

Quad: The U.S. Strategic Alliance for the Indo-Pacific Region and the Chinese Counterbalance

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific maritime region is politically and militarily volatile. This region constantly witnesses political manoeuvring, economic tactics, and military strategies. The current power game involves two great players, i.e., the U.S. and China, as spheres of their influence interact in the form of agreements, alliances, and investments. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), more commonly Quad, has unlocked doors for fresh security models, research ideas, and intellectual and practical plotting. However, it remains problematic to presume that Quad, which the former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe once called the cornerstone of the “Asian Arc of Democracy” (AAD), is more than a mere dialogue concerning regional security; it has profound practical implications. The futuristic dynamics of Quad are challenging to assume. Viz, imagining those states forming the AAD, which would somehow feel better under a Chinese influence, is tricky. Does the speculative Quad seem exaggerated? The current study explores the Chinese Economic influence on most actors in Quad, which is its counterstrategy against U.S. military and political alignments in the Indo-Pacific. Can the U.S. beat Chinese economic influence on Quad’s member nations? This study utilizes a comparative design to investigate the consequences of Chinese countermeasures. Also, the study assumes that U.S. allies in Quad, i.e., India, Australia, and Japan, will not take aggressive actions against China because of their economic reliance on Chinese imports and exports.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, U.S., China, Quad, Asian Arc of Democracy, economy, counterstrategy

Introduction

The economic and military power over the past 15 years has fundamentally drifted towards Asia. China's global utility of per-person economic productivity rose by 339%. The same increased by 153% for India and 246% for Indonesia. On the contrary, it grew by just 6% for the USA (Lockyer, 2015). The rise of Asian nations in this regard reflects a rapid increase in national GNP across regions. Most countries that acquire wealth through economic activity convert it into military influence. Asia's defence budget in 2012 overshadowed Europe's spending in this domain. In modern history, it happened for the first time. However, there is no uniformity in the rise of Asia's military. China and India are expanding to a massive extent than their neighbours. Thus, new strategic lines are shaping Asia. There is a high probability that several regional states will turn into bona fide Powers and many others will develop and modernize their military potentials. Consequently, a transformational distribution of military power is occurring on transregional levels, affecting the Indian Ocean Region on a massive scale (Lockyer, 2015). Thus, the story of the political and military interdependence is rapidly coming down to develop alliances and reshaping the consequential strategy for more favourable outcomes.

The vortex of geopolitical contractions is the collective of Europe and Asia. To be more concise, the Middle East has become the epicentre of interstate rivalry (Tow, 2008). The struggle for power in the IOR pertains primarily to the Strait of Hormuz and the Cape of Good Hope. This region is the essential lifeline for the global industry in the form of oil flowing through its veins. Even a day of blockade of the world's most crucial chokepoints will shake the industrial integrity worldwide, causing a price hike for oil and all necessities of modern life. Therefore, the maritime world focuses on the Indian Ocean Region; within this bigger picture, the Middle East is central. Controlling the Middle East is the other way of containing China, the most desired political ambition of the U.S. and its allies, especially India and Japan. It seems that the new anchor (Quad) is lowered to stable the arc of current alliances and to counter the thrashing Chinese waters.

Together with the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean provides the faculty for military and political strategists to study deep in the maritime tug-of-war. The United States ball game in the Indo-Pacific region in the form of alliances and alignments is constantly

impacting the balance of power in the area. For instance, the Pacific holds many maritime zones of strategic importance, i.e., the Philippine Sea, East China Sea and especially the politically troubled South China Sea. The Pacific Region alone has many chokepoints of strategic nature. The most important is “the Strait of Malacca, a narrow, 890-kilometre stretch of water between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra” (Lauriat, 2021). It works as an essential artery to deliver direct shipping support between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The strait of Malacca is among the fussiest waterways serving “as a vital economic lifeline for the economies of China, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea” (Lauriat, 2021).

Indo-Pacific alignment is critical to India, a much bigger nation and a principal opponent of China in Asia. However, other countries aligning with the U.S. also have economic, military, and social impacts in the region and beyond. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been prominent in shaping the concept of alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. As a result, the regional alliance became known as the Quad (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2020). Quad is a highly ambitious military construct focused on the maritime affairs of the Indian Ocean Region. Australia, Japan, India, and the U.S. participated in several naval exercises before entering this security dialogue specific to the Indo-Pacific. “However, besides the balancing of China, these four nations have a little overlap of strategic interest, which made the QSD too difficult to explain to China and the rest of Asia” (Lockyer, 2015). It creates a high degree of confusion regarding Quad. Would it be called a temporary alignment for the “containment of China policy”? Or is it a semi-permanent alliance waiting for a nudge to become a fully functional military group and taking many other IOR littorals in their military sphere?

Though often used interchangeably, alliances differ from alignments according to their drivers and levels of cooperation. The primary functions of an alliance are defence and deterrence. Defence involves a pledge by allies to support one another in case of military aggression. The identification of a common threat mainly drives the formation of an alliance. The existence of a possible threat also determines the duration and cost of an alliance (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2020). Whichever is valid for Quad, i.e., alignment or

alliance, the containment policy is shaping the IOR, affecting the region's politics, and shaking other spheres of influence such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and politics of the Pacific Ocean Region (POR).

Literature Review

US Minilateralism in the IOR

Wuthnow (2018) drew upon the U.S. minilateralism, especially in the Indian Ocean Region. The wise U.S. foreign policy is evident through historical and most recent developments in the IOR. After the rebirth of Quad and, most recently, the creation of AUKUS, the U.S. intends to exert more pressure through the least number of allies. Wuthnow briefly discussed the question of containment. However, the author believed that the U.S. does not intend to invest more in the name of the military as it sees minimal military threat from China.

On the contrary, the pressure is more diplomatic, envelope in the so-called militarization of the IOR. Atanassova-Cornelis (2020) also has focused on the nature of U.S. policies in the IOR through minilateral strategies. She concentrated on the nature of alignments and political and military architecture in the region, which mostly involved forging maritime alliances. These studies are significant to understand the U.S. regional ambitions through the modernization of its foreign policy and reshaping the nature of alliances.

A China-Centric Approach of the U.S. and Ambitions of its Allies

Shah (2020) took a different stance in evaluating U.S. objectives in IOR. He elaborated that the U.S. strategy in the region is primarily China-centric. But Washington mostly takes like-minded states on board in matters related to China. It wants to keep the status quo in the region and intends to keep China from threatening the regional balance of power in its favour. However, the siege of China may no longer be possible as two of its progressive allies, i.e., Japan and India, have a visible tilt towards China to fulfil their economic needs. It might become difficult for countries relying too much on Chinese economic input to develop a strategy based on coercive actions. The current form of alliances in this regard is politically motivated. Therefore, the notion of the containment of China through the military is highly speculative and may not be realistic.

The U.S. or any of its allies has not shown any military aggressiveness yet.

On the other hand, China seems confident that shaping or reshaping the alliances in the region cannot deter its economic effectiveness. This study is vital for the current research to have an insight into the problematics of military ambitions in a region mainly under the influence of Chinese economic capacity. Lockyer (2015) took a more probabilistic approach to figure out Australian desires for military cooperation in the IOR. He insists that the immediate north must be the first step for Australia to align its defence capabilities. The immediate northern countries involve Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. These countries also have economic ties with Australia, and joint development of a defence framework may become an option. Other regional and maritime military alliances reflect its ambitions to step the role of foreign powers in the region. This study becomes essential for the current research as Australia is also a case study to derive logical outcomes.

Meta-Analysis

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has enriched the faculty for studying alignments, alliances, cooperation, and political, maritime security and military strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region. Many theorists have termed the birth of the Quad as the containment of China. Other researchers have further speculated on the rise of the U.S. strategy in the IPR and the vulnerability of Chinese pursuits. Some theorists have also underpinned the economic drive of India, Japan and Australia that count on their trade with China. An abundant resource is available to researchers concerning Indian or Pacific Regions and their political, economic and security importance. However, much of this resource is speculative. One type of literature stresses U.S. hegemony, and the other emphasizes Chinese containment. It, therefore, becomes problematic to identify balanced approaches by the theorists and political and social scientists. The current study has identified that a popular approach of writers is the central idea of the containment of China, which can be both in favour and against the U.S. However, Quad's members have not extensively explored the economic grounds on which they rely on China. This study identifies that the research on the interdependence of Quad's actors and China is an area that can give a better understanding of how Quad collectively will react against

China. It becomes a hypothetical scenario that Quad's members cannot take or support coercive actions.

Methodology

This study used a mixed method and relied predominantly on secondary data sources. The sources used to conduct this study were necessary to understand how the Chinese economic counterbalance was adequate and that it carried the same potential as a foreign policy based on military and political ambitions. These sources predominantly link to communication, trade, and logistics that gather extensive data regularly regarding trade and communication between bilateral and multilateral countries. They retrieve their statistical data through flowcharts, graphs, and statistical tables. As it is hard for individual researchers to gather such data for analyzing trade between countries, they rely on resourceful organizations, both governmental and private, to fetch data and compare results.

Consequently, this data gave a clear insight into the subject matter for analysis, comparison, and assessment. The author has retrieved comparable data and produced it in tables, charts, and graphs. These figures are primarily reflecting the comparison of trade statistics. The authors compared to assess whether India, Japan, and Australia are conducting more trade with China than with the United States. For the current study, these sources include the United Nations Communication & Trade Database, namely UNComtrade, Office of the United States Trade Representatives (USTR), United States Census Bureau (USCB), tradingeconomics.com, and statista.com. The quantitative data was assessed through a longitudinal approach for comparison and evaluation and referred to several time stamps. The authors determined all the sources primarily to retrieve statistics confirming or denying the hypothetical scenario of Chinese economic pressure on U.S. allies. Moreover, the statistical data would also confirm or deny that U.S. allies in the region are not in the position to take coercive actions against China because of their economic and industrial reliance on the Chinese economic might.

Results

China's Trade with Japan

Japan is an active member of the U.S. alliance for a speculative containment of China policy. However, in the era of a liberal market

economy, trade and economics have become more important than investing in keeping conflicts alive. Japan has been unable to make the U.S. angry militarily and certainly cannot avoid Chinese economic dominance. The trade volume between Japan and China is ever-growing. The data from 2020 shows substantial trade volumes between the two countries, surpassing the trade between the U.S. and Japan. With a phenomenal US\$ 163.85 billion (Trading Economics, 2021), the volume of Japan's imports from China was 60% more than the volume of its imports from the U.S.

On the other hand, Chinese imports were 6% less than the U.S. It also shows that China relies on Japan less than the U.S., showing substantial gains in economic policies. In its trade with Japan, the U.S. suffered a trade deficit of \$48 billion (USTR, 2021) in 2020 and vice versa in China. The figure below shows comparative statistics from 2020.

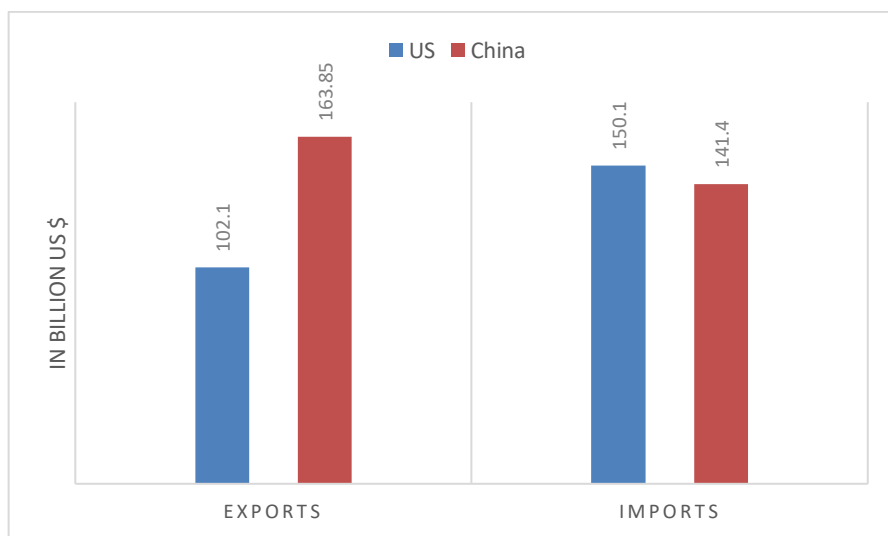


Figure 1: The U.S. and China's total trade volume with Japan in 2020, retrieved from (*Trading Economics, 2021*) and (*USTR, 2021*)

The trade statistics from 2020 reflect a high degree of Chinese impact on Japan's economy. The U.S. must bridge the gap between its trade deficit with improved exports and decreased to counter China in its trade with Japan. These figures also show that

Japan will remain reluctant to aggression against China as a U.S. ally as its industrial position largely depends on China.

China's Trade with Australia

Australia has always been a potential import and export market for China. According to the UNComtrade Database, Australia gets 2.1% of Chinese exports, and these figures are rising. Moreover, China is the 6th largest import market. (UNComtrade, 2020)

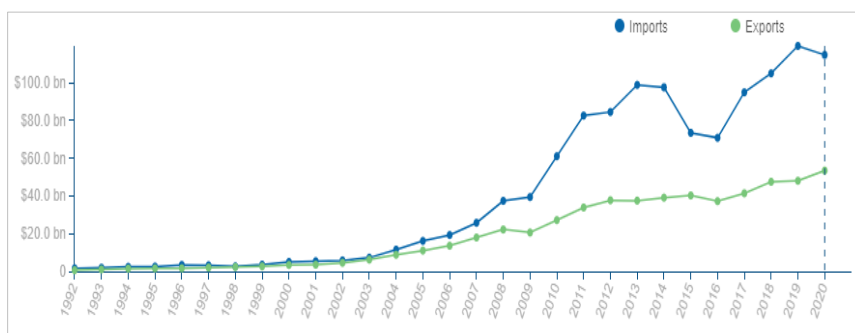


Figure 2: Ever-increasing China-Australia trade, retrieved from (UNComtrade, 2020)

The data from 2020 show that the bilateral trade of China with Australia was US\$ 163.3 billion. Chinese imports were US\$ 114.8 billion, creating a \$61.4 billion trade deficit for China. But Australia would not intend to disturb its export market. The trade between China and Australia shows marginal abating in 2020 (Trading Economics, 2021). However, in 2021 it again shows prosperous bilateral trade (Argus, 2021). Although, the relations between the two countries recently deteriorated on the COVID-19 outbreak inquiry (Tan, 2021). Australia fulfils 5.6% of Chinese imports, making it the 6th largest market (UNComtrade, 2020). Australia returned to Quad in 2017 after it left in 2008, a move that provided the basis to rename the alliance Quad 2.0.

On the other hand, the volume of U.S. trade with Australia is too less than China. Statista (2021) shows that U.S. exports to Australia in 2020 were U\$ 23.49 billion (Statista, 2021). On the contrary, Chinese exports were the U.S. \$53.5 billion.



Figure 3: Five years of U.S. exports to Australia shows a decrease, retrieved from (Statista, 2021)

Over four years, U.S. exports to Australia are decreasing by at least \$2 billion. Moreover, the U.S. imports from Australia were the U.S. \$12.99 billion in 2020. The following figure shows the difference between the trade volumes of China and the U.S.

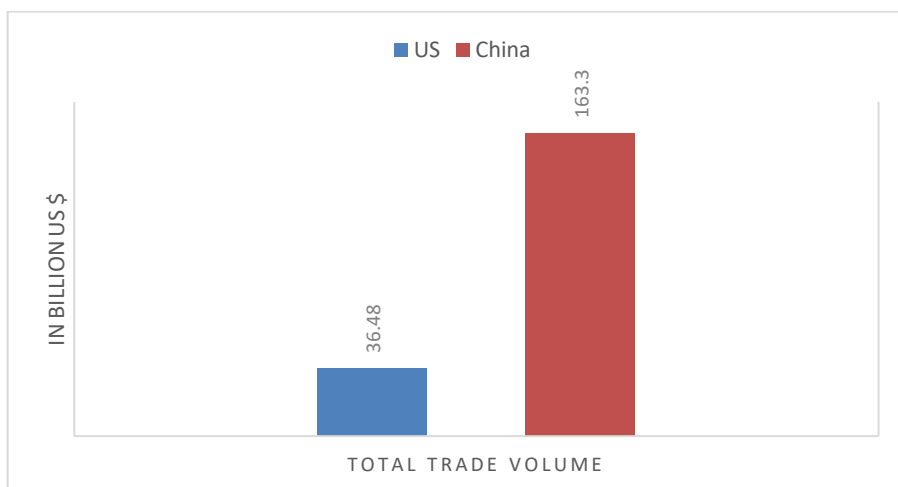


Figure 4: China and U.S. Total trade volume with Australia, developed by the author according to the data retrieved from (Statista, 2021), (USTR, 2021), and (UNComtrade, 2020)

The data above shows that the volume of Chinese trade with Australia is 347% more than the U.S. A decade of the absence of Australia from Quad seems justified in economic terms. However,

its return to the alliance reflects that Australia may not want to displease the only hyper-power of the 21st century, the United States.

China's Trade with India

The bilateral trade volume between China and India in goods was \$87.6 billion in 2020 (UNComtrade, 2020), making India the 9th most significant market for Chinese goods exports. India secured 2.6% of Chinese goods exports in 2020. Chinese goods exports to India are increasing, and where it is successfully keeping its trade balance around \$40 to \$45 billion. On the contrary, the total volume of U.S. trade in goods with India remained at \$78.28 billion, \$ 9 billion less than China (USCB, 2020). Although this difference is not that much considering the trade volumes between China-Japan and China-Australia, there is a big problem regarding a bilateral trade deficit, as reflected in the following table.

Table 1

Total Trade in Goods with India in 2020 (U.S. \$ bn)				
	Exports	Imports	Trade Balance	Total
US	27.0	51.2	-24.1	78.2
China	66.7	20.9	45.9	87.6

Source: Developed by the author, derived from the data retrieved from (USCB, 2020) and UNComtrade (UNComtrade, 2020)

The above statistics show that India relies more on China for imports than the U.S., which makes it vulnerable to Chinese economic might. India's industry relies mainly on Chinese imports more than the U.S. Although India's stakes in Quad 2.0 are too high as it propagates the same containment of China strategy and considers China an ally of Pakistan. But the economic counterweight is much too high, and this weight keeps Quad's stakeholders on the back foot. Incidentally, the region is not likely to undergo abrupt and aggressive military alliances as suggested or speculated by the theorists and researchers of US-China conflicts in the Indo-Pacific Region.

The results mentioned above produce the following significant deductions.

1. Australia, Japan, and India are influential members of U.S. alliances in the Indian Ocean Region, but these countries are more inclined towards China to fulfil their economic needs.
2. Economic reliance on China can reduce the aggressiveness of U.S. military allies in the region.
3. There is a high probability that the economy will keep on dominating the military aspirations of states in the IOR and beyond. Increasing economic ties would mean decreasing hostilities and military confrontations.
4. The economy is the priority of nation-states. The Indian Ocean Region will probably not undergo a high-level military confrontation soon.
5. States use political and military alliances to construct a sense of hegemony. It can also be beneficial for economic gains.

Discussion

The U.S. Strategy in the IPR

The spheres of world politics undergo constant changes, which apply to all political environments related to the global system of politics, and there is no exception (Tow, 2008). Quad, in this regard, is aligned particularly with the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). Quad members derive their basis from the following agenda put forth by the Quad leaders in March 2021.

“We will begin cooperation on the critical technologies of the future to ensure that innovation is consistent with a free, open, inclusive, and resilient Indo-Pacific. We will continue to prioritize the role of international law in the maritime domain, particularly as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and facilitate collaboration, including in maritime security, to meet challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas” (The White House, 2021).

The United States has the ultimate dominion over strategic inputs and probable outcomes in today's military domains, shaping and reshaping the international political system in its favour or its allies. It has reinforced its footing under Donald Trump and now Joe

Biden. The U.S. President titled Chinese President Xi Jinping a “thug” in one of the presidential discourses (Speers, 2021). Then, he made Quad meet his first multilateral engagement after taking the white house. “Borrowing President Biden’s description of the 70-year-old US-Australia alliance, Morrison described the Quad as an *anchor of peace and stability in the region*” (Speers, 2021). “In such an environment, post-war U.S. allies like Australia are challenged with how to determine whether their national security interests and policies correspond with or diverge from American expectations and demands. In this context, Australia stands at a historical crossroads” (Tow, 2008). “Washington’s Indo-Pacific Strategy has drawn on years of confabulations with these like-minded states” (Shah, 2020).

The U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific is China-centric, at least after the end of the cold war. The problem is, of course, the balance of power, particularly in Asia and Europe. The U.S. fears that the Chinese may threaten the status quo. Consequently, shifting the balance of power in China’s favour would be disastrous for the American interest, especially in Asia and Europe.

However, the endeavours for control in the Indo-Pacific are not unprecedented. Two great European Powers of their era, Spain, and Portugal, crafted the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, consequently grouping the world into two regions. Most of the Indian Ocean went to Portugal, and the Kingdom of Spain ruled the Pacific Ocean (Shah, 2020). In the modern age, only there is a change of players, not the ambitions. Now, the U.S. controls the game as a hyper-power, and the modes of divides, alignments, and interests are precise. The maritime and military alliances of IOR and POR are shaping global politics. China is progressing fast. There may be a region-sharing agreement between the U.S. and China.

The critical aspects of Asia’s developing strategic landscape are the efforts of the U.S. to support interoperability and policy coordination among its allies or partners. States mostly do it through intelligence-sharing arrangements, dialogues, military exercises, and developing structures for progressive alliances. Although it helps confront practical problems and underscore shared norms, the actions could increase Chinese dismay of ‘encirclement’, leading to economic or strategic countermeasures (Wuthnow, 2018). The most desired example to elaborate the current scenarios in exploiting the maritime domain for military control is the U.S. minilateralism. The U.S. is acquiring the assistance of the smallest number of nations to

acquire its political desires. The Quad is one of the more imaginative ideas that emerged in U.S. foreign policy. Its reasons for introduction in the IPR's tug-of-war.

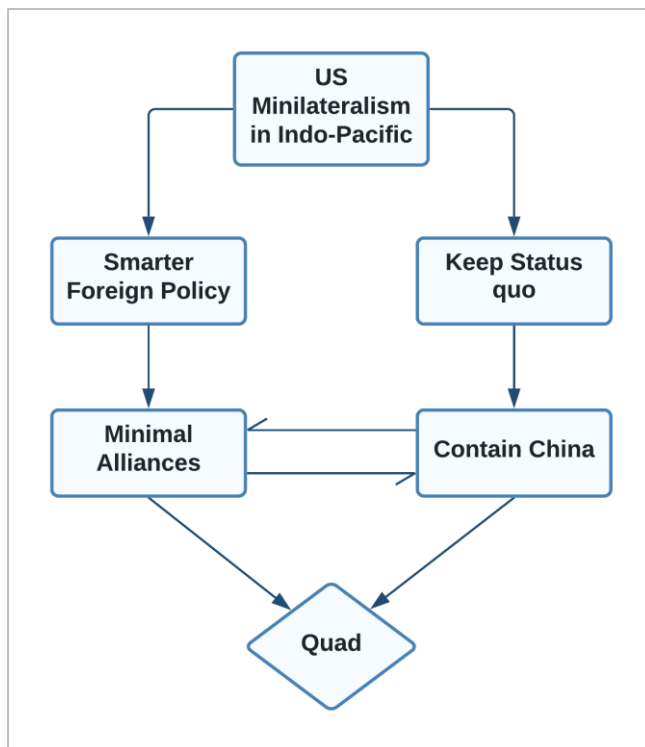


Figure 5: The U.S. minilateralism and containment of China through Quad, a concept derived from (Wuthnow, 2018), and the authors made the improvements

AUKUS is another alliance conceived by the U.S. Although it has angered France, a significant ally of the U.S., it seems that it would be transitory owing to the *more significant cause* in a futuristic perspective.

The Chinese Counterbalance

The most considerable trouble in the U.S. containment of China policy is the Chinese counterstrategy to balance the equations of power in the IPR. The development of alliances and reshaping regional alignments did not push China out of its military quietness. Until today, China has not answered militarily or in the form of

pushing for military alliances in the region. If it does so, the region will be pushed towards an intense security dilemma, instigating an arms race that will affect regional and global peace. So, the Chinese current and probable strategies do not seem to counter the U.S. with identical spheres. The move is one of the Chinese counterweights in foreign policy, which primarily depends on economic bilateralism and multilateralism.

“China’s economic strategy is multifaceted in terms of global reach. It not only intends to keep its industry running to fulfil its economic and monetary purposes but also to align markets of other states technologically and logistically with the pace of its ever-growing industry through investment and development, which the critics of the Chinese strategy term “positive sanctions” (Shahzad, 2021).

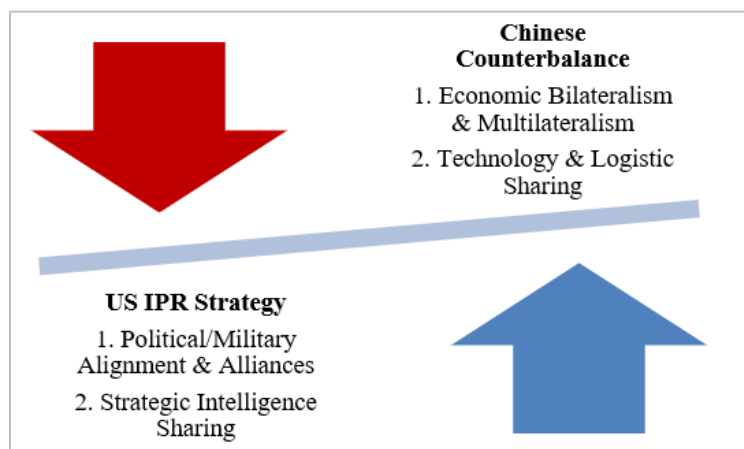


Figure 6: The Chinese counterbalance to the U.S. IPR strategy, developed by the author

China has emerged as an economic giant of the 21st century. Until now, no other economic force seems to challenge China in this domain. It has the most encouraging and immense human resources, the ability to avail industrial raw materials at the lowest costs, technologically superior production facilities harbouring a skilled workforce, and the ability to export final products in a minimum amount of time. Chinses products are rated high in the global

economic markets while their costs are relatively lower than the rivals. These factors have made the world look towards China not only to import products at low costs but also to develop industries in the Chinese mainland where they can substantially cut production costs by availing almost every existing material at the lowest possible costs, from humanitarian assistance to modern equipment and raw materials.

Conclusion

The power struggle in the Indian and Pacific Oceans is going on in two ways. First is forming alliances and new security regimes, misbalancing regional politics and compelling the littoral states to choose sides. It may end up in an arms race that is not in the best interests of any nation, especially in South and Southeast Asia and Africa. Second is the emerging trade race more closely connected to Chinese imports and exports. As a thriving economy, China holds much larger shares of global economic uplift.

China, until now, has successfully integrated its economy to balance military strategies, especially in the Indian Ocean periphery. This counterbalance is channelling security dilemmas in the IOR and preventing a possible arms race in the region. Chinese policies are more inclined toward delivering soft power in economic bilateralism and multilateralism. The country successfully fulfils the norms of a liberal economy and interconnectedness for trade and services. Economically speaking, Japan, Australia, and India are more inclined toward China to meet their trade and industrial demands. The economic factor remains critical for nation-states of the modern era. Glitches in imports or exports may cause hiccups and glitches, even temporary suspensions in the industrial output. Until now, China has been quiet on military fronts. For China, the economy is the best policy to balance the global strategic equations.

Economic interdependence is crucial in studying power and interdependence, especially where China and the U.S. are concerned. This study has determined that a country facing security threats or dilemmas may have other avenues to explore for a better counterstrategy. A security question may have an economic answer. However, this strategy requires the highest degree of patience. As this political system is anarchic, any discrepancy can provide grounds for coercive actions and responses. The IPR is politically volatile and requires economic interdependence rather than security

alliances. Both the U.S. and China must do everything possible to avoid another cold war era.

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