

# From Assertion to Accommodation: Explaining China's Evolving Response to the Indo-Pacific Strategy

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The 'Indo-Pacific' as a frame of reference for regionalism has been gaining increasing popularity in recent times. Over the last decade, many nations have used this terminology in their official discourse, elevating the phrase into a contemporary geo-political nomenclature. The term has a strong political connotation, which reflects the conflict and competition in the regional geo-political outlook of the USA and China. While the USA projects an Indo-Pacific strategy for regional supremacy, Beijing has emerged as its principal critique, perceiving the idea as US-led propaganda aimed towards the containment of China. Their geo-political conflict means the Indo-Pacific has become a major discourse in Asian regionalism. In this context, the paper examines China's evolving policy towards the Indo-Pacific idea, especially one propagated by its principal regional and global competitor, the USA. Beginning with a theoretical exposition of the US-China relationship, the paper analyses the evolution of the Indo-Pacific conception as a discourse of regionalism, Beijing's reaction to the Indo-Pacific concept and its institutional manifestations in light of its regional dynamics with the USA, and the transformation in China's approach to the idea in tune with its regionalism strategy.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, China, Quad, Regionalism, the USA, Foreign policy, Competition

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The 'Indo-Pacific' conception of regionalism has been gaining increasing popularity in recent times. At one level, the usage of the term reflects the geo-political rivalry between two great powers, the USA and China, whose effects are prominently visible in Asia. While the USA consistently projects the Indo-Pacific discourse in its regional outlook, Beijing is averse to the term as the USA-led propaganda with an inherent strategy to galvanise a coalition to contain China's power. In the emerging dynamics between the two great powers, the Indo-Pacific idea has become a significant frame of reference underlying the outlook each has towards the other and the region.

A wide array of literature has highlighted the USA-China dynamics within the binaries of conflict or cooperation. Some studies move away from such binaries and highlight the process of coexistence with an amalgamation of both accommodative and contesting tendencies. The paper analyses China's outlook towards the Indo-Pacific idea in the larger context of its relationship with the USA. Rather than analysing China's reaction from a conflicting lens, the paper brings out the evolutionary transformations of Beijing's response to the Indo-Pacific, reflecting elements of both contestations and accommodation. The study has used government reports along

with an analysis of secondary sources such as books, journals, and newspaper articles to examine China's evolving position towards the Indo-Pacific.

### **Theoretical Interpretations of the US-China Relations**

Much of the mainstream international relations debates on China's ascendancy and the consequent future of US-China relations focus on the binary scenarios of conflict and co-option, with Asia emerging as the theatre of power dynamics between the two great powers. Both scenarios are represented by a rich vein of scholarship primarily under the theoretical domains of realism and liberalism, especially their contemporary versions of neo-realism and neo-liberalism. While both the latter theories start with a common premise of the presence of an essentially anarchical international structure, where they differ is in the effects of anarchy on nation-states' behaviour.

Neo-realism explains the future shape of China-US relations through the notion of balance of power brought about by the anarchical international system. Portraying a pessimistic picture of the inevitability of inter-state conflict, Neo-realism argues that China's growth will lead to a similar situation when a rising power is pitted against the prevailing superpower, with war the most probable outcome (Graaff et al., 2020). Such pessimism is more acute among offensive realists who state that there is no limit to seeking power by states as they ultimately pursue to be a hegemon. The same will be the case with China as Beijing aims to become a regional hegemon in Asia by pushing the USA out of the region, and the USA's China-containment strategy could result in an open military conflict (Mearsheimer, 2010). Offensive realists showcase China's rising stature and the consequent USA's reaction in Asia to give credence to their assumptions.

It cannot be denied that the US and China are intensifying their competition for regional hegemony in Asia and also to balance each other's power in the region. With rapid ascendancy in military capability and economic resources, China is currently the most crucial pillar of the 'Asian Century' discourse. China is second after the USA in economic size and military spending. It has developed an advanced military, a blue-water navy, and other hard and soft power assets geared towards becoming a regional hegemon. Beijing has advanced defence assets such as the A2/AD in numerous regional strategic hotspots to deter America's military operations (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2018). In the economic realm, China's two major initiatives, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with 147 members and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with 106 members, have made rapid expansion since their inception (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2023; Nedopil, 2023, p.25). Through the BRI, China is engaged in robust economic diplomacy through preferential loans and financial assistance to many Asian and European nations in multiple land, rail and maritime connectivity projects.

China's power projection, besides the elevation of hard power capabilities, is also reflected in its assertive behaviour. Beijing is acting assertively in numerous economic and security issues of the region. China's 'Asian security concept', unveiled by Xi Jinping in 2014, underlies the notion of Asian security by the Asian powers, rather than by outsiders, notably the USA. The implication is that China considers itself the primary actor in providing and upholding security in Asia. For Navarro (2014), this is the 'Chinese Monroe Doctrine' at work (China's real goal, para. 8), of Beijing, seeking to become the central anchor in any emerging security framework. The country's

behaviour is reflective of its regional ambitions. Beijing has sought to dominate, notably through maritime claims in the South China Sea (SCS), in defying the prevailing legal structures (Medcalf & Rajamohan, 2014). Through activities like patrolling the Senkaku Islands, exerting control over the Scarborough Shoal, constructing artificial islands in the SCS, etc., China is asserting its power with other regional maritime dispute holders such as Japan and the Philippines. Besides its hard power capabilities, China is also pursuing soft power diplomacy to fulfil its objectives. Through a range of activities – promoting the attraction of its traditional culture, projecting itself as an attractive education destination, expanding trade and investment through the attraction of its economy, foreign aid and development, face-mask diplomacy post-COVID-19, etc. – China has enhanced its influence across the Asia-Pacific.

Beijing competes for regional presence against the USA, which has had a strong presence in Asia over the last seven decades. The hubs and spokes alliance structure, despite its challenges, remains essential to the regional security politics of the USA. America maintains an active regional presence, a factor that has often invoked Beijing's assertive response, through military bases in Australia (Pine Gap, Naval Communication Station Harold E. Holt), Japan (Kadena Air Base), South Korea (Camp Humphreys), Philippines (Camilo Osias, Camp Melchor Dela Cruz, Balabac Island) and Singapore (Changi Naval Base). The USA's current position is powerful enough to rule out its exclusion from any potential China-led regional security architecture. Instead, Washington's regional outlook, over the last decade, has been driven by a close watch on Beijing's power and behaviour. For instance, the Obama Administration, by strengthening America's existing military presence, announced the USA's 'pivot' and 'rebalancing' towards Asia (The White House, 2014). His successor, Donald Trump, by categorising China as a 'strategic competitor', intensified America's strategic offensive against China (The White House, 2017, p. 25). Trump has often labelled China a 'revisionist power' which seeks a regional reordering by displacing the USA (Pu, 2019). To balance China's A2/AD, the USA is strengthening joint military cooperation with its alliance partners and enhancing its ballistic and theatre missile defence systems (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, 2018). In a press conference after assuming office, Joe Biden coated the USA-China confrontation on ideological lines as a "battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies" (The White House, 2021a). In strategic papers and policy documents, the USA has been vocal against China's territorial claims, especially around the SCS (United States Department of State, 2022). Institutionally, America projects the Quadrilateral (Quad) as a platform for like-minded countries to develop security cooperation, including joint military activities, to counter China. Economically, the USA is engaged in a long-standing trade war with China by setting protectionist measures like tariffs and trade barriers to negate China's advantages from alleged unfair trade practices. For offensive realists', all these developments posit an increasing possibility of a conflict between the USA and its closest competitor, China, for a regional hegemonic position in the Asia-Pacific.

In contrast to offensive realism, defensive realism does not subscribe to the view of an unlimited desire for power among states. According to them, states seek power, but only as much as they need rather than as much as they can (Waltz 1979). For defensive realists, pursuing hegemony may be foolhardy because it may lead to balancing, thereby rendering the aspiring hegemon less secure and even in a position of destruction. Defensive realists would no doubt acknowledge a rising and assertive

China in Asia as it does through military mobilisation and economic diplomacy. However, they would stop short of going as far as the offensive realists do and argue that it does not make strategic sense for China to pursue regional hegemony as it could lead to a strong balancing response from many Asian states. Furthermore, China's military position at a global level does lay credence to defensive realists in the sense that Beijing is yet to be in a position to become a regional hegemon in Asia, replacing the USA. As per the SIPRI report, China's share of military spending is almost half of that of the USA, suggesting that China's military mobilisation has not reached levels to balance the power of the USA (SIPRI 2023, p.2).

Some realist scholars also interpret the USA-China competition as exhibiting a status dilemma as an additional source of tension between the great powers. As in the security dilemma, the status dilemma stems from a lack of information from the other power, which creates a perception of threat, but in this case, to the status of the nation-state (Pu, 2019). For proponents of the status dilemma, both the US and China are assured of survival, but they engage in a competition for status rather than their security (Pu, 2019). They point to China's proclamation to build a world-class military in tune with its global status as evidence of a status motive of China's military modernisation besides the strategic objectives, something that may present an additional source of conflict with the United States (Pu, 2019).

Unlike realism, liberalism is more optimistic about the future direction of great power relations. While they agree with realists on anarchy and nation-states' pursuit of power, they believe that there are significant constraints in the international system – popularly referred to as the Kantian constraints of democracy, trade and institutions – that make war too risky and thereby increase the possibility of cooperation even in an anarchical system. For liberal institutionalists, despite China's military mobilisation and the consequent USA-China competition in Asia, Beijing is also a key stakeholder in international trade and regimes, making the consequences of conflict with the USA outweigh its benefits.

Liberals premise their argument by pointing to China's accommodation with the global economic order. China's global trade in 2022 comprises 38 percent of its GDP (The World Bank, 2023). China was ranked first in Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) in 2020, even as Beijing's total Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) stock stood at 2.58 trillion dollars, funding 45,000 overseas enterprises in 189 countries covering over 80 per cent of the countries and regions globally (The State Council, 2021). Since joining WTO, Beijing has mostly acted as a pragmatic WTO rule-taker (Graaff et al., 2020). The China-US trade has risen substantially, with both emerging as a top export market of each other. China has also portrayed itself as a champion of globalisation and calls for a more open global economy, moving away from trade protectionism (Graaff et al., 2020). China is a part of numerous institutions and regimes, including many in the North Pacific, which also involves the USA. While the BRI, despite its pitfalls, serves as an avenue for the integration of China with Asia and beyond, the RECP enables Beijing to be the most significant player in regional free trade. For liberals, all these developments signify China's integration into the global economic structures that both enable and limit Beijing's aspiration for power and influence. Despite China's bilateral tensions, whether with the USA or with other Asian powers, and the accompanying power competition, liberals put faith in trade and institutions to create collaborations and strong economic interdependencies between them.

Some theoretical perspectives that move beyond the binaries of conflict and co-

option (as put forward by realism and liberalism, respectively) in understanding the USA-China dynamics and explore the possibility of coexistence as a possible scenario that includes a complex mix of integration and contestations of China with the USA as well the American-centred liberal order (Graaff & Apeldoorn, 2018; Graaff et al., 2020). Such thinking stems from the alleged limitations of state-centrism that have occupied much of international relations theory as they re-direct the focus towards 'state-society complexes' (Moolakkattu, 2009, p. 447). Such a way of thinking implies that nation-states are not actors in their rights but are structurally related to society, acting through people embedded in wider transnational social networks (Graaff & Apeldoorn, 2018). The state-society complexes may vary among nation-states, and therefore, their behaviour and the nature of their rise to power may vary rather than acting similarly as structural theories assume. The proponents of the state-society complex use the above proposition even in their understanding of the US-China relations. They argue that since China's state-society complex (with the state organised around the communist party in primacy) is different from the USA (dominated by the oligarchic autonomous capitalist class), its rise to power and its association with the global political and economic order may be distinct for the evolutionary history of the USA (Graaff & Apeldoorn, 2018). One needs to take into account the state-society complexes in the USA-China dynamics as we may see certain interests conflicting and others converging that may shape the future interactions of the two great powers. While Beijing may emulate practices of the liberal order, it might also encounter impediments – whether structural or about the norms of the liberal order or others related to elite power structures – and accordingly respond to them (Graaff et al., 2020).

In such complex dynamics, the Indo-Pacific emerges as a significant element both in terms of conception as well as in geopolitics. While the USA leads the way in popularising the Indo-Pacific notion in its conception of regionalism, China remains sceptical of the term in its foreign policy discourse. The contest between the two nations is not merely about accepting or rejecting the term in their regionalism strategy but signifies a much deeper competition for power and regional influence between a current superpower and its closest competitor.

### **The Evolution of the Indo-Pacific Conception**

Regions, as a collective of nation-states within a geographic area, are significant actors in international relations. They have contributed to the establishment of regional norms, regulations, and trade agreements, thus exerting influence on the broader international system. As the world becomes more interconnected, understanding the complexities of regional dynamics is essential for comprehending global politics. The importance of regions can be measured by the fact that scholars often conceptualise a global order as an order of strong regions (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Regions are often defined by the powers that comprise them, most often by the preponderant power but also by the core great powers and regional powers (Katzenstein 2005). While power matters, the socialisation of power by regions is as important, meaning that regions are constructed more from within than from without, and often become an arena of contestation based on ideas and norms (Acharya 2007; 2009). The conceptions of regions as defined by one power also come into contestation with the other based on numerous indices such as inclusion/exclusion of members, strategic outlook, etc. The changing geo-political scenario brought about by the



change in the power configurations of powers also results in a change in the narrative of regions.

Indo-Pacific is one such regional construct that reflects many of the above dynamics. The current popularity of the 'Indo-Pacific' outlook should not compel us to believe that the term has a novel connotation that has replaced the erstwhile 'Asia-Pacific'. The contours of the term can be found way back in the history of exploration - from the beginning of regional maritime trade in pre-recorded history to the spread of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism to European colonialism and Pan-Asian resistance (Medcalf, 2019). In the 1920s, the term was used more specifically by German geo-politician Karl Haushofer in his conception of a region (Li, 2021). During the Cold War, the term was used in passing references to denote the USA's engagement with its Asian allies as a containment strategy against communism. The Indo-Pacific cooperation strengthened after the Cold War as countries across the two oceans began to extend their engagement (Medcalf, 2019), with the impetus provided by institutions and dialogue platforms. For instance, the inaugural East Asia summit in 2005 provided a platform for the confluence of nations across the two Oceans to devise cooperation in areas of common interest - one of which was to develop a grouping large enough to prevent its domination by China (Medcalf, 2019).

By the turn towards the present century, the Indo-Pacific got elevated towards a contemporary geo-political nomenclature. In 2006, in a now famous address, Japanese PM Shinzo Abe envisioned a closer economic and political linkage between the democracies surrounding the two oceans (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007). To realise this vision, Abe proposed a quadrilateral of democracies to initiate dialogue on shared security interests for a prosperous Indo-Pacific. Soon, other countries followed suit. In 2010, the U.S.A. stressed on enhancing security relations with its Asian neighbours to secure the 'Indo-Pacific Basin' for more robust trade between the countries involved (U.S. Department of State, 2010). In 2012, Australia started using the term in its White Paper, and by 2017, Indo-Pacific became a central reference point in the country's regionalism discourse. In 2015, a vision document by the Indian Navy referred to the Indo-Pacific as a reflection of the shift of global political attention towards Asia (Ministry of Defense (Navy), 2015). Subsequently, Modi in his Shangri La address in 2018 placed the Indo-Pacific as a key region in India's foreign Policy outlook. Trump, at the 2017 APEC summit, referred to an inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific as a 'focal point' of the USA's Asia policy (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p.12). ASEAN became the first regional organisation to lay out an Indo-Pacific vision when it adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 with a strong focus on ASEAN-centrality. Germany (2020) and Canada (2022) are the latest entrants, using the Indo-Pacific notion in their vision of regionalism as they aspire for a greater position and role.

Geographically, the Indo-Pacific roughly comprises an area of 75 million sq. km (58 percent of the global share), covers 43 countries of Asia, North America, Latin America and Europe, has a total population of 5.32 billion (69 per cent of the global share) and a GDP of 64 trillion USD (De & Kumarasamy, 2020, p.3). However, it is primarily the political connotation that has brought the Indo-Pacific into the limelight. The politics behind the 'Indo-Pacific' leads to diverse interpretations of nature, objective, and inclusion/exclusions among its proponents and sceptics alike.

Of course, there are some common elements in the Indo-Pacific discourses of the proponents, such as the rule of law, navigational freedom and enhancing

infrastructure and connectivity. Japan outlined its commitment to rule-based international order, freedom of seas, connectivity, and infrastructure development as essential components of the country's Indo-Pacific vision (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). The USA's strategy seeks to strengthen the regional order, uphold navigational freedom, and redouble its commitment to close the region's infrastructure gap (The White House, 2022c). Australia proclaimed that an open, inclusive, and rule-based Indo-Pacific serves its interests, and it will work to enhance the freedom of navigation and support the development of infrastructural plans for connectivity towards that end (Australian Government, 2017). India envisages an inclusive Indo-Pacific region rooted in freedom of navigation, infrastructure development, and respect for sovereignty (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). ASEAN's, besides incorporating most of the common principles, also stresses the institution's centrality in any emerging regional order (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

On the other hand, there are notable divergences, the most significant one relates to how China is perceived in the Indo-Pacific discourse. The USA explicitly propagates a China-containment approach in its Strategy. The country's 2022 document points out that

This intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC...The PRC's coercion and aggression span the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific.... (and) our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behaviour...For our part, the United States is .... aligning our approach with those of our allies and partners abroad and competing with the PRC to defend the interests and vision for the future that we share with others (The White House, 2022c, p.5).

Japan's outlook has evolved from a China-containment strategy to that of engagement in areas of common interest. Japan's initial trust in its Indo-Pacific outlook had a normative tinge, as reflected in Abe's famous 2007 address, where he visualised a linkage of democracies to regulate non-democracies such as China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007). In another essay titled "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", Abe envisaged the formation of a Quad to safeguard the region from coercive and authoritarian tendencies in regional hotspots such as the SCS, a clear indication to Beijing (Abe, 2012). Since 2018, Tokyo has renamed its "FOIP Strategy" to "FOIP Vision" and alluded to the possibility of coexistence of the country's FOIP vision and China's BRI in areas of common interest such as infrastructure development in Asia (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2018). This approach continues at present as Japan's new Indo-Pacific outlook, as unveiled by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in March 2023, mentioned "inclusivity" as an important principle besides stating that the country's Indo-Pacific idea "does not create camps" and "do not exclude anyone" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023, 4). Canada's strategy also raises concerns about China's disruptive behaviour and coercive unilateralism. However, the country's strategy also postulates a "realistic and clear-eyed" approach to China, which includes challenging China's coercive behaviour along with regional partners while cooperating with China on finding solutions to common global challenges (Government of Canada, 2022, p.7). India and ASEAN are much more muted towards China in their Indo-Pacific strategies despite the challenges emanating from Beijing. Resusing to project the Indo-Pacific vision as an approach to contain China, India's PM Narendra Modi categorically stated that

“inclusiveness...lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific”, rather than viewing the latter as a “club of limited members” or “as directed against any country” (Ministry of External Affairs 2018). Along similar lines, the AOIP prescribes an “inclusive regional architecture” and, though not naming China, does look to engage the latter in any emerging framework (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019, p.1). It is evident by the ASEAN-China joint Statement agreed upon at the 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-China Summit at Jakarta that sought to combine the priority areas of the AOIP with the objectives of China's BRI, indicating ASEAN's approach of mutually beneficial cooperation with China for regional development (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

The Quadrilateral or Quad is a recent minilateral institution firmly rooted in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ idea. It took shape in the form of an informal gathering in 2004 between the USA, Australia, India and Japan as they came together for joint action following the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami. Following Abe's visionary 2007 speech, where he emphasised the strategic partnership among the four nations to evolve into a network of free flow of ideas, goods and people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007), their association elevated into a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). Subsequently, ministerial-level meetings, formal and informal exchanges, and military drills among the four countries intensified the cooperation among the four nations. Five regular summit meetings of the Quad have been held so far, besides two foreign and defence minister meetings and Quad plus meetings involving other regional and extra-regional states with shared security interests. In the latest summit meeting in 2023, the members committed to a “free and open Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilient” and resolved to cooperate among themselves and their ‘plus’ partners to maintain peace and stability, ensure global health security, develop infrastructure, and commit to the issues of climate change (The White House, 2023a).

Considering Beijing's expansion of economic diplomacy with underlying political objectives through the BRI, infrastructure development has become a significant component of Quad's agenda. Including infrastructure investment as a “common goal” followed by forming a dedicated coordination group reflects Quad's importance to the sector (The White House, 2021c). From Quad's perspective, investment in infrastructure strengthens the grouping's reputation for providing tangible solutions and emerges as an alternative to the BRI (Hillman, 2021). The agenda also has operational viability as the Quad members have collectively undertaken projects worth \$48 billion for infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific since 2015 (Hillman, 2021). In 2022, the Quad allocated \$50 billion, reaffirming their commitment to deepen cooperation on infrastructure (The White House, 2022b). In the 2023 Hiroshima summit, Quad launched two major initiatives - Quad Infrastructure Fellowship and Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience – for capacity building for further improvement in infrastructure projects (The White House, 2023b).

The formation of the Quad also reflects the conflict in the regional geo-political outlook of the USA and China. From its very inception, Quad had a turbulent ride. China emerged as a principal critique of the Quad, characterising the ensemble as similar to alliance formation during the Cold War. China viewed the Quad as an Asian NATO, promoted by the USA, in association with its allies and friends, to challenge China's supremacy (“Commentary: U.S. dreams of Asian NATO”, 2003). Faced with stern Chinese opposition, India and Australia hesitated to move the initiative forward lest it seem like a counterweight to Beijing. This led to the temporary cession of the Quad in the same year it began. A decade later, during the 2017 ASEAN Summit, the



four member-states again converged on the agenda of Indo-Pacific security. The consequent renewal of Quad once again reinvigorated the tensions between the two major powers. The Quad and the broader Indo-Pacific conception thus go beyond the mere confines of geography to reveal the compulsions of regional geopolitics with the USA and China at the centre stage.

### **China's Scepticism towards the Indo-Pacific Vision**

America's and China's perceptions towards the Indo-Pacific are a manifestation of their vying for regional influence. The USA seeks to maintain its predominant regional position by containing China's rise. Since Trump's FOIP outlook at the 2017 APEC summit, the Indo-Pacific conception as a form of regionalism occupied a vital part of the USA's strategic discourse. For Trump, the FOIP strategy would be pivotal to 're-energise' USA's alliances with its regional partners, the prime objective of which is to deal with China as the latter "endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability" (The White House, 2017, p. 46). The USA's approach is also designed to counter the BRI, an instrument China uses to leverage its economic power in undermining the sovereignty of the regional nations (The Department of Défense, 2019, p. 9). While there is a multilateral touch in the FOIP, such as references to ASEAN centrality, there has been an overall downgrading of multilateral forums and deals in favour of bilateralism by the USA (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). A prominent case is Trump's withdrawal from the TPP in 2017, negotiated painstakingly by his predecessor Obama, based on the 'America first' policy, which, in this case, entailed USA's emphasis on bilateral deals as providing more utility than multilateral institutions (Baker, 2017).

The crux of America's Indo-Pacific strategy under Biden follows a similar trajectory, influenced by the challenges posed by China. The country's strategy document of 2022 laid down the US advocacy for a free and open Indo-Pacific to be realised through improvement in regional connectivity and security cooperation (The White House, 2022c). Containing China being an essential component of the FOIP, it overshadowed any possibility of accommodating China in America's regionalism discourse. The USA did make references to the theoretical possibility of accommodating China in its FOIP. For instance, the 2022 strategy referred to not just "managing competition with the PRC responsibly" but also cooperating with "allies and partners while seeking to work with the PRC in areas like climate change and non-proliferation" and hope that "PRC succeeds in transforming the rules and norms that have benefitted the Indo-Pacific and the world" (The White House, 2022c, p. 5). Nevertheless, given its position and regional strategy, Beijing is primarily perceived as a competitor and opponent.

China's initial reaction to the above developments was a mix of dismissal, scepticism and an even more vigorous adoption of the 'Asia-Pacific' connotation in its regionalism strategy. China has consistently brushed aside America's Indo-Pacific strategy since Trump presented his FOIP vision as a new geo-political construct of the USA's involvement in Asia. In a press meeting in 2019, when asked about China's view on the "Indo-Pacific strategy," China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi responded:

It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they may get some attention, but soon will dissipate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

Instead, China constantly used the Asia-Pacific notion in any inquiries about regional affairs. At one instance, on repeated inquiries on Indo-Pacific and whether there is a contradiction between the latter and Asia-Pacific, a Chinese official, in a somewhat irritated tone, remarked:

You seem to be too obsessed with the concept of the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific.....development of all countries and regions, be it the Asia-Pacific or others, shall heed the call of the times for peaceful development and ride with the trend of the world for win-win cooperation (Embassy of People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2017).

Beijing also dismissed any possibility of the FOIP being inclusive enough to accommodate China. As spokesperson Wang Wenbin remarked,

I want to point out that ill intentions underlie the so-called "Indo-Pacific strategy" devised under the pretext of "the China threat". What the US says in its "Indo-Pacific strategy" is different from what it is doing. The US claims to advance "freedom and openness" in the region but is forming an exclusive clique through AUKUS and QUAD (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b).

Instead, for China, FOIP is a strategic response by the USA to the changing regional landscape brought about by Beijing's ascendance. As Foreign Minister Yi stated:

The so-called "strategy" (The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy) has given itself away, as it not only aims to erase the name of "Asia-Pacific" and the effective regional cooperation framework in the Asia-Pacific region, but also aims to efface the achievements and momentum of peace and development fostered by regional countries with joint efforts for decades (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022f).

Until 2019, formal use of the 'Indo-Pacific' connotation in China has been nearly absent. However, in academics, the term was sparingly used till 2017, after which the frequency of its usage has increased, indicating that the concept is here to stay (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p.31). As the Indo-Pacific garnered more attention and acceptance, the Chinese government's approach also transformed from being purely dismissive to pointing out its negative implications for the region. One reason behind this approach may be a growing concern in Beijing that the Indo-Pacific idea might stay strong, and a wider acceptance of the concept, with the USA in the lead, may have negative implications for China's regional interest. Many Chinese scholars believe that greater involvement of the USA in Beijing's neighbourhood will intensify the 'four-seas linkage' dilemma, compromise the security of China, and increase Beijing's strategic uncertainty, intensifying the regional arms race between the USA and China (Liu, 2020, p.17). This might even make the other territorial dispute holders more assertive vis-à-vis China, which could erode the legitimacy of Beijing's territorial and maritime claims. Other member-states party to territorial and maritime disputes with China may also become more assertive vis-à-vis China in staking their claims.

With the above possibilities into consideration, China, rather than overtly dismissing the Indo-Pacific, altered its narrative that the conception is not conducive to regional security. As Foreign Minister Yi stated:

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is triggering more and more vigilance and concerns in the world, especially in Asia-Pacific countries.....Facts will prove that the so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy is in essence a strategy

that creates divisions, incites confrontation and undermines peace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022f).

China also coated its economic diplomacy with a normative tinge by differentiating the objective and outlook of the FOIP and the BRI. For China, the former is focused exclusively on security, one that could rekindle the Cold War era. Responding to the US strategy, Wenbin remarked that the “strategy that resurrects the Cold War mentality and bloc politics has nothing new and no future, but will only bring division and turbulence to the Asia-Pacific” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). Rather, Beijing wholeheartedly projected the BRI with progress and development as its cornerstone. At a BRI conference in 2021, Yi stated,

The BRI has truly become the world's broadest-based and largest platform for international cooperation...(that) braved COVID-19 and continued to move forward, showing remarkable resilience and vitality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Beijing also left no stone unturned in pointing out the limitations of the Indo-Pacific conceptions. It questioned America's border-sharing capability that would be required to move the Quad and the broader Indo-Pacific support group forward. Beijing's scepticism of the USA's ability is not out of place. While the USA looks to cut its logistical costs, the regional nations will expect the USA to be the key anchor, especially in security matters. In that sense, the decline in the USA's capacity may counter the expectations of the Indo-Pacific proponents towards Washington. The issue of burden-sharing becomes more problematic considering the diversity in the outlook of the Indo-Pacific idea among its proponents. China has repeatedly stressed this divergent conceptualisation as a sign of its weakness. Indeed, each Quad member has a distinct geographical scope, strategic understanding, objectives, and expectations in their propagation of the Indo-Pacific. Unlike the USA, India, despite its long-standing territorial disputes with Beijing, does not subscribe to the idea of elevating the Quad into an alliance structure and refuses to project the grouping as a containment strategy directed against China. In fact, India's divergence with other Quad partners makes New Delhi one of the weakest allies in the group. While India wants to balance China, it avoids doing it overtly to prevent offending Beijing. As PM Modi pointed out in 2018, ‘[By] no means do we see it (the Indo-Pacific) directed at any country ... New Delhi's engagement in the area will be inclusive’ (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Some of China's other neighbours share this hesitancy to project their strategy as directed to contain China. Instead, they look up to China as a key partner in development funds despite having territorial or other political tensions with Beijing. Such regional dynamics provide an important base for China to place the BRI on a higher pedestal than Indo-Pacific strategies with security orientation.

### **The Quad and China's Response**

China's reaction to the Quad is on similar lines to that of the Indo-Pacific conception. Beijing remains wary of the Quad, viewing the latter as essentially an outcome of the security mindset of its proponents, especially the USA. Even as the Quadrilateral Security Initiative outlined its objective as a security cooperation rather than a military alliance, China remains the least convinced. Since the Quadrilateral took shape, Beijing has emerged as one of its most vociferous critics. In fact, even before the formation of the Quad, China had expressed apprehension about the USA's

desire to build what it terms a 'NATO-like multilateral mechanism for Asia' ("Commentary: U.S. dreams of Asian NATO", 2003). A week before the inaugural exploratory meeting of Quad officials in 2007, China issued demarches to all Quad members, asking them to explain the meeting (Varadarajan, 2007). Subsequently, Abe's speech and the 2007 Malabar exercise between the four Quad members confirmed China's suspicions about forming a new multilateral grouping.

It is not that Quad marks the first regional multilateral initiative without China. The USA, Japan and Australia have been involved in a Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD) since 2002 on democracy promotion, human rights, free trade, freedom of navigation and stable regional security architecture (Tatsumi, 2015). It is possible that India's involvement in the Quad, a country that is outside the USA's radar of alliance structure in the Asia-Pacific, intrigued Beijing. China was concerned with the potential inclusion of India in the existing TSD process as a next step, which will signal a new balance of force in the region. As expected, Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed his reservations about the Quad and sought clarifications from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh about India's position. Singh responded with an assurance that Quad was not about 'ganging up' against China but was a dialogue platform without any 'security implications' and would consequently have no negative impact on India-China relations (Chaudhury, 2007). It is doubtful that such assurances convinced Beijing, as was evident from the country's dispatch of 1,600 troops in 2007 to the Ural Mountains for a "joint Peace Mission" manoeuvre with Russia (Ali, 2007). China had a momentary strategic victory when Quad, giving precedence to Beijing's concern, pulled out of any future four-way meetings by the end of 2007. Australia formerly led the way when Defence Minister Brendon Nelson, in a meeting with his Chinese counterpart General Cao Gangchuan in July 2007 in Beijing, assured Australia's discontinuance of the initiative (McDonell, 2007). Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith would reiterate this stance the following year, even as both Australian leaders backed the existing Trilateral Security Dialogue with the USA and Japan (Bagchi, 2008). With Australia's retraction, Quad was put on the back burner for ten years, to resurface in 2017.

China's reaction to the revived Quadrilateral remained ambivalent, ranging from conditional acceptance to dismissal to containment. A day after the inaugural meeting of the revived Quad, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang, in a relatively optimistic tone, hoped for Quad to be an open and inclusive body rather than directed at a third party (Embassy of People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2017). Others, like Foreign Minister Yi, who referred to the Quadrilateral cooperation as a 'foam in the sea that ...will soon dissipate', were more dismissive (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). However, by 2020, Beijing's narrative changed, now perceiving Quad as threatening its regional interest. Yi himself, by October 2020, altered his narration of the Quad as a quadrilateral mechanism aimed at building an 'Indo-Pacific New NATO.' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020b). Yi further stated that if Quad goes ahead, it would bring back the 'Cold War mentality' of stirring confrontation among groups for the USA to maintain its dominance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020b). Chinese officials and media also belittled Quad's potential to make a significant dent in China's global and regional interests. Numerous reasons were cited for the same - the USA's declining capacity, the lack of regional acceptance of the USA's leadership, the lack of a substantial economic base of Quad, Quad nation's economic

links with China, and India's ambiguous position and closeness with Russia etc. (Rozman, 2021). But there is undoubtedly a sense of anxiety about the revived Quad vis-à-vis Beijing's regional interests.

China has even worked up the ante to prevent Quad from transforming into a Quad plus grouping. In 2021, China's Ambassador Li Jiming issued a warning to Bangladesh about "substantial damage" to the bilateral relationship if Dhaka joins the Quad ("China warns of 'substantial damage' to ties," 2021). Following strong reactions from Bangladesh ("We'll decide our foreign policy," 2021), Beijing slightly backtracked from its earlier assertive stance. Chinese officials later eased the situation by pointing out that "China and Bangladesh are very friendly close neighbours who treat each other with mutual respect" while shifting the blame on Quad as an "exclusive clique, that portrays China as a challenge, and sow discord between regional countries and China." (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Gambia, 2021). Beijing views any extension of the Quad as detrimental to its regional ambitions. Consequently, Beijing's reactions are not merely in military terms but are also structural - rooted in protecting Beijing's interests within the emerging 'Indo-Pacific' constructs. Such structural overtones also explain Beijing's foreign policy towards the USA and other regional countries.

### **Regionalism through Accommodation**

China views the 'Indo-Pacific' notion within the prism of its vital strategic interest against the challenge posed by the USA. One such challenge is the probability of the Indo-Pacific narrative becoming a rallying point of a common front by the regional states, led by the USA, against Beijing. For instance, it would not be ideal for China if the Quad group expands, as it might galvanise the Indo-Pacific discourse against Beijing's regional interest. Quad groups' outreach to other nations was evident even before the revival of Quad 2.0 in 2017. Since 2013, national-security analysts from Quad member-states think tanks have held a series of roundtable conferences called the "Quad-Plus Dialogue" around shared strategic concerns among the Quad nations with a rotating fifth country wherein countries such as Jakarta and Taiwan acted as plus partners. Besides the Quad-Plus framework, the member states have also initiated weekly Quad meetings with different states of Asia and Europe, besides expressing their willingness to engage with institutions such as ASEAN on common concerns and shared interests. Consequently, Beijing is gradually moving from its earlier assertive stance to a more moderate and accommodative approach towards the Indo-Pacific idea. While firmly rooting for the 'Asia-Pacific' discourse on regionalism, China is more open to Indo-Pacific projections, especially those that are inclusive and not overtly designed to counter China. This is a much more discreet stance by Beijing to maintain and elevate its regional dominance.

Differences in the outlook of the proponents provide China with the diplomatic space to adopt an accommodation strategy. For instance, China tends to cooperate with ASEAN over adopting the AOIP while differentiating it from the FOIP strategy formulated by the USA. China's tilt towards the AOIP stems from a certain degree of divergences between the AOIP and the FOIP. While both the AOIP and FOIP emphasise maintaining a rule-based order, the FOIP is more exclusive and security-orientated than the AOIP, focussing as it is on containing China, enhancing security cooperation, military modernisation, arms exports and developing an alternative to the BRI (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). In 2021, China officially acknowledged the Indo-Pacific



while supporting the centrality of ASEAN in any emerging regional architecture (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021). On the occasion, China's President Xi reaffirmed China's high priority towards ASEAN in the country's neighbourhood diplomacy (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Considering that all ASEAN nations are part of BRI, Beijing raised the possibility of greater cooperation between the BRI and the AOIP. China also collaborated with Indonesia in formulating an action plan to synergise the BRI with the AOIP during the Indonesian Foreign Minister's visit to China in February 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022e). Overall, Beijing accepted the AOIP considering its developmental agenda while condemning the FOIP as provoking Cold War-type bloc politics and raising the possibility of regional tensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022e). With ASEAN, China is also pushing ahead with a Code of Conduct (CoC) in the SCS, a region where territorial disputes have marred Beijing's relations with some ASEAN states. In a meeting with Indonesia in February 2023, China reaffirmed its willingness to "work with other ASEAN countries to fully and effectively implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), advance the consultations on a code of conduct in the SCS at a faster pace, and jointly safeguard peace and stability in the SCS" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023b). However, it may be stated that while China projects its commitment to the COC, the alleged interest of China in delaying negotiations, which have been dragging on for more than two decades, given Beijing's bilateral dialogue preference over the SCS, does not do much to instil confidence among the ASEAN nations of Beijing's commitment to engage with ASEAN (Das, 2023).

China is also enhancing its bilateral engagements with other Indo-Pacific proponents. One rationale behind this strategy may be to prevent a strong Indo-Pacific coalition from threatening Beijing's interest. China is mending its relations with Japan, which have been strained for a long time, especially over Beijing's territorial control of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. In a press conference, while reacting to Japan's Indo-Pacific concept, China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Geng Shuang, pointed out that while any nation may have visions and proposals on regional cooperation, what is important is that such visions should be open and inclusive (Embassy of People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2017). The Prime Ministerial exchange visits between the two countries in 2018 were the first of their kind in seven years, which has helped stabilise the relationship. During his visit, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed optimism that in the new era, both China and Japan could transform their competitive relationship into a cooperative one ("Xi meets Japanese Prime Minister," 2018). During a subsequent meeting between Xi Jinping and Japanese PM Fumio Kishida in 2022, the two nations reached a five-point common understanding on elevating the relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). China stressed that the relationship between the two countries is set on strong foundations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022d). While there are areas of differences, China expressed hope that Japan would correct its perceptions, and opposes picking sides and engaging in bloc confrontation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023a; 2023c).

With India, despite border tensions in Dokhlam (2017) and the Galwan Valley (2020), China did its best to diffuse the situation by keeping open the avenue for

dialogue with New Delhi. Both these conflicts have been followed by informal summits and meetings between the two countries, from the commander to the Prime Ministerial level, which helped diffuse tensions. For instance, in the meeting between China's President Xi and India's PM Modi in 2019, both sides committed to looking for a solution that is "fair, reasonable and acceptable to both sides," and as far as unresolved problems are concerned, to "properly manage and control them." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019)." Following the Galwan Valley clash, the Foreign Ministers of both countries in a meeting agreed that both sides should fairly address the situation, jointly observe the consensus reached at the commander-level meetings, and maintain peace and tranquillity in the border area" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020a). Even in the most recent interaction, both sides stressed not escalating the situation and looking for amicable solutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). Despite a long pending territorial conflict, China and India are looking to avoid making the issue hostage to numerous other avenues of cooperation. As with ASEAN, China is more accommodating to India's Indo-Pacific vision, considering that the latter categorically rejected both an exclusive Indo-Pacific concept and a Quad rooted in containment strategy against China. India and China have an escalating trading relationship, and they also cooperate in shared platforms, such as the SCO and the BRICS, on numerous areas of common interest. China's accommodative stance towards India is also evident in other issues such as Beijing's condemnation of terror incidents in Pakistan, sharing of hydrological information about the Yaluzangbu River, and an optimistic stand to open the Nathu La Pass (Liu, 2020).

China is also making an effort to engage with Australia. In a recent meeting with Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Xi noted that the relations between the two nations should be 'cherished' – a change in the narrative from the previous few years, where trade restrictions and political problems led to significant deterioration of relations between the two countries (Legarda, 2022). At a foreign ministers' meeting in 2024, Yi acknowledged that the ups and downs in the relationship served important lessons, as both countries have broken the ice and set sail again (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). Even with regard to the USA, Beijing's approach has been relatively benign. Despite the trade wars, Chinese rhetoric with the USA is relatively restrained as Beijing is trying to balance competition with accommodation as far as possible with Washington. In 2023, President Xi visited the US, a visit by a president after six years, for a summit meeting in San Francisco, where both countries reached more than 20 deliverables in multiple areas. In a subsequent press conference, Wang Yi termed the summit a "historic meeting" where areas of agreement and disagreement were discussed and pointed out that it is no more an option for both nations to "turn their back on each other" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023d). For China, this is the most prudent way to move ahead, as Beijing cannot afford a direct military confrontation with the USA. On the economic front, China is focusing on risk management and greater transparency in the BRI projects through 'BRI Financing guidelines' to counter the allegations of a debt trap frequently levelled against the initiative. In all, China is becoming more restrained vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific strategy and is adopting an accommodative stance on an issue-specific basis towards other Indo-Pacific proponents in its overall regionalism strategy.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear from the developments of the last half a decade that the Indo-Pacific idea will not wither away. Instead, with more and more nations joining the Indo-Pacific bandwagon, the proposition will further proliferate into a central discourse on regionalism by many countries in Asia. This discourse will be shaped by the emerging dynamics between the two important stakeholders, the USA and China. The latter's evolving perception towards the Indo-Pacific strategies goes beyond the binaries of conflict and cooperation as propagated by many mainstream theoretical assumptions. Instead, a complex mix of confluence and contestations at work defines the state of their bilateral relations and Beijing's regionalism strategy.

Contestations will be a recurring feature, as evidenced by the developments over the war in Ukraine. Even though Europe has been the main theatre of the Ukraine war, the latter has significant ramifications for the Indo-Pacific idea, considering the policy approach of the USA and China to the events unfolding in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis has shown that regions, be it Europe or the Indo-Pacific, are no longer watertight compartments, as a crisis far away may have ramifications for how the Indo-Pacific outlook shapes up. And as expected, the two actors galvanising the process are the USA and China. It is evident that the USA and China have a contrasting position in the Ukraine war. While the USA provides military support to Ukraine in its resistance against Russia, China is giving tactical support to Putin while blaming the USA's obsession with blocs as the main reason for the crisis. Over the years, Beijing has consistently opposed the expansion of NATO, believing it to be a reminiscence of the Cold War period, which could lead to confrontation and instability. Currently, China's scepticism of the USA's Indo-Pacific idea is also on similar lines.

The response of the Asian nations to global developments, such as the Ukraine War, has ramifications on the Indo-Pacific idea. Russia's military actions have galvanised a united condemnation from many Asian countries, who are also the proponents of the Indo-Pacific vision. For China, as far fetched as these two issues may seem, it could be a curtain raiser of a probable response from the Indo-Pacific proponents towards a similar military action by China against Taiwan. China will thus watch the developments in Ukraine closely, with a concern against the rise of an America-led Indo-Pacific coalition to contain China's rise towards a global power status. All such probabilities will condition China's policy towards the Indo-Pacific proponents. Beijing will probably continue its accommodative policy towards the latter group of countries to prevent the development of any idea or perception that runs counter to China's regionalism strategy.

It is also important to look deeper into China's charm offensive and not overlook the country's desire to fulfil its vital strategic interest in the region. Through a combination of hard power and influence, Beijing seeks to dislodge the US-centric regional security architecture, active since the post-war period, to a new one where Beijing is a leading power. In 2022, Xi Jinping outlined Beijing's ambition to lead the world in strength and influence by 2049. One of its goals is for China to be a leader in the current and emerging regional architecture in Asia, replacing the USA. Any developments in this direction may raise regional tensions as new blocs may emerge and solidify, with China and America at the centre. With its objectives in mind, China will play its card astutely to sustain its growth, overtake the USA, and prevent the rise of an anti-China coalition of Indo-Pacific proponents. To this end, Beijing may continue to employ a prudent mix of accommodation and assertiveness in its

regionalism strategy. It is keeping in mind these ends and means that China will shape up its Indo-Pacific approach in future.

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