

POSITIVE PARANOIA: CHINESE INTERPRETATIONS OF INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICS

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This paper seeks to interpret Chinese narratives on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by reviewing Chinese state media and scholarly opinions. For this purpose, the paper also examines the PRC's interpretation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the 'Quad' comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.) and the interplay with the three middle-power Quad partners. Similarly, it explores China-Europe dynamics in Chinese state media and official discourse, given the expansion of the European Union's strategic interest in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Chinese scholars share many views with those of official state media. This is particularly evident in views of U.S. motives to contain China, dismissals of any U.S. success, and fault-finding with U.S. traditional and potential allies. Yet, Chinese scholars reveal different interpretations of the evolution of U.S. Indo-Pacific policies and the space for U.S.-China cooperation within the Indo-Pacific strategy confines. The paper concludes with a discussion of political events in Beijing in 2024 and what these might imply in the future.

Introduction

Since American, Japanese, and Australian policy circles revived the concept of the Indo-Pacific in the past decade, academic literature by and on these countries' policies and approaches to the Indo-Pacific has mushroomed. A diversity of literature now also exists on and by non-core countries in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific alliance system, which includes close partnerships with states like India that are not treaty allies and have maintained their traditional reluctance to join any alliance system till today.¹ Existing literature presents how these states view the opportunities and challenges that have taken shape with the emergence of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Geographically, these cover

the views of various Southeast Asian countries, a number of South Asian countries, Taiwan, South Korea, and European states.

Surprisingly, little literature in the West is dedicated to discussing the People's Republic of China's (PRC) views on this topic,² perhaps with the assumption that the PRC is unanimously and unequivocally against the Indo-Pacific strategy (印太战略) and corresponding alliances. The oldest article found on *China Daily's* search engine with the keyword "Indo-Pacific" dates back to February 5, 2002.³ However, it was not until 2011 that more

articles became related to Indo-Pacific politics. This surge coincides with the development of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. On October 28, 2010, Hillary Clinton spoke as the Secretary of State in Honolulu, where the silhouette of U.S. awareness of the Indo-Pacific appeared. Even though her speech was about “America’s Engagement in the Asia-Pacific,” it mentioned the term “Indo-Pacific,” especially in terms of the U.S.-India naval engagement in the Pacific: “We understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce.”⁴ In the following year, in 2011, she published an article, “America’s Pacific Century” in *Foreign Policy*, in which she stressed that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia” and the U.S. “will be right at the center of the action.”⁵ This went hand in hand with the then Obama administration’s actual policies of “Pivot to Asia” or “Rebalancing to Asia.” At that time, the Chinese observed that “Asia-Pacific” was still the principal term. In the background, borrowing from allies in the region, particularly Japan and Australia, American policymakers and officials gradually constructed the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a strategy. Until today, Chinese state media generally prefers to use the term Asia-Pacific while acknowledging the existence of the term Indo-Pacific used by the U.S.

In the next section, we interpret Chinese narratives on Indo-Pacific geopolitics by reviewing state media and scholarly writing. The PRC’s interpretation of Indo-Pacific geopolitics is then examined via the officially reviled Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the ‘Quad,’ comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.) and the interplay of the growing bonhomie between the three middle-power Quad partners. China sees the Quad as one of the primary embodiments of the Indo-Pacific’s China-containment objective and a vehicle to sow disorder rather than order.⁶ We also briefly explore China-Europe dynamics in Chinese state media and official discourse, given the growing interest of the European Union (EU), a valuable strategic and trade partner, in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy. The paper concludes with a discussion of political events in Beijing in 2024 and what this might imply for the future development of Chinese narratives and approaches regarding Indo-Pacific strategy.

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Parsing Chinese Narratives on Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

In this section, information extracted from the state-run *China Daily*, as explained in the methodological note shared at the end of this paper, is triangulated with information obtained from other official sources, such as statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the *Global Times*. As U.S.-led Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships have gained steam in recent years, *China Daily* has published more articles dedicated to this topic, implying that Beijing feels the urge to respond and articulate its views on emerging Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Sometimes, articles in *China Daily* also appear in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). In CNKI, we surveyed academic, quasi-academic, and non-academic articles on the Indo-Pacific. More articles are related to the keyword “Indo-Pacific” on CNKI than in *China Daily*’s search engine. From 2014 to mid-March 2024, 4120 articles resulted from a keyword search,¹

1 Some articles on the Indo-Pacific actually were about “Indo-Pacific tsunamis,” “earthquakes,” and “humpback dolphins.” They were not relevant and thus excluded for analysis.

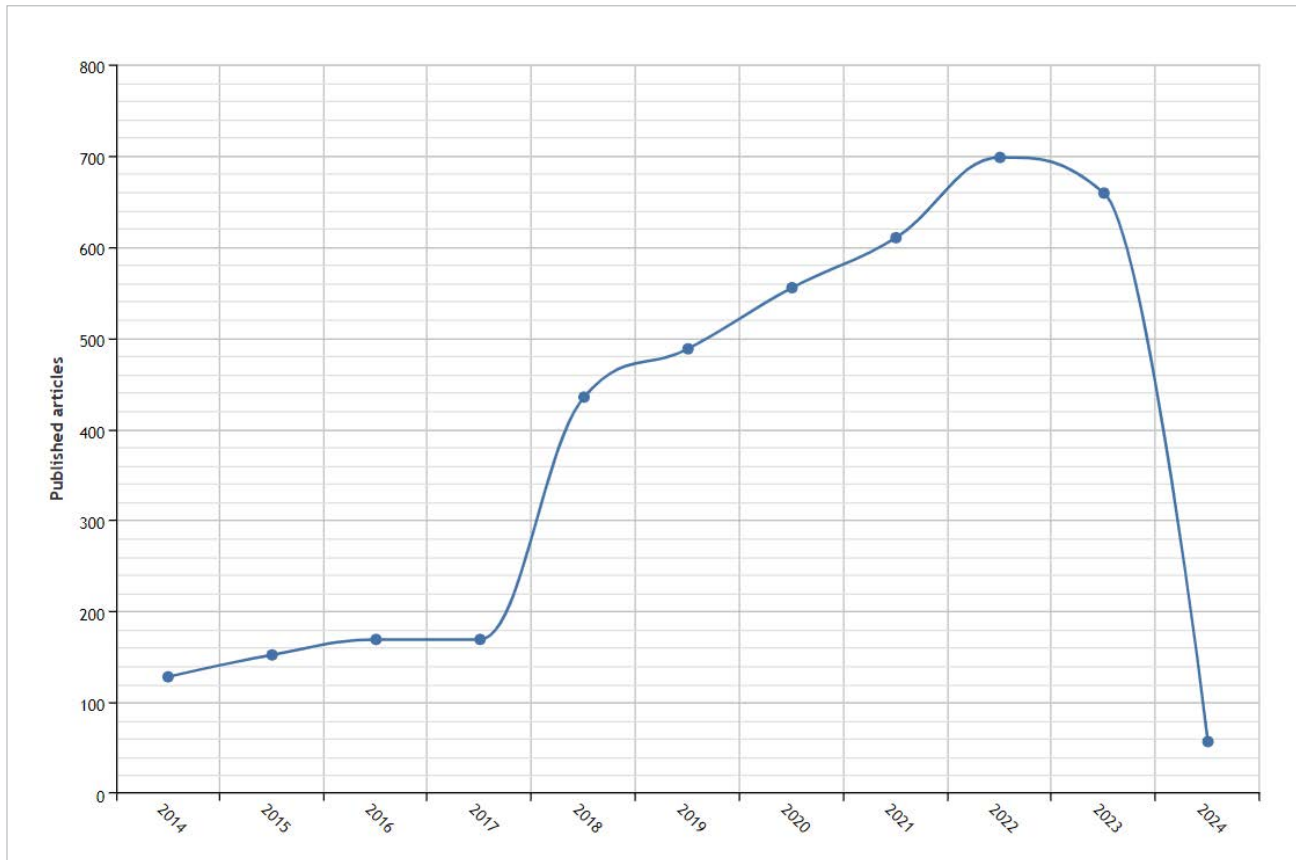


Figure 1: Results of CNKI Keyword Search for “Indo-Pacific” from 2014-2024 (Source: CNKI)

see Figure 1, highlighting an uptick between 2017 and mid-2023.

Some *China Daily* articles are more like news reports and have quoted Western sources (i.e., the *Wall Street Journal*) or non-PRC experts. There are also editorials from *China Daily* that directly convey official PRC views. These editorials or general news articles similarly share skepticism of the concept of the Indo-Pacific, arguing that the conventional framework of the Asia-Pacific is sufficient for understanding and running regional affairs. For example, Guo Yanjun, the director of the Institute of Asian Studies at China Foreign Affairs University, rejects the concept of the Indo-Pacific.⁷ He even asserts that while “more countries are in a state of contradiction and anxiety, trying to avoid choosing between China and the U.S.,” the Asia-Pacific framework, in which China has a legitimate place, is in danger of being replaced by the Indo-Pacific.⁸

The U.S. motive is always depicted negatively, and Indo-Pacific alliances formed by the U.S. are believed to serve U.S. geopolitical interests in containing China. This is, in fact, a continuation of the PRC’s typical dismissal of the U.S. alliance system as a means to contain China, which, of course, existed even before the Indo-Pacific topic became salient in recent years.⁹ There is an attempt from the PRC side to depict the U.S.’ pivot towards the Indo-Pacific as opportunistic, arguing that the U.S. has been neglecting countries, for instance, in the South Pacific, until it recently realized the importance of that space in winning the geopolitical competition against China.

PRC scholars’ views on this issue highly correspond to the official narrative. They believe that the U.S. has realized its relative decline and thus its need for a new strategic arrangement.¹⁰ The U.S. government under Biden, Trump, and Obama all treated China as a competitor.¹¹ Chinese authors commonly note that the U.S.’ Cold War thinking is outdated. The U.S. approach will only divide countries

in the Indo-Pacific, increase contradictions, and lead the Indo-Pacific to chaos, recession and anarchy, which are not what Indo-Pacific countries desire.¹²

Compared with state media, however, Chinese scholars have delved further into how the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved. Specifically, they have differing opinions about whether the Trump administration has inherited and developed the strategy from the Obama administration. Some scholars think that Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy has little to do with Obama's rebalancing Asia strategy. They believe that the Indo-Pacific strategy was formed under the Trump administration because the administration realized its loss of balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and thus created a new strategy to foster the U.S.' power in that space. They argue that when Trump came into office, he gave speeches to deny the Obama period's official statements and further abolish Obama's policies.

However, other PRC scholars believe there is consistency between the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations toward the Indo-Pacific region, albeit variances in foreign policies exist.¹³ The reason for this is that there are similarities among these administrations in terms of strategic goals and approaches. They use the term "inherit" (继承) to show the continuation (延续) of the U.S.' formulation of the Indo-Pacific strategy throughout different administrations.¹⁴ They also use the term "extension" (延伸 or 扩大) to depict how Trump continued Obama's rebalance strategy, and they use the term "upgrade" (升级) to illustrate the current Biden administration's endeavor to improve the Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁵ Some PRC scholars

point out that the difference between Obama and Trump is that Trump's administration did not use the Asia-Pacific notion as Obama's administration did.¹⁶ Trump became the first U.S. administration to be vocal about Indo-Pacific nomenclature. Trump's administration also negatively depicted China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), believing that China is using such an initiative to compete with the U.S. and eventually lead the international community.¹⁷ PRC scholars essentially think that it was only until 2018 when James Mattis, then Trump's U.S. Defense Secretary, finally fleshed out U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy in the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018 that policies and plans in the domains of the military, economy, foreign relations, and security had been gradually introduced to give the Indo-Pacific framework more substantial meaning.¹⁸ John Calabrese, who teaches at the American University in Washington D.C., shares the same view that the Shangri-La Dialogue was the first time the U.S. had an authoritative elaboration on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Framework (FOIP).¹⁹ After that, the geographic concept of the Indo-Pacific was finally transformed into concrete political proposals.²⁰

Analysts who believe in this consistency between U.S. administrations view Biden as vital in upgrading Trump's policies to a 2.0 version. From Trump to Biden, the difference is that Biden puts more emphasis on alliances and partnerships than Trump. Biden also emphasizes the importance of value in diplomacy more than Trump, which aligns with his Democratic Party's principles.²¹ Yan Dexue and Li Shuaiwu of East China Normal University observe that compared with Trump, Biden's administration is more willing to cooperate in some areas with China while at the same time treating China as a competitor.²² For instance, in high-tech domains such as 5G and artificial intelligence, Biden's government is competing and containing China. However, Yan and Li argue that the U.S. and China can cooperate on climate change, COVID-19, security in Afghanistan and the Korean Peninsula, and Iranian nuclear issues.²³

State media and scholars generally share views that the U.S. approach is competition-oriented, ignoring Indo-Pacific countries' true interests, disrupting regional cooperation and coercing Indo-Pacific countries to meet U.S. objectives.²⁴ In contrast, China is depicted as playing a much more positive role than the U.S. in embracing open regionalism and multipolarity and truly supporting regional governance

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and development. In Southeast Asia, for example, *China Daily* articles contend that China has respected and supported the central role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in regional governance and that the U.S. Indo-Pacific concept only disrupts Southeast Asia's regional governance. *China Daily* articles suggest that Southeast Asia should de-Americanize (去美国化) and further advance cooperation within ASEAN. This kind of “de-Americanization” discourse in Chinese media existed before the advent of Indo-Pacific politics. For instance, back in 2013, *Xinhua* already published a commentary on a de-Americanized world order for the future.²⁵

Regarding South Asia, *China Daily* depicts the U.S. State Partnership Program with small(er) countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as failures.²⁶ This defeat is contrasted with the fact that most small South Asian countries are partners of China's BRI. The success of China's friendly relations with South Asian countries is also interpreted as a result of China's policy of not interfering in other countries' internal affairs but rather focusing on delivering tangible economic and trade benefits to partners.

Besides exhibiting the U.S.' limit of success, *China Daily* finds fault with U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific. To begin with, Japan has been depicted in recent years as an American “pawn” because of its “active participation” in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad. For example, an editorial in March 2023 started by informing the readers of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's visits to Ukraine.²⁷ The significance was that Kishida was the last G7 leader to visit Ukraine and the first Japanese leader in a military conflict zone since World War II. However, while the editorial started with this context, the rest of the article centered on Japan's alliance with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. The editorial uses the meme of a “rich club” to express the disappointment that the Japanese prime minister is just kowtowing to the U.S. to be seen as “first-class members of the international community.”²⁸ The same article also criticizes Japan for taking the lead in creating an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) because Japan's alliance with the U.S. has made Japan a springboard for NATO to enter the Asia-Pacific region.

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Another country under criticism is India. In an editorial, Wei Zongyou, a professor at the Center for American Studies at Fudan University, contends that some of India's moves, such as joining the Quad, as well as its subscription to the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF),² deviates from India's foreign policy tradition of non-alignment, putting the Indian tradition—and with it, its good reputation—in jeopardy.²⁹ However, Wei also highlights that India would feel uncomfortable to be seen as overtly anti-China. Accordingly, he points out that India would use its hosting of two crucial international events in 2023, namely the Group of Twenty (G20) summit and the annual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to mend its deteriorating relations with China.³⁰ Chinese state media generally show wishful thinking and believe that “New Delhi will strive to maintain a certain level of strategic autonomy.”³¹

Cross-validating with Chinese MFA statements, we see that the MFA has only recently started commenting on Indo-Pacific geopolitics. The Ministry's press releases and statements are usually more concise than what can be found in the state media's publications. Back in March 2018, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi mocked the Australian and American preference for calling the region “Indo-Pacific” not “Asia-Pacific” as a “headline-grabbing” exercise that will “dissipate like ocean foam”.³² To the contrary, it has far from dissipated. Therefore, as time progressed, the

2 China is not a member of the U.S.-led IPEF, and India is not part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement, which China is a member of.

Chinese MFA started to take the trend of the formation of the Indo-Pacific concept more seriously. For instance, during a press conference after a 2022 meeting between Wang Yi and his Pakistani counterpart Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Wang Yi used the Chinese idiom “Sima Zhao’s ill intent is known to all”³ to reiterate China’s perception of the U.S.’ hidden (yet obvious according to Wang) ill intent to contain China using the broader Indo-Pacific alliance framework.³³ Due to the Chinese MFA’s reluctance to engage with the concept, the examples we found in press releases and statements mostly entailed responses to agreed-upon questions from journalists. However, there has been more space for sub-central discourse actors, such as scholars and thinkers, to formulate policy options that the leadership believes can or should be pursued.

For instance, while critical of the U.S. influence on BRI, Wang Chuangjiang and Zhang Jian of Tianjin Normal University believe that China must narrate the BRI story well to avoid criticism and misunderstanding.³⁴ They also think China should discuss how to “start Indo-Pacific

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cooperation.” Hence, instead of negating the Indo-Pacific concept, Wang and Zhang showed a willingness to seek cooperation with the U.S. in the region.³⁵ This view is similar to Yan Dexue and Li Shuaiwu of East China Normal University, who believe that the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy echoes the interests of some EU and Asian countries.³⁶ They believe such a strategy is not necessarily different from China’s. Hence, they think that China and the U.S. can try to discuss more, linking up with each other’s projects in the region to benefit the development of the Indo-Pacific region.

However, not all PRC scholars hold such sanguine views. There are quite a lot of PRC scholars who believe that the U.S. will not work with China-led BRI projects to realize regional connectivity and prosperity. They also criticize what they deem as the U.S. counter-responses, the Blue Dot Network, for being short of concrete actions.³⁷ Zhou Shixin of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies writes that the high standards set by the market-driven Blue Dot Network plan make it (intentionally) hard for China to be part of infrastructure projects.³⁸ Zhou warns that if the U.S. makes collaboration in the scheme a “prerequisite” for security cooperation, this would “inevitably affect” China’s BRI.³⁹ As Ge summarizes well, Chinese scholars who look at Indo-Pacific geopolitics through “realist” power politics generally do not believe that the U.S. and China can cooperate on the BRI or Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰ However, a minority of Chinese scholars look at the issue from the lens of cooperative development, believing that the U.S. and China can build regional security order through cooperation.

Lastly, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and the further expansion of NATO in 2023 triggered some Chinese discussion of the role of NATO in Asia. State media sometimes uses memes of Asian NATO or Indo-Pacific NATO to talk about the U.S. Indo-Pacific ambition.⁴¹ However, these memes are usually just mentioned without further analysis by the state media. *China Daily* published an article by Fudan University professor Zhao Minghao, in which he argues that “a new NATO with China as its imaginary enemy is not what the Asia-Pacific region wants or needs”.⁴² While articles published in state media

3 A complete version of this Chinese idiom is “Everyone on the street knows what is in Sima Zhao’s mind” (司马昭之心, 路人皆知) who intended to usurp the throne.

about the link between NATO and the Indo-Pacific are usually vague and alarmist, academic or quasi-academic publications have deeper discussions. These scholars tend to see NATO as not ready to enter Indo-Pacific politics; it is only used symbolically by the U.S. to show that NATO countries are increasingly paying attention to the situation in the Indo-Pacific region.⁴³

In sum, Chinese scholars share many views similar to those of official state media. This is particularly evident in the U.S.' motives to contain China, dismissing U.S. success and finding faults with the U.S.' traditional and potential allies. Interestingly, compared with the state media, Chinese scholars show more nuanced views regarding whether the U.S. administrations have been consistent in the Indo-Pacific strategy and whether China and the U.S. can have Indo-Pacific or BRI cooperation. Different views are not presented as competing views in the PRC context. They reveal different scholarly interpretations of the development of U.S. policies and the space for any U.S.-China cooperation.

The following sections discuss China's interpretations of the revitalized Quad, including the evolving regional dynamics with the three middle-power Quad members and the EU's embrace of the Indo-Pacific. They also examine the 2024 "Two Sessions" foreign policy element to see how the current diplomatic trajectory vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific is shaping.

The Quad: In a Perennial State of Disfavor by China

China has always seen the Quad as an "anti-China" front, the Quad's humanitarian origins or its current widened ambit covering issues from global health to climate change notwithstanding. However, even before the Quad came into being in the early 2000s, the Chinese state media narrative was wary of U.S. attempts to enhance its alliance system in Asia. The rumblings of an Asian security network à la NATO in Europe were getting stronger: In 2001, a *China Daily* article called out the U.S. for strengthening "bilateral alliances in Asia to form an alleged 'mini-NATO'" and defended China's rise as a force for peace, calling the "China threat" theory "groundless"—the Chinese media has continued to label the threat factor a result of other powers' inability to digest China's rise particularly in recent years.⁴⁴

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In 2004, Niu Jun, a Professor at Peking University, wrote in *China Daily*, comparing the security threats in East Asia and Europe, highlighted the U.S.' unwillingness to "abandon its Cold War policy towards East Asia" and held the U.S. responsible for "often" contributing to "intensifying regional tensions."⁴⁵ However, the article categorically called the U.S.-Japan alliance "fundamentally different" from NATO while ridiculing the alliance's "Cold War mentality."⁴⁶

Around the same time, a more targeted opinion piece highlighted the U.S. intent under the Bush administration to "extend the network of Asia-Pacific security alliances under its domination to the Indian Ocean and even to the Persian Gulf to join the southward-extending NATO."⁴⁷ Such development foreshadowed the creation of a Quad-like structure by including India in the strategic calculations alongside "core allies" in Asia-Pacific, namely Japan and Australia.

Thus, the Chinese narrative has for decades feared the notion of an Asian security network led by the U.S., at least "partially targeted" against China at the start of hard containment in the post-Quad and AUKUS era. The state media and other official arguments that push for the U.S. and the Asian states to "discard the Cold War-stamped zero-sum game and construct a win-win platform to pursue common security and development" are also a familiar refrain in the post-revitalized Quad era.⁴⁸

Notably, the Chinese state media has seen Quad not through the lens of the humanitarian origins in the wake

of the 2004 Tsunami but as a result of growing security cooperation efforts by the U.S. In particular, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD, comprising Australia, Japan, and the United States) was announced in 2005 to channel their growing role as independent regional and international security players into a more cohesive policy mechanism.⁴⁹ And which China saw as a tool directed against its rise, even as the inaugural TSD meeting between the foreign ministers in 2006 “welcomed China’s constructive engagement” in the region.⁵⁰

The expansion of this trio to include India for another minilateral (namely the Quad) was attributed to then-Japanese Prime Minister and known China hawk Shinzo Abe: Abe’s monumental speech entitled “Confluence of the Two Seas” was an address to the Indian Parliament in 2007 and is often seen by most, including Chinese state sources, as responsible for steamrolling the Indo-Pacific construct, in particular the Quad.⁵¹ Moreover, nearly a decade later, the Chinese state media saw Japan under Abe as a critical player in accelerating the “old momentum” for reviving the “so-called quad.”⁵² Similarly, it criticizes Japan for besmirching the global progress of China’s BRI and “unfairly putting an expansionist tag on the initiative.”⁵³

During the Quad’s brief, unsuccessful first stint, the China factor was primarily responsible for its dissolution, even as China as a threat might not have seemed as urgent in the pre-BRI days. Whether it was the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s deference to China’s importance as a trade partner, or fear thereof, or the general lack of intent among the four Quad members, reportedly, the Chinese authorities issued formal diplomatic protests to all Quad states in 2007 with regard to concerns about a security alliance being created to singularly target China.⁵⁴ Soon after, in early 2008, Quad seemed dead on arrival. Then Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, at a joint press conference with Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi, announced that “Australia would not be proposing to have a dialogue of that nature [referring to the Quad].”⁵⁵

In the second edition of the Quad starting in 2017, as China, with the rise of Xi Jinping, moved beyond the confines of its so-called “peaceful rise,” and the four members became more connected bilaterally, the Chinese narrative has seen the Quad in similar, but even more, antagonistic terms. As one *Global Times* piece puts it, “Quad aims to include countries from Northeast Asia to

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Southeast Asia and Central Asia, ‘virtually all the countries on China’s periphery except China itself.’ The concept of Quad was reinforced by joint military war games named Malabar and has been dubbed the ‘Asian NATO.’⁵⁶

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The three middle powers are mainly targeted as the bonhomie between the partners has transcended the older outlook, such as fear of economic and other reprisals from China, to ensure free and open Indo-Pacific security as the military, economic, and technological belligerence from China has raised more hackles. Moreover, in the still-evolving U.S. alliance system, the middle powers in today’s era of declining multilateralism are taking a much more proactive interest in dealing with regional concerns, much of which focuses on China and their own need to buttress respective global profiles as responsible actors.

Below, we briefly discuss China's views on the Quad's middle powers.⁴

Australia

For China, Quad's momentum never receded in Australia. The Chinese narrative expresses befuddlement over the need for Australia to exist as a Quad partner due to no visible security concerns about China and the lack of "pay-offs" from the grouping: "On the contrary, China contributes immensely to Australia's sustainable economic growth" goes the counterargument.⁵⁸ Moreover, China seems concerned about Australia's refusal to endorse the BRI officially. The rhetoric, however, also acknowledges Australia's Quad strategy as a means of diversification of its trade overdependence on China. It calls Australia's Quad endeavor a delusional, biased and not forward-looking step, and in the post-AUKUS (defense pact between Australia, the UK, and the U.S.) as a hard China-containment policy. China fears that the Quad will get "further institutionalized, militarized and expanded," and as such, prefers the balanced approach of ASEAN as a lesson for Australia and others in the Quad.⁵⁹

India's cooperation with the Quad, especially in creating new industrial chains in the post-COVID-19 era, has been singled out as a "political stunt." China is looking to entice a booming India with great prospects for long-term economic cooperation while insisting on separating the border hostilities as a side issue.

India

China sees India's greater engagement with the Quad countries as a China-centered, not necessarily anti-China, fully cognizant that the China-India border tensions fuel India's rivalry and, in turn, regional ambitions. Chinese media narratives maintain that India aims to strike "a certain level of strategic autonomy and will try to strike a balance between major powers."⁶⁰ Yet questions are being continuously raised on the sustainability of India's multi-alignment foreign policy, and doubts about the U.S. using India as a geopolitical tool against a rising China are also being seeded. Lan Jianxue, director of the Department for Asia-Pacific Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, has also warned India against too much hedging between rivals, citing India's interactions with the Quad (and the U.S.) on the one hand and its close interactions with Russia in the wake of the Ukraine war.⁶¹ India's cooperation with the Quad, especially in creating new industrial chains in the post-COVID-19 era, has been singled out as a "political stunt."⁶² China is looking to entice a booming India with great prospects for long-term economic cooperation while insisting on separating the border hostilities as a side issue.

Japan

Vis-à-vis Japan, the rhetoric has always been sharp. For example, Japan has been crudely called "a regional hatchet man that can do much of the dirty work in the Asia-Pacific."⁶³ Japan's long-standing strong bilateral treaty alliance with the U.S. (in China's view, working like an exclusive network-building entity endangering Asian stability though not quite (a) NATO, as mentioned earlier); its historical and territorial hostilities with China; its strong presence in the Indo-Pacific, including in South and Southeast Asia; and the strengthening of the "Taiwan emergency as Japanese emergency" sentiment espoused by Abe in the Fumio Kishida era have all contributed to this aspect. A *China Daily* commentary penned by Peking University professor Han Hua has categorically called out Japan on the Taiwan question: "For its part, Japan is collaborating with the U.S. by meddling in Cross-Strait affairs and by deploying missiles and troops on its island

⁴ We understand that the definition of what counts as middle power is contested by scholars. For convenience, this paper simply treats non-U.S. power such as Australia, India, and Japan as middle powers.

near Taiwan, which is an integral part of China.”⁶⁴

Japan’s move away from its pacifist constitution amid an increase in defense budget recently has been labeled as a “militarization” of Japan, and Chinese observers have accused Japan of sensationalizing the regional security environment and the China threat to achieve its end goal of altering the World War II-era security policy.⁶⁵

With the Indo-Pacific region becoming a geopolitical contesting point, the EU has also been prompted to express its interest and position. In the next section, we proceed to examine the role of the EU and Chinese narratives of EU’s involvement.

China’s European Dilemma: Masked Hostility or “Win-Win” Cooperation?

The changes in the Indo-Pacific regional security landscape, where China is widely seen as a disruptive and coercive power due to its continuously increasing intimidation tactics, have ensured that China-Europe relations have been witnessing a dramatic shift. The easy bonhomie that existed before 2019 when the EU labeled China as a cooperation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival is becoming more difficult to re-inculcate, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, as China’s support for Russia has reduced China’s influence in most of Eastern and Central Europe.⁶⁶ The EU’s use of the term “systemic rival” for China has especially elicited strong reactions due to the phrase’s negative connotations (“hostility and confrontation”) in China.⁶⁷

After the release of Europe’s Indo-Pacific strategies, including by France (2022), Germany (2020), and the EU (2021), the Chinese narrative has recognized that despite differences among the Europeans regarding China’s role, the embrace of the Indo-Pacific—which China recognizes as a term with complex political underpinnings, and not with a “simple” or “value-neutral” tone—has hardened realities.⁶⁸ The Chinese rhetoric acknowledges the European tilt toward the U.S. strategic orientation on Asia-Pacific in general. Still, it highlights that both convergence and divergence exist in greater security and economic cooperation.⁶⁹ In particular, it points to some European states like Germany’s “double-hedging” between China and the U.S.⁷⁰ Such rhetoric reflects a clear recognition that even as the tilt to the U.S. may help Europe’s desires

“The easy bonhomie that existed before 2019 when the EU labeled China as a cooperation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival is becoming more difficult to re-inculcate, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, as China’s support for Russia has reduced China’s influence in most of Eastern and Central Europe.”

for a greater presence in the Indo-Pacific, the continuing European disunity on a common China policy would be to China’s advantage.⁷¹ The discourse also takes pains to distinguish NATO’s “explicit” expansion into “China’s neighborhood” as a U.S. influence while praising France’s separation of North Atlantic and Indo-Pacific as two distinct geographies opposing NATO opening a liaison office in Tokyo.⁷²

However, in the years after the release of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021, Chinese state media has also taken note of the fact that the EU’s talks of inclusiveness aside, the EU has not included China in the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum for the third consecutive year. One *Global Times* commentary criticizes the Forum for the West’s “traditional camp mentality” for trying to woo the Global South “to aid in the confrontation and competition against China and Russia”.⁷³ Another rails against the Forum as effectively provoking Asian states against China and as playing to the “dominant Western narrative about the geopolitical state of things in the Indo-Pacific, and is clumsy code for confronting China”.⁷⁴

Moreover, of late, Europe’s talk of “de-risking” has seriously

unnerved China. The narrative has called out the EU for its decision to launch an anti-subsidy investigation into China-made imports of battery electric vehicles (EVs).⁷⁵ The state media has pitted the decision against the split in Europe regarding the China policy by quoting Western media outlets that highlight the differences among European carmakers.⁷⁶ Moreover, a report by the China Chamber of Commerce has warned the EU “not to politicize critical business matters, particularly in key areas such as information and communication technology, EVs and renewable energy,” with Lai Suetyi, an associate professor of the Center for European Studies at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, ascertaining that the “China-EU relations will get even more complicated” in a *China Daily* interview.⁷⁷

At the same time, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has been extending an olive branch to the EU by talking about cooperation and solidarity with China as a means of strengthening Europe’s strategic autonomy and avoiding bloc confrontation due to third-party disturbances, a likely reference to the U.S. and its confrontational Indo-Pacific strategy:

“The journey spanning 20 years has evidenced that China and the EU do not have conflicts of fundamental interests, and are cooperative partners first and foremost, with far more consensus than differences.”⁷⁸

China is also enticing Europe with talks of being a comprehensive strategic partner and seeing Europe as an “important force in a multi-polar world,” even as the EU has been fairly open about its reservations about China’s “unfair” practices, especially in trade.⁷⁹ So despite the growth in mistrust, China is looking to make good on promises of dialogue and “win-win” strategic development/cooperation, including in multilateral institutions like the United Nations, albeit within the realm of its own reasoning—something Europe may not be altogether comfortable with in today’s geopolitical scenario.

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2024 and Looking Ahead

The “two sessions” (两会)⁵ is one of China’s biggest annual political events that mainly focuses on socio-economic issues. But in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war that has solidified global divides and amid China’s increasing engagement and influence in its extended neighborhood, the event’s significance for examining China Indo-Pacific-oriented foreign policy direction in 2024 cannot be overlooked. More so, domestically, 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and will also define the fulfillment of targets in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). Notably, the latter plan includes military modernization, key to achieving China’s regional goals and thwarting the Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly relating to Taiwan. Taiwan is a key Indo-Pacific territory, and the US and its allies are concerned about contingency development. Or as the U.S. Adm. John Aquilino, head of Indo-Pacific Command, has testified: “All indications point to the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] meeting President Xi Jinping’s directive to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027 [PLA’s centennial]”.⁸⁰

In this context, Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is also the general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central

5 The event, this year’s recently concluded in March, refers to the annual sessions of the National People’s Congress (NPC), the nation’s rubber-stamp legislature, and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the top political advisory body.

Military Commission, has talked about developing strategic capabilities and “new quality productive forces” at the second session of the NPC in March.⁸¹ So even though Xi did not give a keynote address at the sessions, his ambitious blueprint since he assumed office was visible both in the Chinese Premier Li Qiang’s 2024 work report, Li’s abruptly canceled press meeting, and Wang Yi’s press conference, as reprised below.⁸²

So, keeping aside socioeconomic and technological innovation objectives, Premier Li’s 2024 work report highlighted a continuation of China’s foreign policy objectives, particularly the stress on the oft-repeated “independent foreign policy of peace” in tandem with reaffirming President Xi’s Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative, outlined in recent years.⁸³

The cancellation of Premier Li’s press conference may reaffirm Xi’s path of power consolidation, even as Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s press meeting talked tough on the U.S.

“The warning to “certain countries outside this region,” referring mainly to the US and its allies and partners, “not to make provocations, pick sides, or stir up troubles and problems” in the South China Sea emphasizes China’s hardened stance on Indo-Pacific geopolitics, including the rampant gray zone intimidation tactics faced by multiple partners such as Australia, the EU, India, and Japan.

and emphasized the dominance of the “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy,” which essentially aims to accelerate China’s role as a global leader in all facets and in strict competition to the U.S. as a hegemonic power.⁸⁴ Particularly, Wang Yi’s remarks on the South China Sea, arguably the Indo-Pacific strategy’s core geographic area, about responding with “prompt and legitimate countermeasures” highlight that military maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific will continue unabated.⁸⁵

It does not matter that Li’s work report’s language on Taiwan that focuses on “China’s reunification”—not “peaceful reunification,” but “peaceful,” “integrated cross-strait development”—does not appear too boisterous.⁸⁶ Yet the ramifications of the pro-independence ruling party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in Taiwan winning the latest presidential elections amid China’s multipronged coercive interference will be seen in the near future.⁸⁷ No rapprochement, even if it were possible, could change China’s emphatic position on states crossing its so-called “red lines.” The warning to “certain countries outside this region,” referring mainly to the U.S. and its allies and partners, “not to make provocations, pick sides, or stir up troubles and problems” in the South China Sea emphasizes China’s hardened stance on Indo-Pacific geopolitics, including the rampant gray zone intimidation tactics faced by multiple partners such as Australia, the EU, India, and Japan.⁸⁸

To conclude and looking ahead, Chinese narratives, official and scholarly, on the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy and corresponding vehicles like the Quad and its members, which have developed a multifaceted camaraderie vis-à-vis the region and China’s role in it, as well as stakeholders like the EU and its member-states, which have begun to harden their China policies but are caught by the split within, reveal a mostly unanimous and harder position. China will continue to oppose a consolidation of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy and the ways in which China believes it opposes its core interests and regional order.

Methodological Note

Overseen by the Central Propaganda Department, Chinese state media is a relatively direct way to discern the Party-state’s line on the Indo-Pacific. Typically fed by the state-run Xinhua News Agency, we selected *China Daily* for

analysis because it is the principal outlet tailored to foreign audiences, containing the views the Party-state wants to convey. We cross-validated information gleaned from *China Daily* with press releases and statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as with information found in other state media sources such as *Global Times* and Xinhua News Agency to determine Beijing's centrally approved messages and narratives about Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

We surveyed academic, quasi-academic, and non-academic articles on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). More articles are related to the keyword "Indo-Pacific" on CNKI than in *China Daily's* search engine. Sometimes, articles that appeared in *China Daily* also appeared in CNKI. Because the CNKI search led to many results, we paid special attention to more prominent scholars' work—or as it turned out, rather the lack of it—on the subject, such as Wang Jisi and Yan Xuetong. We noticed that other Chinese scholars were interviewed or shared their commentaries in *China Daily*. This shows that the PRC Central Propaganda Department also used arguably lesser-known scholars to engender views that the Chinese party-state favors.

On a final note, in the PRC context, various academic or quasi-academic publications often repeat their rhetoric. These publications contribute to the uniformity of opinions in the country, and by studying them, we re-confirmed the core of Chinese official views on Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

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