisis, China has behaved in an aggressive and dangerous manner. First, it hid the nature of the virus and failed to prevent its spread to other countries, According to US intelligence several Chinese elites with close ties to the CPC thought China had a sinister goal: “China’s not going to be the only one to suffer from this”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Second, China took advantage of the COVID induced distraction and domestic focus of major powers to renew its territorial assertions in the South and East China seas and along the Sino-Indian border. In doing this China was conforming to its historical pattern of behaviour. In 1962, China attacked India when the world was in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis^{iv}.

Third, China is building a “blue water navy”^v that can defend its sea lines of communication and become a dominant force in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. China’s port-building activities in the Indian Ocean littoral and the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti have led to concerns that this is part of a larger strategy to bring about the strategic domination of the IOR.

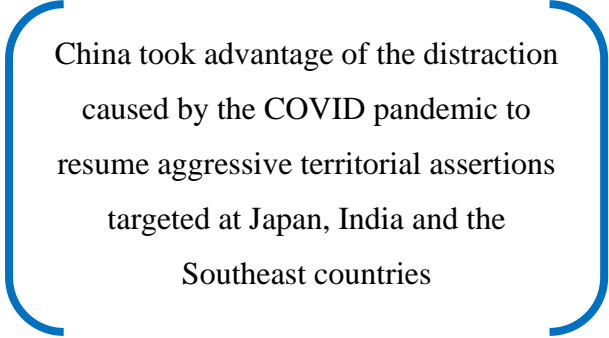
Fourth, China’s BRI is a grand strategy,^{vi} unparalleled in scope and ambition and far

exceeding anything the world has seen before. It is also a masterly blueprint to integrate China's markets, gain access to resources, utilize excess domestic capacity, strengthen China's periphery, gain strategic military access in the maritime domain beyond the Eurasian heartland, and enlist "all-weather friends," as China prefers to call its allies. Its origins may lie in pressures on the CPC to develop China's western provinces and compensate for China's economic slowdown, but the BRI has evolved into a predominantly strategic enterprise.

Fifth, there were the strategic and security underpinnings of the US-China Trade spat ^{vii} that we must take note of. On the surface, the tariffs imposed by the US seek to address the trade deficit and the theft of intellectual property, but more broadly, they are a reaction to the rise of China as a challenger to the United States' dominance of the capitalist, liberal and democratic order. The US actions reflect concerns over the loss of US manufacturing industries of the US rust belt and the perception that China's trade policies and industrial policy is unfair and threatens the US advantage in high technology sectors. US tariffs have not only targeted steel and heavy industrial goods but also high technology industries, in which China aspires to be the most advanced country by 2025 or 2049.

The COVID crisis has exacerbated tensions between China and the United States and is

likely to accelerate rather than change existing geopolitical trends. Chinese state behaviour suggests that China wishes to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia. "Southeast Asian countries are pieces on a strategic chessboard that China has every intention to dominate."^{viii}



China took advantage of the distraction caused by the COVID pandemic to resume aggressive territorial assertions targeted at Japan, India and the Southeast countries

Sixth, ASEAN-centric security institutions failed to address the hard security issues that came to the fore with China's rise^{ix}. The economic interdependence between the ASEAN and China and China's soft coercion and offers of investment funds, induced many ASEAN countries to fall in line. As a consequence, ASEAN unity on Chinese claims on the Spratlys and Paracels in the South China Sea has been broken since 2012. While Vietnam and Indonesia continue to stand firm, the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos have, in varying degrees, fallen in line and taken an accommodative stance in the face of Chinese pressure. China took advantage of the distraction caused by the COVID pandemic to resume aggressive territorial assertions targeted at Japan, India, Southeast countries in the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Seventh, the strategic collusion between China and Pakistan and China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) exacerbates security challenges for India, Japan, South Korea and the United States. *In South Asia*, China's support to Pakistan – which in the past has included nuclear and missile proliferation - encourages the latter to indulge in brinkmanship with India.

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On the Korean peninsula, China's unwillingness or inability to rein in the DPRK allows the latter to engage in nuclear brinkmanship with the ROK, Japan and the US. China has periodically displayed an ability to help defuse crises and bring the DPRK to the conference table, though without any lasting results. This gives China considerable leverage over those countries – Japan, ROK and the US - which are most affected by the DPRK's rogue state behaviour. President Trump's initiative in directly reaching out to the DPRK leader, had the potential to be a game changer by reducing China's influence on the eventual outcome of negotiations with North Korea – but it was all in vain. The Biden administration is in favour of completing proper groundwork at the

working level before seeking to schedule another summit meeting with the DPRK leader. Nuclear and missile proliferation activities between the DPRK and Pakistan, are another dimension that has been seriously detrimental to India's national security.

Under the Trump administration, America's National Security Strategy (NSS)^x and "principled realism" signalled an intent to reverse the US decline and reassert a "neo-American" order. US trade sanctions on China targeted key technologies vital for the realization of China's 2025 and 2049 goals.

Though committed to continuing a vigorous policy to counter the Chinese challenge, Biden has signalled important differences in his approach. Gone is the "America First" paradigm. The US is committed to its "historic partnerships" and will henceforth work with allies and partners. The strategic perspectives of the Biden administration are however, largely similar to the Indo-Pacific strategy adopted by the Trump administration^{xi}. Like his predecessor, Biden remains committed to engaging with India and enhancing its role as a major defence partner and checking China's influence in Asia.

Confrontation, competition and cooperation with China continue to be the new paradigm for the United States Strategic policy towards China and represent a tectonic shift after 1971. Chinese scholars increasingly believe that

current state of US-China relations is the “new normal”^{xii}. The two countries are engaged in a game of strategic bluff and China’s strategic determination and stamina to fight back are being tested. Whoever blinks first will lose.

A possible three-tier security structure could be an East Asian tier based on US alliances, an ASEAN centric tier buttressed by the web of tri-laterals and the Quad, and an Indian Ocean centric tier linking India, Australia and the US

ASEAN centrality has been a cornerstone of the regional security architecture in East Asia, but neither the security architecture nor the economic integration components of ASEAN-centric mechanisms are doing particularly well^{xiii}. ASEAN cohesion has collapsed under Chinese pressure. Though the ASEAN has embraced the “Indo-Pacific”, there is a state of confusion where accommodation of China is writ large and questions were raised against the Quad. Expectations from the EAS are fading. As such, ringing endorsements of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) centrality to the broader Indo-Pacific would appear to be misplaced. This is all the more so as the constricted geographic space ASEAN centrality implies, corresponds only partially to India’s definition of the Indo-Pacific or Japan’s

broader concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

China’s vision is for a Security Architecture^{xiv} that embraces ASEAN Centrality, albeit a weakened one, is focused on partnerships, draws on existing institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and seeks to dilute US influence in Asia. Our own interest and that of regional partners should be to nudge China towards a greater acceptance of multi-polarity in Asia.

The US NSS describes India as central to its Indo-Pacific Strategy and an essential element in the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture. India and the United States need to jointly evolve a common strategy that takes into account the growing strategic salience of the Indian Ocean, the challenge that China presents in the Indian Ocean and the need to preserve the role of ASEAN in regional security. A possible three-tier security structure could be an East Asian tier based on US alliances, an ASEAN centric tier buttressed by the web of tri-laterals and the Quad, and an Indian Ocean centric tier linking India, Australia and the US.

In the Asia-Pacific, the United States had been operating the hub and spokes alliance system centering on its alliances with Australia, Japan, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines. In the post-cold war period, the US has focused

on strengthening its bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia and has also established the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue.

US-sponsored Mini-lateral dialogues have focused on common security interests and are ad hoc, flexible and informal in nature. Mini-lateral security cooperation also dealt with broader non-traditional security issues. The effect was to promote trust and experience of working together amongst participating states. Mini-lateral Defense Cooperation is typically forged to aggregate the participants' military capabilities to defend against a specific threat. Because of its threat-centric nature, mini-lateral defense cooperation requires a high degree of shared threat perception and interoperability amongst the participants.

In June 2015, India, Japan and Australia met for their first ever Trilateral Dialogue. The trilateral came about amidst increasing strategic interactions between India and Japan on the one hand and India and Australia on the other. Two factors made a significant contribution to the establishment of the Trilateral – First was the rise of China as a power in the Indo-Pacific and second, the perceived decline in American power in the region.

Currently, India has 2+2 Ministerial and Trilateral dialogues with the US, Japan and Australia – India's partners in the Quad.

Though India, Japan and Australia are middle powers, their combined economic and geopolitical heft is driving their increasing regional influence. The fact that they are maritime democracies geographically representative of the Indo-Pacific also gives them a critical mass of soft power in the region. Working together and with US support, they have the potential to restrain China from achieving regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. But India, Australia and Japan have had to contend with an inward-looking isolationist America during the Trump era. Under the Biden administration, there is a demonstrated willingness to reinvigorate the alliance and partnerships towards common goals. However, the US continues to suffer from imperial fatigue and China is no longer willing to play second fiddle.

A group of mini lateral coalitions could help deter China's efforts at establishing regional hegemony

A number of Mini-lateral groupings acting together could, amongst other things, have the potential of contributing to the restoration of the balance of power in the Indo Pacific. In other words, a group of mini lateral coalitions could help deter China's efforts at establishing regional hegemony. Indeed, India, Australia and Japan backed by the US, is the most important chain that could potentially restrict

Chinese maritime ambitions in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Bilateral 2+2 Dialogues of Foreign and Defense Ministers of the US and India, India and Japan and Australia and India and Trilateral Dialogues between the US, India and Japan, India, Australia and Japan and the US, Japan and Australia have developed into important platforms for discussing regional issues and cooperation. These Mini-lateral dialogues are focused on common security interests and require a very high degree of shared threat perceptions and a manifest desire for interoperability amongst participants. China however, perceives US-led mini-lateral security cooperation as a quasi-alliance for containing China.

India has pursued comprehensive engagement with China based on the belief that there is enough strategic space in Asia to support the rise of both

The Quad^{xv} revived after a decade of dormancy in November 2017, emerges from three separate trilateral security dialogues: India-US-Japan, Japan-US-Australia, and India-Japan-Australia. Since its very inception, the Quad has had a rather tenuous existence. While Quad members might share the desire to moderate China's unilateral and hegemonic assertions, each of them have different thresholds for accommodating or hedging against China. This provides China considerable leverage over

Quad members. Looking over the shoulder to see how China might react had stopped the Quad dead in its tracks in 2007 and could do so again.

The Quad is essentially a 3+1 forum as India is not in alliance with the others. India's perspective within the Quad is quite distinct: it upholds multipolar stability and an equitable regional order based on cooperation and not dominance. Furthermore, despite the common embrace of the Indo-Pacific as the regional architecture, the US and its allies are mainly focused on Asia Pacific security and their military deployments also correspond to the Asia-Pacific. There is a suboptimal presence of Quad members other than India in the Indian Ocean. The US, Japan and Australia play no supportive roles in meeting India's continental challenges.

India is reacting to developments in the Indo-Pacific in a number of ways. First, from a strategic perspective, India has moved closer to the United States. However, India is not a member of any alliance and maintains strategic independence. How China approaches differences with India in the future will in part determine whether this posture will change. Second, India has pursued comprehensive engagement with China based on the belief that there is enough strategic space in Asia to support the rise of both. Third, India has developed closer strategic ties with other powers in the region including Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia. Fourth, with its "Act

East Policy” and SAGAR (Security and Growth for all in the Region), India is working vigorously to strengthen relations with ASEAN countries, bilaterally and through active participation in ASEAN dialogue forums.

The India-Japan relationship can play a decisive role in balancing Asia. However, to be effective, India-Japan ties must expand strategically in all areas – economic, security and defense. Only by acting strategically and in concert, can India and Japan encourage China towards a greater recognition of multi-polarity in Asia and moderate China’s assertive behavior. India and Japan must focus on strengthening ASEAN cohesion and addressing the economic and security issues that are pushing ASEAN into the Chinese embrace. On defense, both sides need to harmonize expectations. India is building its defense industrial capacity and developing power projection capabilities as a net security provider and first responder for HADR in the Indo-Pacific. Japan can help India build those capabilities faster. India-Japan defense trade and technology ties can only progress on the basis of unconditional commitment and reliability, which is not the case at present. India-Japan cooperation in (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) BBIN and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) are India’s main regional priorities. This opens greater room for India-Japan initiatives for East-West connectivity alignments, involving the strategic

use of Japan’s ODA and India’s grant assistance programs in the region. Together they can shape a prosperous Bay of Bengal Community.

The Quad is a forum for political consultation and policy coordination and should be regarded as such

The Quad has many critics. Some would regard it as directed against China and therefore provocative and destabilizing. Others regard the Quad to be ineffective and likely to wither away like its first incarnation. Both these views would appear to be incorrect. In fact, the Quad is a forum for political consultation and policy coordination and should be regarded as such. This, in turn, should be viewed along with the growing bilateral strategic ties between Quad members and mini-lateral engagements between the four countries including dialogues, naval exercises, information and intelligence exchanges.

The Realist Perspective of International Relations Theory gives us some useful insights into Geopolitics in Asia and the likely future of Sino-US relations^{xvi}. The Theory of *Offensive realism*^{xvii} put forward by Professor John J Mearsheimer holds that the anarchic nature of the international system is responsible for the promotion of aggressive state behaviour in international politics.

Offensive Realism gives us an insight into China's rise and the future of Sino-US relations. According to *Offensive Realism*, the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximize power and dominate the system. As a corollary, if China continues to grow, it will eventually dominate Asia just as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. As a reaction to China's rise, the US will go to enormous lengths to prevent China from asserting regional hegemony.

No regional hegemon wants a peer competitor. The US is no exception. Once China achieves regional hegemony in Asia, it will move freely all over the world and assert its power in regions and countries far away from home. For this reason, the US will continue to challenge China's efforts at establishing regional hegemony in Asia.

“We must look at the Quad within this paradigm of the new security frameworks emerging in maritime, Asia. The Quad is indeed, a part of the countervailing strategies pursued by the US to contain and limit a rising China”

If China does achieve regional hegemony in Asia, it will pursue a combination of the following objectives: First, it will project power in places like the Persian Gulf and Africa where it has economic and strategic

interests. It could also create problems for the US in the Western Hemisphere. Second, China will also try to maximize the power gap with other powers like India, Japan and Russia so that none of these states can challenge it. Third, China will dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and sanction those who break the rules. Fourth, China will have its own version of the Munroe Doctrine and try to push the US out of Asia. Fifth, China will continue to pursue its naval modernization with the goal of creating a blue water navy, which can project power across the globe and dominate the choke points connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The US will continue to strengthen its security alliance and its strategic partnerships in Asia in order to balance China. This will exacerbate tensions between its alliance and strategic partners and China. *We must look at the Quad within this paradigm of the new security frameworks emerging in maritime, Asia. The Quad is indeed, a part of the countervailing strategies pursued by the US to contain and limit a rising China.*

How would the competition between US and China impact China's neighbours in Asia? Will economic interdependence be the glue that binds? The Theory of *Offensive Realism* suggests that security considerations will always trump economic imperatives. It would appear to be so. China seems ready and eager to go to war over Taiwan even though the

conflict may harm China's economy. Indeed, China has a history of using force to settle security conflicts.

Second, one factor that has weighed in upon countries in East Asia is the use of economic coercion by China. Succumbing to economic coercion prioritizes prosperity over survival. When push comes to shove, however, countries would likely prioritize survival in their interaction with China. This sentiment has been a dominant driver for the push towards bilateral and mini-lateral security cooperation arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.

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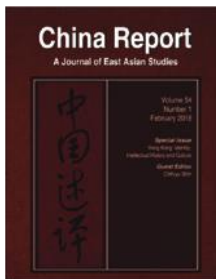


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