

# SUNGKYUN CHINA INSIGHT

## China and the Indo-Pacific: Response and Strategy



# SUNGKYUN CHINA INSIGHT

March 2022, Vol.1, No.6

## China and the Indo-Pacific: Response and Strategy

Author

Dr. Jojin V. John  
(Mahatma Gandhi University)

Online Series Report of the SICS

SUNGKYUNKWAN UNIVERSITY  
**SICS** | SUNGKYUN INSTITUTE  
OF CHINA STUDIES

# China and the Indo-Pacific:

## Response and Strategy

Dr. Jojin V. John  
(Mahatma Gandhi University)

---

Over the last few years, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a popular concept in international relations. The present article is an attempt to evaluate the Chinese response to the Indo-Pacific concept. The origin of the Indo-Pacific idea is a matter of dispute. However, the idea that articulates the strategic significance of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean's linkages in its contemporary sense is attributed to the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Addressing the Indian Parliament in 2007, Abe put forth the idea of a new strategic region through the idea of the ‘confluence of the two Oceans.’<sup>1</sup> The idea of the Indo-Pacific as a regional construct integrating the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region became popular first in the strategic community and then became part of the official deliberation of several countries, including Japan, India, and Australia, in the mid-2010s. However, the concept rose to its popularity only after the US government announced its ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ in 2017.

As a geographic description, Indo-Pacific represents a “new” spatial imagination that views the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean as a single integrated geostrategic space. The promoters of the concept argue that the separation of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as two strategic theatres was a Cold War phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Doing so is no longer relevant given the immensity of linkages between the two.<sup>3</sup> Though broadly described as the maritime space covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it is important to note that the geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific varies between countries.<sup>4</sup> Indo-

Pacific is also a framework for thinking about regional governance, including institutions, rules, principles and norms. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific regional order underlines the fact that the existing institutional mechanisms are no longer sufficient to address the new regional realities. Since Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first proposed the Indo-Pacific idea in 2007, regional order ideas and visions have been evolving with many countries announcing their respective vision/strategy of the Indo-Pacific.

It is also important to note that the evolution of the Indo-Pacific has coincided with the increasing securitisation of the Asian maritime space and the growing assertiveness of China. Hence it is no surprise that key promoters of the concepts are countries that are concerned about the rising profile of China and the claim that the Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical narrative targeting Chinese assertiveness. Some have observed that it is indeed China who started the two Ocean strategy with its Maritime Silk Road project and others have only been responding under the Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>6</sup>

### Chinese response to the Indo-Pacific

As mentioned, the idea of the Indo-Pacific has been evolving, and so has the response of China and can be understood in three different phases. During the first phase (Pre-2017) of the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept, it was mainly articulated in the foreign policy discourses of Japan, India and Australia. During this period Chinese response to the concept was limited. The absence of an official statement and limited discussion of the subject by Chinese academics and the strategic community is reflective of the general lack of interest in the Indo-Pacific concept in China.<sup>7</sup>

Following the announcement of the US's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS) in 2017, the concept gained significant attention in China. The FOIPS and the US National Security Strategy of 2017 described what is happening in the Indo-Pacific region as a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order."<sup>8</sup> Taking its confrontation further, Washington labelled Beijing a revisionist power and referred to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as debt-trap diplomacy.<sup>9</sup> It was not just the US endorsement of the Indo-Pacific concept but also the revival of the QUAD<sup>10</sup> at the official level and the endorsement of the concept by more and more countries including ASEAN has also forced China to take the concept more seriously. A significant increase in Chinese

publications on the subject is indicative of this trend.<sup>11</sup> Despite its growing attention, the Chinese official response to the Indo-Pacific was cautious, muted and dismissive. For instance, in one of his press conferences, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said,

“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. Contrary to the claim made by some academics and media outlets that the "Indo-Pacific strategy" aims to contain China, the four countries' official position is that it targets no one. I hope they mean what they say and their action will match their rhetoric. Nowadays, stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting block confrontation will find no market.”<sup>12</sup>

It was not just Foreign Minister Wang Yi, but other foreign ministry officials also maintained an ambiguous approach to Indo-Pacific. Spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Geng Shuang, during his regular press conference in response to a question on the US-Japan Indo-Pacific cooperation, stated ambiguously that it was the shared responsibility of all regional countries to promote stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to Washington, spoke on the FOIPS with an open posture, stating in an interview, “We recognize the interest of the United States in the Asia-Pacific and we want to cooperate with the United States.”<sup>14</sup>

Beijing's ambiguity on the concept was manifested in its lack of recognition of the concept, its non-rejection or the absence of any formal policy response to the Indo-Pacific concept. The Chinese reticent attitude towards Indo-Pacific continued till 2020. Despite the Trump administration's stepping up tension with Beijing, China's 'nonchalance' approach to Indo-Pacific has been puzzling. A possible reason for Beijing's puzzling approach has been the unorthodox foreign policy approach of the Trump administration, which became hostile to the Washington-led liberal international order. Washington's Indo-Pacific approach under the Trump administration was markedly different from that of India, Japan or Australia, hence there appeared weak Indo-Pacific regional alignment even among the QUAD members. Also, Chinese analysts tend to take the FOIPS into political, economic, and military aspects and see issues in different dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

The Chinese response to the concept has significantly changed in the post-COVID period, particularly after the inauguration of the Joe Biden administration in 2021 and has begun view the concept primarily through the prism of its confrontation with Washington. In an all-out strategic confrontation between Washington and Beijing beyond the trade war in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Joe Biden's emphasis on strengthening the US's alliances and partnerships as a means to deal with China.<sup>16</sup> In the post-COVID period, Beijing's relations have soured not only with the US but also India, Japan, Australia and European countries as well. During this phase, Indo-Pacific alignment has strengthened with the upgradation of QUAD to the Summit level, the announcement of AUKUS and other bilateral, trilateral and minilateral arrangements under the umbrella of the Indo-Pacific. The period also witnessed many European countries announcing their respective versions of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The announcement of the Indo-Pacific Economic framework in May 2022 by Washington and an overwhelming response to it by the regional countries further strengthened the institutional framework of the Indo-Pacific region.

In the post-COVID period, the Chinese approach to the Indo-Pacific has changed significantly. This phase has witnessed frequent statements made by senior foreign ministry officials in an attempt to reject the concept and build the narrative of it as a destabilizing idea. The change in the Chinese narrative of the Indo-Pacific has been the reflection of the intensification of security tension and deterioration of China's relation with not only the United States but also other countries, especially the other QUAD members. During this phase, China's officials have seen vehemently opposing and rejecting the Indo-Pacific concept and strategy building the narrative of it as a reproduction of the 'Cold War mentality, through block building of exclusive regional groupings to contain the rise of China and destabilising the regional order.<sup>17</sup> The change in Chinese response to the Indo-Pacific from an indifferent and dismissive attitude to one that outright rejection and confrontation have been indicative of the broader shift in Chinese foreign policy to a more aggressive and combative style that came to be known as 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. In a press conference in March 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said,

From strengthening the Five Eyes to peddling the Quad, from piecing together AUKUS to tightening bilateral military alliances, the US is staging a “five-four-three-two” formation in the Asia-Pacific. This is by no means some kind of blessing for the region, but a sinister move to disrupt regional peace and stability. The real goal of the US Indo-Pacific strategy is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO. It seeks to maintain the US-led system of hegemony, undermine the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation architecture, and compromise the overall and long-term interests of countries in the region. The perverse actions run counter to the common aspiration of the region for peace, development, cooperation and win-win outcomes. They are doomed to fail.<sup>18</sup>

Following Wang Yi but also Chinese officials both at home and abroad also followed this confrontational approach to the Indo-Pacific. They made an effort to compare to Indo-Pacific strategy with BRI and portray Indo-Pacific as a strategy that reproduces the Cold War mentality. In rejecting Indo-Pacific, Chinese officials made efforts to convince regional countries why its important to maintain the Asia-Pacific framework by making a categorical distinction between the nature of the two. In an interview, the Chinese Ambassador to India stated,

“The Asia-Pacific is a promising land, for cooperation and development, not a chessboard for geopolitical contest. Peace, development, cooperation and win-win outcomes are the common aspiration of the countries in our region. China is willing to work with all parties to make a clear distinction between right and wrong, and stay on the right course. We should reject attempts to create small, confrontational, Indo-Pacific circles, foster a broad, inclusive platform for Asia-Pacific cooperation, and build an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future.”<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese government also made significant efforts to mobilize more regional countries to oppose the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy. For instance, during his meeting with the Indonesian Foreign Minister in April 2022 Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that

“China supports ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation architecture. The aims and objectives of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific are quite different from the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to provoke camp confrontation and tension in the region. All parties should be vigilant and prevent the resurgence of the Cold War mentality in the region.”<sup>20</sup>

On a similar line during his meeting with the Ambassador of Maldives to China, Liu Jinsong Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry said that

“the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy", which prioritizes itself over other countries, security over the economy, exclusiveness over inclusiveness, and words over actions, is unlikely to bring benefits to countries in the region. Asian and developing countries should work together to prevent the development agenda from being marginalized, regional cooperation from being politicized and ideologized, and multilateral initiatives and regional cooperation mechanisms from being fragmented and being used as tools to create camps. China and the Maldives are partners of mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual assistance...(and) believes that the Maldives will guard against the Cold War mentality and unilateralism and safeguard the common interests of China, the Maldives and other developing countries.”<sup>21</sup>

Following the announcement of the Indo-Pacific Economic Forum in May 2022, Beijing heightened its rhetoric ant-Indo-Pacific rhetoric arguing that “the newly launched IPEF is a patch of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" and its philosophy is "narrow and exclusive.”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

China’s approach to the Indo-Pacific concept evolved clearly in response to its relations with the United States and changing regional circumstances. Before the US’s endorsement of the concept in 2017, there was little attention paid to the Indo-Pacific concept in Chinese foreign policy discourse both at the official and academic levels. However, that was to change after Washinton’s announcement



of the FOIPS. But at the official level, Beijing remained cautious and muted in its response and to some extent dismissive. The Chinese discursive approach to the Indo-Pacific radically changed in the post-COVID period reflecting “the Wolf Warrior” turn in Beijing’s diplomacy. The Chinese officials not only rejected the concept but also aimed at building a narrative of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a reproduction of the Cold War mentality promoted by Washington to maintain its hegemony, thereby destabilising the peaceful ‘Asia Pacific’ cooperative regional order. In addition to heightening its anti-Indo-Pacific rhetoric, Chinese government officials actively sought support from regional countries to counter the Indo-Pacific regional construct. In conclusion, it is fair to argue that the discursive turn in the Chinese approach to Indo-Pacific has evolved to become an important piece of Beijing’s strategy in confronting Washington's containment strategy.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Shinzo Abe, 'Confluence of the Two Seas- Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India', MOFA, Japan, September 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

<sup>2</sup>"Indo-Pacific represents a return of history: EAM Jaishankar", DNA, July 6, 2021, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-indo-pacific-represents-a-return-of-history-eam-jaishankar-2899227>

<sup>3</sup>Pardesi, Manjeet S (2020), 'The Indo-Pacific: a 'new' region or the return of history?', Australian Journal of International Affairs, 74 (2), 124-146.

<sup>4</sup>Wada Haruko, "The "Indo-Pacific" Concept Geographical Adjustments And Their Implications", RSIS, March 16, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/WP326.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Chengxin Pan (2014), 'The 'Indo-Pacific' and geopolitical anxieties about China's rise in the Asian regional order', Australian Journal of International Affairs, 68(4), 453-469.

<sup>6</sup>Raja Mohan, "China's Two-Ocean Strategy Puts India in a Pincer", Foreign policy, January 4, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/04/india-china-ocean-geopolitics-sri-lanka-maldives-comoros/>

<sup>7</sup>Bo Ma (2020), 'China's Fragmented Approach toward the Indo-Pacific Strategy', China Review , 20, (3), 177-204.

<sup>8</sup>'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 17, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Salem Solomon, 'As US 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' Rhetoric Heats Up, China-Africa Relations Hold Fast', Reuters, December 12, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-debt-trap-diplomacy-rhetoric-heats-china-africa-relations-hold-fast>.

<sup>10</sup>Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving United States, Japan, India and Australia is a security dialogue initiated in 2007. However, failing to maintain the momentum it dissipated only to reconvene at the official level in 2017. It was upgraded to Summit level in 2021.

<sup>11</sup>Op.cit Bo Ma

<sup>12</sup>Wang Yi, "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press", MOFA China, March 9, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/201803/t20180309\\_678665.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/201803/t20180309_678665.html)

<sup>13</sup>"Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on June 3, 2019," June 3 ,2019, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/201906/t20190603\\_4473728.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/201906/t20190603_4473728.htm)

<sup>14</sup>Cui Tiankai, Quoted in "Beijing warns US against trying to contain China's rise",

<sup>15</sup>Denisov, I., Paramonov, O., Arapova, E., & Safranchuk, I. (2021), 'Russia, China, and the concept of Indo-Pacific', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), 72–85.

<sup>16</sup>Vivek Mishra and Premesha Saha, "Decoding the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy", ORF, February 19, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decoding-the-biden-administrations-indo-pacific-strategy/>

<sup>17</sup>"US trying to create Asian NATO with blocs to 'suppress' China: FM Wang Yi", *Economic Times*, March 7, 2022, [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-trying-to-create-asian-nato-with-blocs-to-suppress-china-fm-wang-yi/articleshow/90059130.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-trying-to-create-asian-nato-with-blocs-to-suppress-china-fm-wang-yi/articleshow/90059130.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>18</sup>"State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press", MOFA China, March 07, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202203/t20220308\\_10649559.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html)

<sup>19</sup>"Chinese Ambassador to India H.E. Sun Weidong Received Written Interview from Force Magazine", MOFA China, May 8, 2022 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbdt202208/t20220805\\_10735781.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbdt202208/t20220805_10735781.html)

<sup>20</sup>Wang Yi Holds Talks with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, MOFA China, April 1, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202204/t20220401\\_10663135.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220401_10663135.html)

<sup>21</sup>"Chinese Ambassador to India H.E. Sun Weidong Received Written Interview from Force Magazine" MOFA China, August 22, 2022 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbdt202208/t20220805\\_10735781.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbdt202208/t20220805_10735781.html)

<sup>22</sup>Ensuring Effective COVID Control, Stable Economic Performance, Safe and Secure Development, and Upgraded Cooperation, MOFA China, June 19, 2022 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619\\_10706022.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706022.html)

---

# SUNGKYUN CHINA INSIGHT

## Author

Dr. Jojin V. John  
(Mahatma Gandhi University)

**Dr. Jojin V. John** is a Assistant Professor in the School of International Relations and Politics at Mahatma Gandhi University, India. His research interests are Foreign Policy Analysis, IR Theory, International Relations in East Asia, Korean Foreign Policy, India-Korea Relations.

## Editor

Dr. Chang, Young-Hee  
(SICS)

Mr. Lee, In-Woo  
(SICS)

(03063) 600th anniversary hall, 25-2, SUNGKYUNKWAN-RO, JONGNO-GU, SEOUL, KOREA

COPYRIGHT 2020. SUNGKYUNKWAN UNIVERSITY ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

<https://sics.skku.edu/sics/index.do>