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CHINA AND QUAD 2.0: Between response and regional construct

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ABSTRACT

The existing literature on the Quadrilateral Initiative or Quad 2.0, has primarily focused on why the US, India, Japan and Australia have been promoting a strategic mechanism and how it could possibly contain an increasingly assertive China in the Indo-Pacific. However, what remains overlooked is the Chinese perception towards the Quad, which remains complex and systemic, underpinned by Beijing's national interests, national identity in the regional affairs, and a desire to attain the "Chinese Dream". While the official Chinese reaction to the "Asian NATO" has mainly been dismissive, this paper argues that Beijing's response to the Quad with its underlying apprehensions, is structurally linked to China's rise vis-à-vis India, the re-emergence of Japan in Asia and beyond, Australia's recent firm and calculated approach towards China, and US' rebuilt Asia strategy extending beyond military connotations.

KEYWORDS

Quad 2.0; China; Indo-Pacific; regional construct; geopolitics

Introduction

As the locus of geopolitics and geo-economics shifts to the east, the strategic spotlight has increasingly been garnered by the Indo-Pacific construct¹, overlooking a narrative of maritime politics and regional power play. One result of this has been the Quadrilateral Initiative emerging as a consultative mechanism in 2006 between India, US, Japan and Australia, aiming to regularly exchange views on regional challenges and dealing with maritime emergencies and threats such as piracy. However, even as the Quad was determined not to take a military approach, the grouping was alluded to as a military alliance especially by China, calling it the "Asian NATO".² These Chinese perceptions were prevalent even after the Quad 1.0 resurfaced as the Quad 2.0, which was invigorated by regular official meetings, upgraded to the foreign minister-level, and strengthened with an agenda to ensure a free, open, stable and secure Indo-Pacific. Although the official reactions of the Chinese were largely dismissive,³ an alarmist approach towards the Quad had been evident, which went beyond military concerns.

In the purview of the current times, a contemptuous and adverse response by China persists towards the Quad 2.0, even if Beijing remains conscious to not overtly express its anxiety over the grouping. What needs to be understood is the systemic and structural framework of China's perceptions towards the Quad. This evolves around securing

China's national interests in the Indo-Pacific and national identity in the regional affairs; its desire to protect its regional supremacy in the face of the US' Indo-Pacific strategy; and a need to safeguard Beijing's vulnerabilities of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) to sustain its rising power status in the maritime domain. What is also significant to acknowledge is China's desire to fulfil its Chinese Dream⁴ in an increasingly multipolar maritime domain where the juxtaposition of managing Beijing's evolving relationships with major powers and protecting its strategic interests in the region often remains a paradox.

Mapping China's responses to the Quad

The Quadrilateral Initiative or the Quad 1.0 traces its origins to the period post the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004. The primary stimulus was an American suggestion in 2006 to form a regional consultative forum, which would deal with maritime emergencies and security threats.⁵ The Americans believed that as the four democracies, that is the US, Japan, Australia and India had substantial naval capabilities, the countries could form a consultative forum, which would hold regular exchanges of views on regional challenges.

Shyam Saran, in his article "The Quadrilateral: Is it an Alliance or Alignment?"⁶ propounded that "all the four countries had expressed the proposition to not take a military dimension, or be directed against any third country". However, China, in particular, viewed the Quad as a developing military and security coalition in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and considered the proposition as a potential "Asian NATO".⁷ The adverse reactions from China signified towards a Neo-Realist view of the international system⁸, and indicated its anxiousness over a coalition which could pose a probable threat to its growing maritime footprints in the IOR.

In fact, China expressed its discontent even before the first-ever official-level security consultation took place between the Quad countries in 2007, by issuing *démarches* to each of the participants seeking to know the purpose behind their meeting.⁹ The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech at the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007 entitled "Confluence of the Two Seas" calling for a "broader Asia" in cooperation with India, Japan, United States and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region;¹⁰ and the Malabar naval exercises involving the US, Japan, Australia and Singapore in September 2007¹¹ acted as catalysts to China's growing suspicions towards the newly-formed Quad. These developments subsequently acted as a potential deterrent to Beijing's naval expansions and influence in the IOR.¹² Nonetheless, with the retraction of Australia from the Quad, this proposition died down by 2007, and re-emerged in 2017, popularly known as the Quad 2.0.¹³

China's reactions to the Quad 2.0 remained dismissive, acting as a shift from its earlier approach, even as Beijing officially welcomed the grouping for promoting a "regional and state-to-state cooperation".¹⁴ This was reiterated by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the Press Meet for the First Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress, held on March 8, 2018, where he expressed China's views regarding the Quad by saying that the grouping was "like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean."¹⁵ As a conscious strategy, the shift could be accorded to China's desire to not overtly express its growing apprehensions towards a grouping which could pose a threat to its maritime ventures in the region.¹⁶

What is important to note here is China's structural perspective towards the Quad, which underpins a necessity to protect Beijing's regional supremacy acting as a guarantor

to its geopolitical and geo-economic power; and a requirement to sustain the regime of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to ensure the political, economic and social control and stability of the 1.4 billion population of China. For China, it thus, becomes an imperative to protect its vital maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific-trade and energy, which remain significant to sustain and further develop the second-largest economy of the world.

The question of the regional construct

The paramount concern stirring Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific has been to protect its core strategic objectives, a vitality that has been widely discussed amongst international scholars.¹⁷ Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific has been enhancing China's threat perceptions, which has forced Beijing to accord utmost priority to the region. Importantly, there remains a difference of outlook between China and the Quad countries towards the region, especially as China had been renouncing the term "Indo-Pacific" as being a US-led proposition and embracing "Asia-Pacific" instead.

Even though a conversation is fast emerging amongst the Chinese strategic community regarding ways to engage with the concept of "Indo-Pacific", the leadership is yet to endorse the same.¹⁸ What is also imperative to acknowledge is the power structure of the Asia-Pacific region, which has primarily been dominated by the US since the end of the World War II, as a development and security guarantor. The US has sustained its strategic primacy through its economic and military might, coupled with offshore balancing¹⁹ and rebalancing to maintain the status quo and stability of the region.²⁰ In fact, it is this regional construct with the US' omnipresence, which acted as an impetus to China's economic and strategic development in the region, and led it to the path of regional and global influence.²¹

The Shifting Regional Construct (*first structural element*). In the context of the above, the theoretical element for China's response to the Quad should be the shifting gravity in the regional construct from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific", where China's apprehensions are centred around the Quad's endorsement of the latter. In brief, the "Indo-Pacific" is increasingly becoming a threat to China's supremacy and a China-led regional architecture in the "Asia-Pacific".

In retrospect the Asia-Pacific has been a regional construct for China where it has been enjoying supremacy with its rising economy, in turn contributing to a strengthening military. Most importantly, the Asia-Pacific has been a construct having virtues of Asian economic multilateralism, corroborating China's regional economic rise. One of the finest examples of the same has been the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), where following China's accession to the APEC in 1991 and its joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, Beijing not only became the global manufacturing hub, but also developed into the largest exporter to many of the Asia-Pacific countries.

China established itself as the first major economy to surpass the growth recession of 2008–09 and paved the way for its neighbouring economies. Its developing role in the APEC and in the international economic community largely corroborated the "China Miracle", contributing to the sustainability of China's economy and legitimacy of the CPC. As a pretext, it must be noted that the "Asianness" of the APEC, especially after the end of the Cold War undermined the strategic presence of the US. This, when coupled with the absence of India from the forum, helped China to rise in the multilateral organisation.

At present, China has been leading the plan for a Free Trade Area (FTA) in the APEC, while the forum has been endorsing the *Beijing Roadmap for APEC's Contribution to the Realization of the Free Trade Area of Asia-Pacific (FTAAP)*. This, hence, has been acting as a facilitator for China to establish itself as the gravity centre in the Asia-Pacific regional construct,²² enabling it to play a greater role in global affairs.

Its desire to sustain and enhance its dominance was reiterated during the speech by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China:

It will be an era for all of us, the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, to strive with one heart to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind.²³

Similar sentiments were visible during the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2017, where the founder of the WEF, Klaus Schwab introduced Xi Jinping by promulgating: "In a world marked by great uncertainty and volatility, the international community is looking to China."²⁴ These perceptions have been prevalent in the infrastructure and connectivity domain as China introduced its "Grand Strategy" of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013; and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to support the infrastructure building in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁵

In the regional security domain, China initiated with relevant countries the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Xiangshan Forum, China-ASEAN Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation, and the Centre for Comprehensive Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong Sub-Region. The initiation of these multilateral institutions enabled China to "shoulder greater responsibilities for regional and global security".²⁶ If anything, these initiatives reiterated China's desires to build a regional architecture which would cater to its national interests, at the same time, make a case for its governance model and a potential rise as a global leader.

However for China, the emerging Indo-Pacific construct, differing from the Asia-Pacific, upholds elements of Neo-Realism and an orientation of a security domain. Most importantly, this concept being overtly endorsed by the US, Japan, Australia and India, acts as a pretence to China's Neo-Realistic views, where the proposition has been functioning as a risk to its national identity in the regional affairs. The emerging construct of Indo-Pacific underpins a great volume of geopolitical vacuum, which is gradually being occupied by the Quad countries, especially India, Japan and Australia. This, to China's disconcert, is the space Beijing has been wanting to fill through its economic and military supremacy.

Subsequently, the construct of the Indo-Pacific, even as it includes China as a beneficiary, acts as a threat to the regional construct it is endorsing. A gradual revisionist view is hence developing within China's response to the Quad and the larger Indo-Pacific, where the actions and statements by Beijing are increasingly hinting towards its desire to change the status-quo.²⁷ For instance, China in 2014, endorsed the "New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation" under Xi Jinping, and propounded the need for the people in Asia to govern the regional security affairs, echoing its dislike for the US engagement in the region.²⁸ Also, Beijing in "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation" called for "building of a new model of international relations" through developing partnerships in different forms with all countries and regional organisations.²⁹

In other words, China with these conceptual and institutional initiatives calls for a new “China centric” security architecture by building a better world through the “China View”, which would be away from the US-led alliance system.³⁰ In fact, its emphasis on the term “security” itself denotes a sense of discomfort, and even an unfavourable approach towards the architecture of the Indo-Pacific. The security centred construct, in China’s view, is being led by US’s Indo-Pacific Strategy; and comprised of India’s political, security and economic rise; Japan’s re-emergence; and Australia’s emerging prominence with a firm approach towards China, formalising as Beijing’s foundational response to the Quad’s emergence in the Indo-Pacific.

China as a maritime power in the Indo-Pacific

China’s Desire for regional dominance amidst threats and vulnerabilities (*second structural element*). The Indo-Pacific region has become strategically significant after it replaced the Atlantic and became the most vital trade corridor, carrying four-fifths of the world’s container traffic between Asia and rest of the world, and three-fifths of the world’s oil supplies.³¹ Most importantly, while China officially refuses to endorse the Indo-Pacific construct, the region holds considerable significance for Beijing for housing the straits of Sunda, Lombok, and Malacca, which carry up to 80 per cent of its oil shipments originating from Middle East, Africa and Indian Ocean.³² This makes the case for China’s response to the Quad, where the re-emergence of the latter poses a risk to Beijing’s vital overseas interests in light of China’s vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

In this context, while the People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) came into the region as early as 1985, Chinese overseas interests witnessed a quick expansion with Jiang Zemin’s “Going Global” strategy. This strategy, introduced at the Third Session of the Ninth National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2000, played a significant role in enhancing China’s dependence on trade, energy and security in the Indo-Pacific. Subsequently, China emerged as a stronger maritime power under the Hu Jintao administration in 2003–04 and witnessed a growing emphasis on expanding the navy (China surpassed Japan as the second largest consumer of energy with its increased dependence on the Malacca Strait.)

Hu Jintao propounded the “Go out” and “New Historic Missions” strategies, which focused on encouraging domestic investors to invest abroad to acquire natural resources and technology³³; and defended China’s international interests, especially by conducting counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden from 2008.³⁴ Arguably, China’s growing footprints in the Indo-Pacific has often been resonated with Alfred Mahan’s theory of the “Importance of the Sea Power” published in the *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. According to Mahan, “Sea Power was the key to global dominance”, emphasising on trade routes and strategic chokepoints as imperatives to ensure the sustainability of states.

Presently, Mahan’s vision of Sea Power is increasingly being conceived as a zero-sum game in which a mercantilist approach by states is gradually prevalent. From a Chinese perspective, as the Indo-Pacific takes the centre stage for global politics, it becomes a requirement for China to defend its national interests through a strong navy and overseas bases. Thus, following Xi’s “Chinese Dream” and the “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, the 19th National Congress of the

Communist Party of China promulgated three goals for China—Mechanisation of PLA by 2020, complete modernisation of China’s military forces by 2035, and transforming the PLA as a “world-class power” by the 2050.

China under Xi Jinping has been invigorating its naval modernisation and expanding its maritime power in the Indo-Pacific by creating a blue-water navy capable of power projection, and working to achieve operational synergies as part of joint warfare. Further, it has been advancing PLA’s capability to fight and win wars against advanced militaries, and enable the military to work with the coast guard, maritime militia and other parts of the Chinese government to advance China’s maritime sovereignty claims.³⁵ What is important to note here is China’s emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region, especially as Beijing propounds to

... address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, ... builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks. The PLA conducts vessel protection operations, maintains the security of strategic SLOCs, and carries out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations.³⁶

Viewing the situation through Chinese perspective, “Overseas interests are a crucial part of China’s national interests”. It justifies adding a new element of “open-seas protection” to its existing “offshore waters defence” and turn to the “far seas” in the Indian Ocean. In fact, this remains a pretext for China’s growing engagement in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) where Beijing’s rising posture in the multilateral body remains a result of its strategic interests, geo-economic considerations, and the growing power politics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).³⁷

Keeping this narrative in mind, the rising frequencies of the Quad meetings and the advancement of the proposition in the region has been causing China’s reaction to being cautious.³⁸ China’s growing vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific region coupled with the uncertainties in the region is leading it to percept the Quad navies of having a possibility to pose for a better scope for reconnaissance in the region amidst Chinese trade routes and maritime adventurism.³⁹

Thus, China has been trying to diversify its trade routes and energy passages through the Maritime Silk Road and the six corridors of its BRI. With these infrastructural initiatives at the backdrop, Beijing fears that a re-energised Quad could pose a threat to its national overseas interests; even if the navies of the Quad might try to protect their own maritime interests.

The Code of Conduct (*third structural element*). A vigilant response from China is also visible towards the South China Sea (SCS) region as Beijing pushes for a Code of Conduct (CoC) with the ASEAN countries. The CoC is aimed to provide a set of rules, norms and responsibilities for the parties to promote maritime cooperation in the SCS. This comes in the context of the persistent contestation and coercion between China and certain Southeast Asian nations over the territorial control of the SCS- one of the most strategically important maritime regions on earth.⁴⁰

For China, the sovereignty claims are over 90 per cent of the islands in the region on the basis of its Nine-Dash Line,⁴¹ and reiterates the same through its White Paper entitled “China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea’ released on July 13, 2016”.⁴² The paper was announced at the time of China’s rejection of the ruling of the

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which supported Philippines' plea for China's historical claims over the islands in the SCS as being unlawful, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) dated July 12, 2016.

In China's view, the ruling against China's control over the water or resources was ill-founded. In fact, China's White Paper on National Defence in a New Era released in 2019 propounded that "the South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory".⁴³ It moreover stated that "China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the SCS."

In the backdrop of the above, a COC between the claimant parties became imperative. Thus, initiating the concept of a COC in the 1990s, which was first formally discussed in 2002 at a gathering of foreign ministers from ASEAN countries and China in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. However, it was not until 2013, when China began discussing a formal framework for the COC to ease the tensions with its Southeast Asian neighbours.⁴⁴

After four years of negotiations between China and the Southeast Asian claimant countries, all the parties decided on a framework for a COC in November 2017, following the 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting. This was succeeded by a "Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text (SDNT)" announced on August 3, 2018, which would serve as the basis for the adoption of a COC in the SCS. However, the question of China's reaction to Quad came when point four of the document under part iii of Section 2.c, which perhaps remains the most contentious portion of the SDNT, was proposed by China. As cited by Carl Thayer in *The Diplomat* on August 03, 2018:

The Parties shall establish a notification mechanism on military activities, and to notify each other of major military activities if deemed necessary. The Parties shall not hold joint military exercises with countries from outside the region, unless the parties concerned are notified beforehand and express no objection.⁴⁵

The above point suggests, if not overtly, towards targeting the joint military exercises and the freedom of navigation activities of the nations, particularly by the Quad members. In fact, freedom of navigation, and advocating for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) have been a prevalent theme in the Quad 2.0 meetings. For the US, freedom of navigation by air and by sea is vital, especially as more than \$1.2 trillion worth of US goods pass through the SCS every year.⁴⁶ The region has been housing one of the most important shipping lanes in the world, and remains rich in natural resources such as oil and natural gas in deposits under the sea.⁴⁷

The US has been regularly conducting freedom of navigation operations in the region (FONOPs). Similarly, India and Japan have time and again promulgated the importance of freedom of navigation in the SCS for their own maritime interests and economic development, especially through their first India-Japan 2 + 2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting in 2019. In the meeting, both the countries urged the COC to be "effective, substantive, and consistent with international law".⁴⁸ Australia too, has asserted its rights to conduct freedom of navigation in the SCS.⁴⁹

The Quad countries have also expressed their discontent over China's coercive unilateral actions in the region which could increase the tensions between the claimant countries and alter the status quo in SCS. In this context, the US, Australia, and Japan demanded China and Philippines to abide by the 2016 PCA arbitral ruling on the SCS on the side-

Table 1. China's Strategy towards South China Sea (2000–2019).

2000	China advocates to settle pending and unresolved border and maritime disputes through negotiations. It accords significance to the establishment of a mutual confidence-building mechanism in border regions, and condemns the use of force or provocative acts in the region.
2002	The situation in the South China Sea area has been stable, as the relevant countries have signed the <i>Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea</i> . However, uncertainties threatening peace and development are rising. Thus, in an event of aggression, China will firmly resist in accordance with the Constitution and laws.
2004	China is determined to safeguard its national sovereignty and security, territorial integrity and maritime rights and interests, irrespective of the evolving international situation.
2006	Territorial disputes and conflicting claims over maritime rights and interests undermine the trust and cooperation among states. The PLAN aims to gradually expand the intensity of its offshore defensive operations and strengthen its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks.
2008	Conflicting claims over territorial and maritime rights and interests remain serious and regional hotspots remain complex. In response to the new trends in global military developments and the requirements of the national security and development strategy, China has formulated a military strategic guideline of active defense.
2010	China has clearly stated that relevant disputes should be properly resolved through peaceful negotiation and consultation. This should be done in accordance with mutually accepted international laws and modern maritime laws, including the basic principles and legal systems as prescribed in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
2013	Regarding the issues which concern China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some neighboring countries are taking actions that complicate or worsen the situation. China follows the principle of "we will not attack unless we are attacked; but we will surely counterattack if attacked." Thus, China will resolutely take all necessary measures to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.
2015	Regarding the issues which concern China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbours are taking provocative actions and reinforcing their military presence around China's reefs and islands that they have been illegally occupied. Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a few continue engaging in close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China. China condemns these activities.
2016	China is firm in upholding its sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao and their surrounding waters. Some countries have been illegally claiming and occupying some islands and reefs of Nansha Qundao by force. These violate the Charter of the United Nations and basic norms governing international relations and remain null and void. China maintains its opposition regarding such actions and demands that relevant countries stop violating China's territory.
2019	The South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea. China is committed to resolve related disputes through negotiations based on respecting historical facts and international law with those states directly involved.

SOURCE: The Main Source is from Defence White Papers of China (2000–2019) at www.fmprc.gov.cn. However, the table has been prepared and condensed by the author

lines of the 50th ASEAN ministerial meeting.⁵⁰ India too, on the same lines, supported the Arbitral ruling of the PCA in its statement released on July 12, 2016, and urged the claimant countries to exercise self-restraint against the use of force in the region.⁵¹ Nonetheless, China has been condemning such verdicts by the Quad countries regarding its actions in the SCS, while the verdicts have only been unnerving for China.

As a result, even as military drills by the US, Japan and India has been conducted in the past; it was the joint exercises such as the naval drills performed by the US, Japan, India and Philippines in May 2019, which alarmed China.⁵² While the naval drill by the countries represented their national interests and maritime rights of freedom of navigation, for China, such adventurism in the SCS where three of the Quad members performed military exercise with Beijing's ASEAN neighbour with whom the former shares an unresolved maritime territory, went against China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. China also condemned the joint freedom of navigation activities by the US and Australia in the SCS since mid-April, 2020, restating its sovereignty claims and opposing the naval presence of foreign powers in the region.⁵³ A matter of significance here remains China's persistent military activities in the SCS even amidst a global pandemic situation, echoing an

uncompromising approach towards its sovereignty claims and core strategic interests. China's response towards Quad's movements, or interest to play a greater role in the SCS, in this context, reflects a territorial approach. From a Realist perspective, China's irksome reaction to the Quad's desire for freedom of navigation in SCS does not just correspond to a hindrance to Beijing's territorial integrity, but also highlights its apprehensions towards a relative enhancement of the Quad's influence in the region.⁵⁴

Although the SCS region witnesses China's growing assertiveness, an emerging bonhomie between ASEAN and the Quad members; and the ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific as stressed by the Quad⁵⁵ itself comes as a pretext to China's response towards Quad in the region.

It is also significant to acknowledge China's gradual but firm approach towards the region, especially in response to the COC, which speaks volume about an "incrementalistic" policy by Beijing. Such an approach draws direct correlation with its strengthening and modernising navy, where its growth has been instrumental in gradually expanding China's control over the islands and the adjacent waters in the SCS.

What is evident from [Table 1](#) is a shift in China's approach towards the dispute where, from an initial will to resolve the SCS dispute through treaties and agreements, China moved to claim the SCS islands as an "inalienable parts of Chinese territory" refusing to acknowledge the PCA. This kind of approach, nevertheless highlights a revisionist desire to change the status-quo of the region. This also highlights a change in China's maritime strategy from defensive to offensive diplomacy in the SCS, where the latter form has been a response to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially as some "external countries meddle in South China Sea affairs."⁵⁶ A recent and greater emphasis on the COC, especially stressing on the point of preventing outsiders to access the region comes as a ploy. An implicit reference to the Quad is thus restated, where the growing adventurism of the grouping in the SCS has been worrisome for China.

The BRI and the Chinese Dream (fourth structural element). The Belt and Road Initiative, with the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) have become a part of China's grand strategy to realise its Chinese Dream and national rejuvenation. China aims at fulfilling its goal of a moderately prosperous society, where the BRI would play a major role by actualising a "global network of partnerships", and focusing on regional pockets in the IOR.

In brief, through BRI, China has been trying to strengthen its partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific by initiating collaborations, deals, agreements, loans, aids and grants. What remains at stake is China's \$1–8 trillion investment in the BRI, which China is strategically upholding to enable its majestic ambitions to become a reality.⁵⁷ However, what are also essential to acknowledge, are China's ambitious BRI projects, especially in the Indian Ocean, which are swiftly unfolding the grander strategic elements underpinning it.

For instance, the Chinese EXIM bank's \$1 billion loan to the Sri Lankan Government to build the Hambantota Port unfolded a strategic element to it when Sri Lanka failed to pay back the loan with high-interest rates, and leased the port to China for 99 years. Often debated as a strategy to expand China's footprints in the Indian Ocean, the BRI projects were criticised by the US Secretary-General of State, Mike Pompeo during his visit to the Panama City for carrying out "predatory economic activity".⁵⁸

Concerns regarding the mounting unsustainable debts being a part of many BRI projects were also raised by India, Japan,⁵⁹ as well as Australia, where the latter supported the

BRI for developing infrastructure and opportunities, but felt that the “Economic power is also being used for strategic ends”.⁶⁰ Likewise, the US National Security Adviser John R. Bolton in his remarks in the Heritage Foundation, Washington DC expressed his views on China’s investments in Africa as “predatory” and the BRI as China’s plan to achieve its ultimate goal of global dominance.⁶¹

Trepidations regarding China’s aim to gain the strategic upper hand was further expressed by the US, particularly in light of China’s first overseas military outpost in Djibouti where the Djibouti government now has a loan to repay China. What makes Djibouti a significant region is its important strategic location, lying on the transit routes of the Suez Canal and working as a sea outlet for the land-locked Ethiopia. Most importantly, China’s military base in Djibouti remains situated at a striking proximity to the US base in Diego Garcia, in Djibouti-Camp Lemonnier and in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Arguably, these concerns have been a part of a larger narrative, which resonates China’s “debt diplomacy” to the geopolitical strategy of “String of Pearls”, which centres around China’s bases in the Indian Ocean, strategically encircling India and seeking to offset the American influence in the region.⁶²

Nonetheless, Chinese officials have time and again negated such accusations while assuring the BRI to be initiating a “win-win” scenario, and being economically profitable for all the stakeholders.⁶³ Imperative to note in this context is the Chinese apprehensive response to the Quad, which factors the “debt burden” narrative presented by the Quad members. Moreover, in response to China’s governance during the Covid-19 as well as the supply chain disruptions as a result of the pandemic, Quad countries such as Japan have decided to diversify production away from China. The US, too, is pushing to bring its manufacturing back from China. A sentiment is arising in Washington and its partners in Asia to reshape supply chains and trade relations in order to create an economic order which is less dependent on China.⁶⁴

In light of the scenario mentioned above, Beijing remains cautious of the collective economic competence, which the Quad grouping might bring to contain China’s developing connectivity networks, and in turn stand as a hindrance to the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation.⁶⁵ This has only enhanced with the inception of Covid-19. In retrospect, China already has witnessed major connectivity initiatives taken by India, Japan, the US and Australia in the region, such as the Project Mausam, Equal Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (EPQI), the Blue Dot Network, and the Pacific Step Up respectively. While the infrastructural initiatives by the Quad countries in the Indo-Pacific are not viewed as grand as the BRI, such projects are enabling India, Japan, the US and Australia to develop significant strategic and developmental partnerships in the region.⁶⁶ Together, these developments are factoring China to build an alarmist response to the Quad.

The question of competing power projections in the Indo-Pacific

China’s Desire for Regional Dominance vis-à-vis India’s Rising Power (*fifth structural element*). Debatably, it has been the rise of India as an economic and military powerhouse and influential political actor in world affairs, which has acted as one of the catalysts for the emergence of the Indo-Pacific. An Indo-Pacific view of the region has provided legitimacy

to India's role as a growing political, strategic and economic actor in East Asia—where China has traditionally held supremacy; the SCS—where China has perceived complete sovereignty, and the Pacific Ocean—where China has been expanding its influence. Thus, another structural element for China's response to the Quad remains the rise of India in the aforementioned regional pockets, which acts as a revisionist element in the status quo set by China in its regional architecture shaped by its desire for leadership.

India's rise in the Indo-Pacific has mostly been shaped by its policy adjustment in the region, which highlights its desire to play a greater, and a more significant role in the regional as well as global affairs. The conversation with the External Minister of India, S. Jaishankar in the Raisina Dialogue held in January 16, 2020 signified India moving towards being a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific through “strategic proactiveness”.⁶⁷ He went on to say that:

Today India has sixteen white shipping agreements. It has given naval equipment ships to eight of its Indian Ocean neighbours, it has coastal surveillance radars in six of its countries, it has done seven HADR operations in the last five years, major HADR operations. It has today extended defence lines of credit close to two billion dollars to eleven countries, it has trained more than a thousand troops in the last five years, it has military training teams in eleven countries, it does hydrographic cooperation with five of its maritime neighbours ... I'm giving you numbers, region, places which shows really where our influence is going.

The above statement speaks immensely about India's emergent strategic influence in the region, which creates apprehensions for China, vis-a-vis its own rise in the Indo-Pacific.

Further, an Indo-Pacific description to Asia provides a new rationale to the US-India relations, which consecutively appears as a hindrance to China's role and interests as a leading power in the region.⁶⁸ The Trump Administration defending its use of the term “Indo-Pacific” instead of “Asia-Pacific” as it captures the significance of India's rise corroborates to the growing US-India ties, and acts as a reason for China's hesitant approach towards the Quad in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁹ New Delhi's emergence as a major strategic and defence partner to the US, and its access to high-end defence technologies and advanced weapons systems have unnerved the Chinese.

The US' decision to change its Pacific Command's name from PACOM to INDOPACOM might be symbolic, but it embraces a strengthened US-India partnership, which would expand beyond bilateralism, exploring a strategic and a more proactive approach in the Indo-Pacific. This hence has been a matter of caution for China, which has been enhancing its influence in the region.

In fact, for long China has refused to acknowledge the “Rise of India”—Beijing's central position in the regional architecture, which it has been endorsing was a factor to China's response. Its denial to acknowledge India as a major and competitive power was witnessed by its initial stance during the Doklam incident; its disregard to India's territorial and sovereignty issues during the construction of the CPEC; its refusal to support India's plea for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council and its blocking of Masood Azhar's listing as a global terrorist in the UNSC four times until lifting its veto in May 2019.

In other words, China's rapid rise in the region has positioned Beijing as the “centre power” for Asia, developing to become another security guarantor for the region in light of US' selective balancing. However, the re-emergence of Quad, with the rise of

India becomes a reset to the China's desired image in the regional and global affairs as an emergent power.⁷⁰

Also, India's strengthening "Global and Strategic" partnership with Japan; its bolstering bilateral relationship with South Korea; and a diplomatic but sustained relationship with North Korea has acted as a prelude to India's enhancing engagement in the East Asia, where China holds dominance. Its growing acceptance in the Indo-Pacific, especially by the ASEAN countries, provides legitimacy to New Delhi's growing role in the region as a strategic power, including in the SCS, which China has considered its sovereign backyard since decades. This has been reiterated in the India-ASEAN Summit of 2019, where the ASEAN backed India's growing role in the region amidst the increasing Chinese assertiveness in the SCS.⁷¹

Additionally, with the India-Pacific Islands Forum in Jaipur in August 2015, India is seeking to expand its strategic influence beyond the Indian Ocean Region through the Act East Policy to the South Pacific Region.⁷² India's establishment of the "Forum for India and Pacific Island Countries (FIPIC)", and its growing engagement with the "Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)" unravels India's increasing footprints in the Pacific Ocean.⁷³ Thus, apprehending China in the process, India's engagement in larger East Asia, SCS as well as the South Pacific region is acting as a test to China's role as an influential economic and strategic power, especially in the regions where China occupies a strong foothold.

China's Regional Clout vis-à-vis Japan's Re-emergence (*sixth structural element*). Another element in China's response to the Quad has been Japan's re-invigorated attempt to play a more significant role in Asia, and the re-emergence of a nationalist Japan. This has been efficiently promulgated in the "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech by Shinzo Abe,⁷⁴ charting the concept of a broader Asia as a region where India, Japan, the US and Australia would play a central role to ensure a free, open, stable and secure Indo-Pacific. For China, the Quad opposing Beijing's version of centrality and leadership, would strengthen Japan's vision of alliance and help Japan advance its military as well as non-military alignments in the region and beyond. This plays greater vitality in the backdrop of the US-Japan alliance trajectory in the region, which has been unsettling for China. Further, Washington's support towards Japan's desires to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific has led to Beijing being watchful of the developments in the region, especially in the backdrop of its experiences of Japanese imperialism and militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁵ In brief, the Quad process has brought a strategic complementarity to Japan's "Reiwa era" which has bolstered Tokyo's position in the regional and global affairs. Japan's policy statements in recent times have been more vocal about security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region while shifting its security posture from 'passive pacifism' to 'proactive pacifism'.⁷⁶ Subsequently, its policy initiative of Expansive Partnership for Quality Initiative (EPQI) have been reiterating the "Reiwa"-ness in Japan's outlook towards regional and global affairs by bringing in sustainability and quality developmental partnerships and projects. These, if anything, have been garnering a cautious response by China.

Sino-Australian Relations amidst Australia's Re-embrace of the Quad (*seventh structural element*). Australia's emerging and active role in advocating the construct of the Indo-Pacific, at the same time, reviewing the Chinese investments and involvement in Australia⁷⁷, has been worrying China. Australia has been expanding its diplomatic and strategic influence in the region, especially through its "two-oceans" strategy, and promoting a

secure and rules-based Indo-Pacific. The strategic significance of Canberra's position comes from the fact that it remains a geographic entity connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans; and an important strategic ally to the US, while sharing vital economic relations with China (China remains Australia's largest trading partner).⁷⁸

Australia being at the forefront advocating the Indo-Pacific construct, especially in its defence White Paper of 2013, makes China anxious.⁷⁹ To China's dismay, while Australia has shown solidarity with the BRI in terms of its developmental agenda, it still retains its reservations regarding the structural and administrative policies of the BRI. Australia has been committed to its policies such as the "Pacific step up" and initiatives like the "Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility" and supports the Quad grouping for a more stable and peaceful Indo-Pacific.⁸⁰ Moreover, it has been participating in the US-led Blue Dot Network to advance the region of the Pacific through quality infrastructural development in the backdrop of China's unsustainable investments to the Pacific island countries.⁸¹ Australia also has been the first country to ban the Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei from its 5G network, citing security concerns, irking China.⁸²

With the inception of the Covid-19 resulting in a health and economic crisis, Sino-Australian relations have reached a new low. Australia leading the call for an investigation into the origins of the novel Coronavirus, joining the global campaign for an independent international enquiry has been met with growing criticism by China, while precepting Canberra's actions as a risk to the long term Sino-Australian bilateral relations and trading partnership.⁸³ Australia's firm response to China's criticism and repudiation of China's attempt at "economic coercion" strengthens Beijing's apprehensions towards Australia's embracing of Quad 2.0, which would prevail in the near future.⁸⁴

Quad 2.0 and the Strengthening Schisms between the US and China (*Eighth Structural Element*). China's reservations towards a strengthened US role in Asia as a net security provider has often enabled Washington to have a containment approach towards Beijing.⁸⁵ Such an approach by the US was prevalent as Western analysts and strategic communities from the US, began characterising China as a revisionist power. This was further explicated in the US's National Security Strategy (NSS) under Donald Trump, where countries such as China and Russia were termed as "revisionist".⁸⁶

In fact, a provocative and offensive approach of this length by US triggered a trade war with China, against the backdrop of the US accusing China of stealing "American trade secrets", being a "currency manipulator",⁸⁷ and engaging in unfair trade and commercial practices to gain economic and geopolitical advantages.⁸⁸ For the US, it has been China's initiatives such as the BRI, its assertiveness in the SCS, East China Sea and the Taiwan Straits, its growing footprints in the Indo-Pacific, largely, and its desire for a China-led security architecture, which is leading Washington to view Beijing as a power which seeks to change the status-quo. However, for China it is the US refusing to accept China as a growing power; or as the theory of the "Thucydides Trap"⁸⁹ suggests—the US considering China's rise as a threat to its global supremacy—which has been the reason for the US to contain China through the Quad.

In this regard, China, taking an offensive route, has more often than not, put the same liability on the US by terming it as the "revisionist power". As a *China Daily* piece states somewhat overtly, "US is the real revisionist power".⁹⁰ China moreover, perceives the US' coming together with its allies to strengthen its presence in the region as a security threat to China, hindering the peace and stability of the region.⁹¹

In the purview of the Covid-19 pandemic, the reinvigoration of the US' critical stance towards China's response to the crisis has enhanced the rift between both the countries. Viewing the situation from a Chinese point of view, US' censorious approach towards China coupled with the underlying tensions in the US–China relations would only harden China's cautious approach towards Quad 2.0.

Going ahead

In view of the shifting geo-politics in Asia, China's perceptions of the Quad 2.0 becomes pivotal in shaping the discourse of the Indo-Pacific. For this, China's response to Quad remains structural and beyond military undertones. If anything, China's response towards the Quad 2.0 remains foundational, underpinned with the resonance of the latter's emergence, and its endorsement of a FOIP acting as a strategic challenge to China's official vision of the regional architecture—the “Asia-Pacific”. China's systemic approach towards Quad comes as a result of the latter acting as a potential threat to China's growth and sustenance—its advancing military to secure Beijing's national interests in the maritime domain; its Grand Strategy of the BRI to sustain China's rising power status and legitimize the CPC's control; and its national identity and influence in the regional affairs to ensure China's supremacy.

Given the perspectives China holds towards the Quad 2.0, especially in view of a containment strategy by US, a rising India, re-emerging Japan and a prominent Australia imbibing a vigilant and firm approach towards China in the region; Beijing's outlook towards the Quad would continue to be tougher, but nuanced. Moreover, Covid-19 is likely to be a significant trigger towards a possible expansion of the Quad mechanism, as deliberated by the global strategic community post the teleconference meetings, which included countries like Vietnam, South Korea, New Zealand, Brazil and Israel, apart from the Quad members.⁹² Although this is not yet an official body, the abstract idea of “Quad Plus” could play a constructive role in the region in the backdrop of the pandemic, which is likely to simultaneously enhance China's apprehensions.

Amidst the competing national interests in the Indo-Pacific, these perceptions of China towards the Quad 2.0 are bound to grow; even as Beijing engages with the Quad countries at multiple levels. The national security and growth ambitions of China with underlying insecurities would have significant bearing on China's view towards the Quad's emergence, even as the Quad 2.0 might fend towards safeguarding its own interests.

Notes

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 4. The Chinese Dream for China holds significant historical connotations, emphasizing on its desire to restore the dignity it deserves in the backdrop of the century of humiliation it experienced at the hands of imperialist powers. If anything, the concept for Xi Jinping is a means to rejuvenate the nation, and not seek hegemony. Please see, "Xi: Chinese Dream by no means hegemonistic," *Xinhuanet*, November 22, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/22/c_138575924.htm. May 27, 2020. However, as per many China observers, the term also acts as a key medium to enhance China's stature in the global affairs as a "rising superpower," which could be determined through China's increasingly assertive efforts to sustain power and control in regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, South China Sea, East China Sea, etc. Please read, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, June 04, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html> May 27, 2020; Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "The Elusive Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, December 26, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/27/opinion/the-elusive-chinese-dream.html> May 27, 2020.
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 8. Within the Neo-Realist discipline of thought, rational states in an anarchic situation while facing a "security dilemma," either enhance their economic growth and/or military capabilities (internal balancing) or enter into alliances to check the influence of more powerful states (external balancing) to ensure the Balance of Power (BoP). China, in particular, viewed the Quad proposition as a camouflage for a military alliance, working together to contain the "Rise of China." For more arguments on alliances in Neo-Realism, please read Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 5–41.
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