

CASE STUDY

The rise and fall of China's 'Peaceful Rise': Implications for US-China geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

Strategic competition and rivalry between the United States and China has become a paradigm of international relations in the past decade. Central to this growing strategic distrust between Washington and Beijing is the tug of war between the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, the role of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy and assertive nationalism characteristic of Chinese foreign policymaking in creating an atmosphere of tension and misunderstanding between Beijing and Washington have been largely overlooked. This paper, therefore, seeks to understand the relationship between the rise and fall of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' concept, the emerging prominence of assertive nationalism in China's foreign policy making and a deteriorating US-China relations with deepening strategic mistrust between the two major powers through a comparative-historical analysis of China's BRI and the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy. Rather than demonstrating China's commitment to its 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' to the world, this paper argues that Beijing's offensive to defend China's national interests in a confrontational manner is an indication that an increasingly confident Chinese leadership no longer feels the need for reassuring the world that China's 'rise' is peaceful and non-threatening in nature. This could embolden Beijing to defy (if not explicitly challenge) the 'rules-based international order' upheld/defended by Washington, thereby spelling the end of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific, Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), US-China relations, Geopolitical competition, Strategic distrust, assertive nationalism, Peaceful rise/Peaceful development, Chinese/China Model

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Introduction

Speaking at a group study session of the Politburo of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in June 2021, President Xi Jinping told senior Communist Party officials that new concepts, domains and expressions should be created to present an image of a ‘credible, loveable and respectable China’.¹ In the eyes of President Xi, ‘it is necessary to make friends, unite and win over the majority, and constantly expand the circle of friends as regards international public opinion’.² This, according to some observers,³ appears to be a rare acknowledgement of China’s current international isolation, and stands in stark contrast to the Chinese President’s advocacy of the ‘Asia-Pacific Century’⁴ during his attendance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Peru in November 2016.⁵

A year later, at the APEC leaders’ summit in Vietnam in November 2017, the-then US President Donald Trump, during his marathon tour in Asia, announced a new initiative- the ‘Indo-Pacific dream’ -as the centerpiece of his administration’s strategy towards the region.⁶ This vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, according to President Trump, is ‘a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace’.⁷

With both the American and the Chinese leaders outlining their visions for the region, it is worth noting that behind the demonstration of their divergent ‘worldviews’ is a more serious message: The continuous effort made by the United States to counterbalance China’s advocacy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁸ through

¹ “Xi Jinping calls for more ‘loveable’ image for China in bid to make friends,” *BBC News*, 2 June, 2021, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57327177> (accessed 13 September 2021).

² E. Dyer, “A more ‘loveable’ China? Xi hints at a charm offensive to ‘expand’ Beijing’s ‘circle of friends,’” *CBC News*, 3 June, 2021, Available at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/xi-china-spavor-kovrig-1.6052192> (accessed 13 September 2021).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The ‘Asia-Pacific Century’ is a policy idea advocated by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during his attendance at the 2016 APEC CEO Summit in Peru. Xi outlined a four-prong economic development plan including i) promotion of an open and integrated economy in the form of a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP); ii) the enhancement of connectivity for achieving interconnected development in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ; iii) strengthening of reform and innovation on the basis of the G20 Blueprint on Innovative Growth adapted by the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit and iv) promotion of win-win cooperation for forging stronger Asia-Pacific partnership.

⁵ *Global Times*, “Keynote speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the APEC CEO Summit,” 20 November, 2016, Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1019023.shtml> (accessed 13 September 2021).

⁶ US Mission to ASEAN, “Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit | Da Nang, Vietnam,” 10 November, 2017, Available at <https://asean.usmission.gov/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/> (accessed 13 September 2021).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ At its simplest, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is formerly known as One Belt One Road, is a massive infrastructure building and development project launched by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI has since become synonymous with Chinese foreign policy under Xi.

the advancement of its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy',⁹ from Beijing's perspective, has exacerbated the mutual suspicions, or what is known as 'strategic distrust', between the two major powers.¹⁰

Then, in the light of this climate of continuing US-China strategic distrust, has the fundamental change in China's foreign policy endorsed by President Xi Jinping, contributed to the tension and cumulative distrust between the United States and China? What will the implications of the clash between an increasingly confident China and a vigilant America to the Indo-Pacific region? The aim of this paper, therefore, is to address these questions. The paper seeks to understand the relationship between the rise and fall of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' concept,¹¹ the emerging prominence of assertive nationalism in China's foreign policy¹² and the deteriorating US-China relations. This mistrust between these two major powers will be explored through a comparative historical analysis of China's BRI and the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy.

Against the background of China's growing ambitions and assertiveness, this paper argues that Beijing's efforts to defend China's national interests in a confrontational manner, is indicative of an increasingly confident Chinese leadership that no longer feels the need for reassuring the world that China's 'rise' is peaceful and non-threatening in nature. In this sense, the resurgence of an increasingly confident

⁹ US Department of State, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington DC: the Department of State, 2019), Available at <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision/> (accessed 19 September 2021); A 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', according to the US Department of State, can be understood at three levels: the individual, state and regional. The emphasis is being placed on freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific, the fastest growing region on the planet. Yet, many analysts, especially the Chinese scholars, believe that this new US policy initiative towards Asia is driven by the geopolitical changes to the existing Western-dominated international order brought about by China's rise and is, therefore, intended to hedge against China's foreign and security policy behaviour. See 'Top U.S. diplomat rallies Asian allies in face of 'aggressive' China', *The Japan Times*, 14 December 2021. Available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/12/14/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/antony-blinken-indonesia-speech/> (accessed 1 October 2021); US Department of State, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision', (Washington DC: the Department of State. 2019). D. Chen, 'The Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Background Analysis', *Instituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) Commentary*, 4 June 2018.

¹⁰ K. Lieberthal and W. Jisi, "Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust," in *China Center Monograph Series*, J.L. Thornton (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, March 2012), 4; M. Zhao, "Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12 no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 371–94.

¹¹ 'Peaceful rise/ peaceful development' is a new concept being introduced in 2003 by Z. Bijian, the former executive vice president of the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and a foreign policy advisor to President Hu Jintao. Zheng defined China's 'peaceful rise' as a 'new strategic path' taken by the country 'through independently building socialism with Chinese characteristics, while participating in rather than detaching from economic globalization'. The term, however, has been replaced in official statements by the phrase 'peaceful development' in 2004. See Z. Bijian, 'A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia', speech delivered during Boao Forum for Asia, Boao, China, 1–3 November 2003; 'White Paper on Peaceful Development Road Published', China Internet Information Center, 22 December 2005.

¹² A.S. Whiting, "Assertive Nationalism in Chinese Foreign Policy," *Asian Survey* 23, no. 8 (1983): 913–33.

China under President Xi and his efforts to make China an assertive player, particularly via the launch of the BRI, was never meant to demonstrate Beijing's commitment to 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' to the world. This has emboldened Beijing to defy (if not explicitly challenge) the 'rules-based international order' upheld by Washington,¹³ thereby spelling the end of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy.

This paper begins by addressing the rise and fall of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy and the growth of assertive nationalism in the Chinese foreign policymaking, with a particular focus on the emergence of wolf-warrior diplomacy since 2017.¹⁴ I will then examine the launch of the BRI by President Xi Jinping in 2013. This is followed by an analysis of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and the establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which composes of the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. The next section elaborates on the nature of the intensifying US-China strategic competition and their growing mutual strategic distrust.¹⁵ The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the clash between an increasingly confident China and a vigilant America for the Indo-Pacific region.

A cautious China: the rise of China's 'peaceful rise' strategy under Hu Jintao

China's rapid and spectacular economic growth since the adoption of the reform and opening-up policy (*gaige kaifang*) by its leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978 has transformed the country from a centrally planned to a 'socialist-market' economy.¹⁶ As a result of an average 10% annual GDP growth that China has experienced between 1978 and 2018¹⁷ and significant improvements in access to health, education, and other services over the same period, more than 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty.¹⁸ This spectacular growth and poverty reduction within the country has transformed China into an enormously powerful country, making China's rise 'the most important geopolitical development of the twenty-first century'.¹⁹

¹³ Z. Majeed, "Blinken Blasts China, Says It 'disturbs' Rules-based Order Which US 'strongly Defends'," *RepublicWorld*, 9 June, 2021, Available at <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/us-news/blinker-blasts-china-says-it-disturbs-rules-based-order-which-us-strongly-defends.html> (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹⁴ Z. Zhu, "Interpreting China's "Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, 15 May, 2020, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/> (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ Z. Cui, "Making Sense of the Chinese "Socialist Market Economy": A Note," *Modern China* 38, no. 6 (November 2012): 665–76; Global Times, "CPC's reform and opening-up policies overcome major hurdles and change China, the world," 12 August, 2021, Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231304.shtml> (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹⁷ Y. Yao, "China's Economic Growth in Retrospect," in *China 2049: Economic Challenges of a Rising Global Power*, D. Dollar, Y. Huang and Y. Yao (eds.), (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2020).

¹⁸ World Bank, "China Overview: Development news, research, data," 29 March, 2021, Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview> (accessed 15 September 2021).

¹⁹ J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

China's forty years of reform and development have attracted worldwide attention. Yet China's seemingly inexorable rise has prompted some Internal Relations scholars such as John Mearsheimer, the leading proponent of offensive realism,²⁰ to argue that 'an intense security competition with considerable potential for war' between US and China is inevitable, because the United States 'will go to enormous lengths to prevent China from achieving regional hegemony'.²¹ As such, the rise of China, as Professor²² aptly pointed out, 'is unlikely to be tranquil' because most of China's neighboring countries, including India and Japan, will join the US to contain Chinese power.

It is against this backdrop that,²³ a former vice-chair of the Central Party School, spearheaded a movement to introduce a new concept 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*) during 2002–2007. In his article written for *Foreign Affairs*,²⁴ suggested that the Chinese leadership, through its concentration on economic development since the adoption of reform and opening-up policies in 1978, has laid out 'the development path to a peaceful rise': a 'new strategic path' that enables China's emergence through peaceful means, without plundering other countries' resources through invasion, colonization, expansion, or even large-scale wars of aggression. Beijing's pursuit of the goal of a peaceful rising China, according to,²⁵ would also enable the country to improve its relations with the rest of the world because 'China does not seek hegemony or predominance in world affairs'.

In important respects, Zheng's advocacy of China's 'peaceful rise' was aimed to counterbalance the influence of the 'China Threat Theory' and the 'China Collapse Theory'²⁶ employed by the United States.²⁷ China, according to Zheng, could transcend the old development strategies of rising powers, as its rise 'will not take the road of Germany in the first world war, or Germany and Japan in the second world

²⁰ S. Myšička, "Offensive Realism and the Future of China's Rise," *Pacific Focus* 36, no. 1 (April 2021): 63–91.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ B. Zheng, "A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia," speech delivered during Boao Forum for Asia, Boao, China, 1–3 November, 2003.

²⁴ B. Zheng, "China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84 no. 5 (September–October, 2005): 18–24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18–24.

²⁶ According to the proponents of the 'China Threat Theory', it is inconceivable for China to have a peaceful rise because a would-be superpower like China will inevitable be a threat to the United States. Proponents of the 'China Collapse Theory', such as Gordon Chang, the author of *The Coming Collapse of China* (2001), argue that the inefficiency of state-owned enterprises and the inability of the Chinese Communist Party to build an open democratic society would likely bring down China's financial system and its communist regime, along with the entire country.

²⁷ D. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

war - using violence to pillage resources and seek world hegemony'.²⁸ Zheng argues that the world, therefore, can rest assured that China would not challenge the status quo powers through war or other means. Instead, China's 'peaceful rise' would enable the country's integration with the world.

In addition to Zheng's 'peaceful rise', another important concept put forward by the Chinese government under the-then President Hu Jintao is the 'harmonious world'.²⁹ In his speech 'Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity', delivered at the UN's 60th anniversary summit in 2005, President Hu highlighted that multilateralism (an effective collective security mechanism within the UN), as well as mutually beneficial cooperation and a more representative UN Security Council, could help establish a 'harmonious world'.³⁰ Given the peaceful nature of the Chinese nation, 'China's development, instead of hurting or threatening anyone, can only serve peace, stability and common prosperity in the world'.³¹ Issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in September 2011, the official White Paper entitled *China's Peaceful Development*, placed the emphasis on the 'peaceful' and 'non-threatening' nature Chinese foreign policy:

The central goal of China's diplomacy is to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development. China could become strong in the future. Yet peace will remain critical for its development, and China has no reason to deviate from the path of peaceful development.³²

A confident China: The fall of 'peaceful rise' strategy under Xi Jinping

China's foreign policymaking, however, has witnessed a fundamental transformation since President Xi Jinping came into power in 2013. In his speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, President³³

²⁸ H. Okuda, "China's "peaceful rise/peaceful development": A case study of media frames of the rise of China," *Global Media and China* 1, no. 1–2 (2016): 121–38.

²⁹ S. Guo and J.M. Blanchard, (eds.). *Harmonious World and China's New Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

³⁰ J. Hu, 'Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity' speech, (New York City, NY, 14 September, 2005).

³¹ Ibid.

³² China Internet Information Center, "White Paper on Peaceful Development Road Published," 22 December, 2005, Available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Dec/152669.htm> (accessed 15 September 2021).

³³ J. Xi, "Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era," report delivered at 19th National Congress of the CCP, Beijing, 18 October, 2017, Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed 16 September 2021).

highlighted that China 'has achieved a tremendous transformation', as the country 'has stood up, grown rich and is becoming strong'. This indicates that there is no reason why China has to shy away from world leadership, but instead, as the Chinese leader argued, 'it is time for us to take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind'.³⁴

Underlying Xi's intent to adopt a more proactive approach in world affairs, is his strong belief in his country's 'national rejuvenation', which is known as the 'Chinese Dream'.³⁵ The essence of the 'Chinese Dream', in President Xi's own words, is 'a rich and powerful country, revitalizing the nation and enhancing the well-being of the people', and that it constitutes 'the inner meaning of upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics'.³⁶ This great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, accordingly, can materialize through realizing two centennial goals, that is, to establish a 'moderate well-off society by 2021 and a rich and strong country by 2049'.³⁷ This notion of the 'Chinese Dream', however, can only be implemented through the path of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics',³⁸ and, perhaps most importantly, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in materializing the national revival of the Chinese nation, because 'only the CCP can rejuvenate China'.³⁹

Along with his notion of the 'Chinese Dream', the other cornerstone of Xi's thinking is his advocacy of 'four confidences'.⁴⁰ Put forth most systematically by the President in his inaugural speech at the closing meeting of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018, Xi stated that China and its people should have confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics.⁴¹ These were later officially referred to as the 'four matters of confidence', and are added to the Party Constitution in 2017:

³⁴ "Xi Jinping: 'Time for China to take centre stage'," *BBC News* 18 October, 2017, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41647872> (assessed 15 September 2021); Ibid.

³⁵ "Potential of the Chinese Dream," *China Daily*, 26 March, 2014, Available at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-03/26/content_17380146.htm (accessed 16 September 2021).

³⁶ P. Ferdinand, "Westward ho—The China Dream and 'One Belt, One Road': Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 2016): 941–57.

³⁷ Xinhua, "CPC Q&A: What are China's two centennial goals and why do they matter?" 17 October, 2017a, Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136686770.htm (accessed 16 September 2021).

³⁸ Xinhua, "China Focus: Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: 10 Ideas to Share with World," 8 October, 2017b, Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/08/c_136665156.htm (assessed 29 September 2021).

³⁹ C.T.N. Sørensen, "The Significance of Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream' for Chinese Foreign Policy: From 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' to 'Fen Fa You Wei'," *Journal of China International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2015): 53–73.

⁴⁰ China Internet Information Center, "July 1, 2016 Four matters of confidence," 1 July, 2016, Available at http://www.china.org.cn/china/2021-06/01/content_77231327.htm (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁴¹ "Speech delivered by President Xi at the NPC closing meeting," *China Daily*, 22 March, 2018, Available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2018-03/22/content_35894512.htm (accessed 16 September 2021).

"Confidence in the path" is confidence in the direction of socialism with Chinese characteristics and confidence in its future; "confidence in the theory" is confidence in the scientific, true and authentic nature of the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics; "confidence in the system" is confidence in the advanced and superior nature of the system of Chinese socialism; and "confidence in culture" is a full affirmation of the value of China's culture and a faith in its vitality.⁴²

Perhaps most fundamentally, Beijing's growing self-confidence has emboldened China to act more assertively in its foreign policymaking.⁴³ One prominent example of this growing sense of assertiveness is President Xi's call for a 'new model of major-country relationship' during his talks with the US President Barack Obama in Beijing, in November 2014. The Chinese President outlined 'no conflict, no confrontation', 'mutual respect' and 'win-win cooperation' as the three principal elements of the construction of this new model of major-country relationship, between the two countries.⁴⁴ Being driven by China's self-perceived shrinking power gap with the United States, President Xi's effort to push the international community to build this new model, is an attempt to recast China-US relations on more equal terms,⁴⁵ because China under Xi, wants to be regarded as a great power, and certainly to be equal with the US.⁴⁶

A confident China: assertive nationalism characteristic of 'wolf-warrior diplomacy'

The waning influence of 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy has, therefore, become noticeable, since Beijing has increasingly signalled its resolve in China's rising power aspirations. The country's foreign policy has been reoriented into a more assertive direction, known as 'wolf-warrior diplomacy'.⁴⁷ Named after two

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A.I. Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7–48.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Barack Obama of the US, Stressing Promoting Construction of New Model of Major-Country Relationship Between China and the US in Six Key Directions and Putting into Practice Principles of No Conflict, No Confrontation, Mutual Respect, and Win-Win Cooperation," 12 November, 2014, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/ytjhzzdrsreldrfzshyixghd/t1211022.shtml (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁴⁵ J. Zeng and S. Breslin, "China's, new type of Great Power relations': a G2 with Chinese characteristics?" *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 2016): 773–94.

⁴⁶ C. Shepherd, "China says it wants to resolve differences with U.S. 'on equal footing'," *Reuters*, 3 August, 2018, Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-singapore-china-usa-idUSKBN1KO12M> (accessed 15 September 2021); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Calls for the Building of New Type of International Relations with Win-Win Cooperation at the Core in a Speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations," 23 March, 2013b, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpcfl_665694/t1024781.shtml (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

domestic blockbuster movies *Wolf Warrior* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017),⁴⁸ this new approach is a fundamental transformation of Chinese diplomacy 'from conservative, passive, and low-key, to assertive, proactive, and high-profile'.⁴⁹ This increasingly 'muscular' foreign policy behaviour is characterized by Beijing's increasing willingness to defend China's self-proclaimed core (national) interests. The issues relating to China's core interests, as mentioned in the State Council's 2011 White Paper *China's Peaceful Development*, involve state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification.⁵⁰

In the context of the Chinese Communist Party's active promotion of the 'four matters of confidence' as mentioned above, China has seen a strident turn to assertive nationalism, as the government has become more willing to confront the Western powers and its neighbours. For instance, the Chinese diplomats, especially the foreign ministry spokespersons such as Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian,⁵¹ have pursued increasingly assertive tactics to shape how China is perceived online, through hitting back at criticism by Western powers over China's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak via Twitter.⁵² Along with the use of abrasive language, Beijing has also increased its efforts to artificial island building and infrastructure construction, after making expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea (SCS) in recent years.⁵³ The construction of ports, military installations, and airstrips in the Paracel

⁴⁸ G. Zhang, "Wolf Warrior 2' becomes China's highest-grossing film of all time," *Los Angeles Times* 15 August, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-china-box-office-wolf-warrior2-story.html> (accessed 15 September 2021); The term 'Wolf Warrior' is first derived from a 2015 Chinese-produced cross-genre action-military film called *Wolf Warrior*. It depicts a Chinese special force soldier with extraordinary marksmanship, pursuing a vicious drug lord who is defended by a group of deadly foreign mercenaries. The release of its sequel, *Wolf Warrior II* in 2017 coincided with the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army in China. The film was highly acclaimed for its patriotic story, special effects, action sequences, and cast performances.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The State Council of The People's Republic of China, "White Paper: China's Peaceful Development." 6 September, 2011, Available at http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm (accessed 17 September 2021).

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Z. Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 29, 2021," 29 July, 2021, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1896083.shtml (accessed 27 September 2021).

⁵² J. Brandt and B. Schafer, "How China's 'wolf warrior' diplomats use and abuse Twitter," *Brookings Institutions* 28 October, 2020, Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats-use-and-abuse-twitter/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁵³ V.R. Lee, "South China Sea: China's Unprecedented Spratlys Building Program," *The Diplomat*, 25 April, 2015, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/south-china-sea-chinas-unprecedented-spratlys-building-program/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

and Spratly Islands, as well as the deployment of fighter jets, cruise missiles, and a radar system in Woody Island, one of China's largest possessions in the SCS, are two cases in point.⁵⁴

From Beijing's perspective, this assertive and often abrasive stance adopted by its diplomats does not only constitute a 'justified defence' to protect China's core interests against the offensive and aggressive Western diplomacy, but also represents a fundamental change of China's international status. In this sense, while Deng Xiaoping's 'keeping a low profile' policy of the early 1990s was well-suited for the early phases of China's economic modernization, the elevated status of China as a leading economic power means 'China should take charge as a great, responsible power because continuing low-profile type policies will bring more harm than benefit to China'.⁵⁵ Yet, perhaps the most crucial implication of this growing acceptance of 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' among China's foreign policy officials and scholars is that it represents the irreversible process of Beijing's growing self-confidence on the world stage. The launch of the BRI, in this context, is the most obvious manifestation of China's self confidence in its system.

A confident China: the launch of the BRI under Xi Jinping

Along with his advocacy of the 'Chinese Dream' as discussed earlier, the BRI is arguably the most eye-catching initiative and visionary idea put forward by President Xi Jinping on the world stage. It was in September and October 2013, during his visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia respectively, that the new Chinese leader proposed the building of the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road.⁵⁶ Initially termed as One Belt One Road (OBOR), this vision of the Silk Road Economic Belt was aimed at connecting China and Europe, through countries across central Eurasia, while the 21st century Maritime Silk Road envisions China's connection with Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

Beijing's advocacy of the BRI, in the words of President Xi, was meant to foster a 'new type of international relations' featuring 'win-win cooperation' with Belt and Road countries. This foreign policy vision, according to the Chinese President, has nothing to do with 'outdated geopolitical maneuvering', since China has 'no intention

⁵⁴ "China says South China Sea land reclamation 'justified'," *BBC News* 10 September, 2014, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29139125> (accessed 15 September 2021); A. Karambelkar, *China's Militarisation of South China Sea* (Vivekananda International Foundation, 15 September, 2020), Available at <https://www.vifindia.org/2020/september/15/china-s-militarisation-of-south-china-sea> (accessed 15 September 2021).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," 7 September, 2013a, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml (accessed 16 September 2021).

to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others'.⁵⁷ Instead, what China hopes to achieve is, as suggested by the country's leadership, 'a new model of win-win cooperation' as the country is 'ready to share practices of development with other countries'.⁵⁸

Yet, it is important to note that this changing development strategy of China, with its focus on connectivity and infrastructure construction across Eurasia and Oceania, is logically connected with President Xi's notion of the 'Chinese Dream' and his emphasis on the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, as mentioned above. In important respects, the BRI is an unparalleled geographical and financial-scale project. With the BRI encompassing 4.4 billion people, at least 65 countries (most of them developing economies) and a combined economic output of \$21 trillion (29% of global GDP), Beijing is keen to promote development across the three continents - Asia, Europe and Africa - through the establishment of an infrastructure network including highways, railways, telecommunications, energy pipelines and ports.⁵⁹ As a result, this foreign policy vision can reasonably be understood as a long-standing and deeply held belief by President Xi that a rejuvenated Chinese nation, as Xi himself put it, is able to offer 'Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach as a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development'.⁶⁰

In this sense, Beijing's subtle promotion of its own brand of state capitalism is not entirely unanticipated because, as suggested by,⁶¹ it has long been one of China's major foreign policy goals: 'By portraying itself as an advocate for the developing world and emphasizing the rhetoric of South-South cooperation, China has arguably sought to offer itself up as an alternative model to Western dominance'.⁶² one of the most influential Western thinkers about Chinese politics, has described the Chinese leaders' mentality on the BRI:

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum," 15 May, 2017b, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/201705/t20170527_678618.html (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ S.K. Aryal, "India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (11 May 2021): 1–13.

⁶⁰ "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, 4 November, 2017, Available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm (accessed 16 September 2021); R. Foot and A. King, "China's world view in the Xi Jinping Era: Where do Japan, Russia and the USA fit?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no. 2 (May 2021): 210–27.

⁶¹ I. Taylor, *The International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

⁶² K. Brown, "Five Years On: The significance of the Belt and Road Initiative extends beyond roads and railways," *Beijing Review* (20 September 2018): 38, Available at http://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/201809/t20180917_800141589.html (accessed 16 September 2021).

China ... has usually been figured in ways which place it as a student, and the outside world—Europe, America and the developed world in particular—as its teachers. Now this situation has changed. No other country has lifted so many from poverty and built so much hard infrastructure in such a short period of time. It is now, therefore, the era of China the teacher, not China the student. The Belt and Road Initiative is one way that this is unfolding.

The rise of China as ‘the biggest player in the history of the world’, argued Graham Allison, in his 2017 book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, has heralded a new balance of power known as geo-economics: ‘the use of economic instruments (from trade and investment policy to sanctions, cyberattacks, and foreign aid) to achieve geopolitical goals’.⁶³ The conduction of Chinese foreign policy through economics, however, has raised the eyebrows and concerns in the United States.

An increasingly vigilant America: the gradual emergence of the Indo-Pacific strategy under Donald Trump

China’s growing assertiveness in its foreign policymaking and its geo-economic offensive via the BRI, from Washington’s perspective, has shaken the very foundation of the United States as a hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific in the past four decades.⁶⁴ By paying increasing attention to the growing challenge of China’s ambition, the Barack Obama administration put in place the policy of strategic rebalancing, by shifting the focus of US foreign policy from the Middle East, particularly its military counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the Asia Pacific.⁶⁵ The goal of Obama’s initiative, known as the ‘US pivot to Asia’ policy, is to prevent China from becoming the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶⁶ Yet, since President Obama stated that ‘the United States welcomes the rise of a China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in global affairs’,⁶⁷ it

⁶³ G. Allison, *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (London and Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2017).

⁶⁴ S.M. Walt, “China Wants a ‘Rules-Based International Order,’ Too,” *Foreign Policy*, 31 March, 2021, Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/> (accessed 16 September 2021).

⁶⁵ White House, “FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” Office of the Press Secretary, 16 November, 2015a, Available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific> (accessed 18 September 2021).

⁶⁶ H. Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy* 189, no. 1 (2011): 56–63; R.C. De Castro, “The Obama Administration’s Strategic Rebalancing to Asia: *Quo Vadis* in 2017?” *Pacific Focus* 33, no. 2 (August 2018): 179–208.

⁶⁷ S. Condon, “Obama: ‘We Welcome China’s Rise,’” *CBS News*, 20 January, 2011, Available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-we-welcome-chinas-rise/> (accessed 18 September 2021); White House, “Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People’s Republic of China in Joint Press Conference,” Office of the Press Secretary, 25 September, 2015b, Available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint> (accessed 18 September 2021).

seems fair to suggest that engagement with China was still considered as the strategic foreign policy pursued by the United States since President Richard Nixon.⁶⁸

It was not until the election victory of Donald Trump in 2016 that the principle of a 'qualified American welcome to the rise of China', the strategic foreign policy being implemented through eight presidencies and four decades,⁶⁹ underwent a significant change. On 18th December 2017, the Trump administration released its first National Security Strategy (NSS).⁷⁰ Along with highlighting the United States as being engaged in a global power struggle for economic and military dominance, the NSS, in particular, identifies China as an a strategic 'competitor' and 'revisionist' power trying to 'shape a world antithetical to US values and interests'.⁷¹

Of particular importance is the Trump administration's attempt to highlight the geopolitical dimension of the Indo-Pacific.⁷² By highlighting the danger of 'a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order' in the Indo-Pacific region, the NSS singled out 'Indo-Pacific', which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States, as a distinctive region for the advancement of US national interests.⁷³ This is in line with President Trump's advocacy of the 'Indo-Pacific dream' during the 2017 APEC leaders' summit in Vietnam and his administration's view that the US foreign and economic policy battleground with China lies in the 'Indo-Pacific region'.⁷⁴

The release of the NSS was soon followed by the issuance of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* by the US Department of Defense (DoD) in

⁶⁸ Ibid., 371–94.

⁶⁹ C. Gracie, "Collision course? Rise of China a stress for the US," *BBC News*, 26 September, 2015, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34368249> (accessed 18 September 2021).

⁷⁰ White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government of the United States of America, 2017). Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁷¹ D. Sevastopulo, "Trump labels China a strategic 'competitor'," *Financial Times*, 19 December, 2017, Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/215cf8fa-e3cb-11e7-8b99-0191e45377ec> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁷² White House, *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: Government of the United States of America, 2021), Available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ T. Doyle and D. Rumley, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); F. Heiduk and G. Wacker, "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges," *SWP Research Paper* Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 9, July 2020, Available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2020RP09_IndoPacific.pdf (accessed 18 September 2021).

January 2018 and June 2019 respectively.⁷⁵ With the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition with revisionist powers like China being identified in the NDS as the central challenge to US (economic) prosperity and (military) security,⁷⁶ the DoD documents highlighted the importance of strengthening US alliances and partners in the Indo-Pacific to a ‘networked security architecture’, since the Indo-Pacific would potentially become ‘the single most consequential region for America’s future’.⁷⁷

With the US Pacific Command being renamed as the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in May 2018,⁷⁸ a closer look at these fundamental documents issued by the White House and the Department of Defense, suggests that the US vision of ‘Indo-Pacific’ had become a ‘whole-of-government’ approach,⁷⁹ after the continuous use of the term in official US strategy papers since 2017.⁸⁰ The tactic used by the Trump administration, primarily as a response to China’s BRI,⁸¹ to use the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific, ‘is no mere wordplay’, as Professor⁸² points out:

‘It reflects something real: a changing approach by many nations to security, economics and diplomacy. Far from being an obscure account of words and maps, the narrative of the Indo-Pacific helps nations face one of the great international dilemmas of the 21st century: how can other countries respond to a strong and often coercive China without resorting to capitulation or conflict?’

In this sense, the fact that there is a growing recognition and acceptance of the idea of Indo-Pacific as what Professor Medcalf called ‘a changing approach’ instead

⁷⁵ US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington DC: the Department of Defense, 2018), Available at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed 18 September 2021); US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington DC: the Department of Defense, 1 June, 2019), Available at <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF> (accessed 18 September 2021).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ I. Ali, “In symbolic nod to India, U.S. Pacific Command changes name,” *Reuters* 31 May, 2018, Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-india-idUSKCN1IIV2Q2> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁷⁹ J. Garamone, “Trump Announces New Whole-of-Government National Security Strategy,” *DoD News* 18 December, 2017, Available at <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1399392/trump-announces-new-whole-of-government-national-security-strategy/> (accessed 18 September 2021).

⁸⁰ ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy: Implications for the Region,’ *The Daily Star*, 20 March, 2019, Available at <https://www.thedailystar.net/round-tables/news/indo-pacific-strategy-implications-the-region-1717426> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² R. Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2020).

of a mere wordplay is attributed to the multidimensional threat being posed by China to the rule-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region, which comprises of the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific Ocean, including the South China Sea. With China being perceived as a significant challenge for its Asian neighbours and the United States, a multinational collective response is deemed necessary and urgent. The most obvious manifestation of this multinational collective response is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which is also known as 'the Quad').

An increasingly vigilant America: the Quad's revival under Donald Trump

At its simplest, the Quad is a loose grouping of states comprising the United States, India, Japan and Australia, whose origin could be traced back to the Boxing Day tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004.⁸³ However, it was in May 2007, after a three-year hiatus, that this group of four nations held its inaugural meeting in Manila. The meeting was preceded by the first-ever trilateral exercises by the US, Japanese, and Indian navies in April the same year. This, somewhat interestingly, coincided with the visit of the-then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Japan.⁸⁴

It was against this backdrop that the-then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled a new vision of regional connectivity. In his address to the Parliament during his visit to India in August 2007, Abe suggested that a 'new "broader Asia" takes shape at the confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans'.⁸⁵ By proposing the idea of linking the Pacific with the Indian Ocean, Prime Minister Abe's advocacy of an 'arc of prosperity and freedom' helped provide an important foundation for the emergence of 'the Indo-Pacific region' as a new geopolitical concept to replace the 'Asia-Pacific'.⁸⁶ Since then, this new geopolitical concept has

⁸³ "Bush announces tsunami aid coalition," *CNN*, 29 December, 2004, Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/US/12/29/bush.quake/> (accessed 19 September 2021); M. Grossman, "The Tsunami Core Group: A Step toward a Transformed Diplomacy in Asia and Beyond," *Security Challenges* 1, no. 1 (2005): 11–14.

⁸⁴ R. Sharma, "Asia's New Strategic Baby: The Quadrilateral Forum," *DW News*, 15 June, 2007, Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/asias-new-strategic-baby-the-quadrilateral-forum/a-5212697> (accessed 21 September 2021).

⁸⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, "Confluence of the Two Seas," Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August, 2007, Available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (accessed 17 September 2021).

⁸⁶ G.S. Khurana, "What is the Indo-Pacific? The New Geopolitics of the Asia-Centred Rim Land," in *Geopolitics by Other Means: The Indo-Pacific Reality*, eds. A. Berkofsky and S. Miracola (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019), 13–32.

been employed and (somewhat) institutionalized across the official documents of the Quad countries.⁸⁷

Admittedly, Indo-Pacific is a term that denotes different things to different countries. Yet while there may be concern about ‘Whose “Indo Pacific”?’ does the concept refer to,⁸⁸ these diverging national perspectives have not stopped the Quad’s evolution from a loose grouping of states focusing on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, to one ‘with a strategic outlook centered on the rising concerns over free and open seas and a rules-based order’.⁸⁹ This is largely attributed to the Trump administration’s effort to revitalize the Quad through the resumption of a formal dialogue in late 2017.⁹⁰

As such, the Quad has, since, met twice a year and perhaps most importantly, the grouping has been upgraded to the level of foreign ministers among Australia, India, Japan and the US since 2019.⁹¹ The global COVID-19 pandemic, which erupted in Wuhan, China in December 2019, has driven the creation of Quad Plus, adding New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam as new Quad partners, for coordinating actions on COVID-19, repatriating citizens, and opening up trade and economic activity within the region.⁹²

The unifying elements among the Quad partnership are twofold:⁹³ first, the democratic set-up of the four countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Tokyo’s active effort to promote the democratic nature of the Quad, via Abe’s advocacy of Asia’s

⁸⁷ Department of Defence, Government of Australia, “2016 Defence White Paper,” 2016, Available at <https://www1.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2016-defence-white-paper> (accessed 21 September 2021); Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, “Towards a Free and Open Pacific,” November 2019, Available at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2021); E. Ranjana, “India Sets Up New Indo-Pacific Desk, Experts Laud ‘Strategic Move’,” *The Quint*, 15 April, 2019, Available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/india-sets-up-new-indo-pacific-desk-experts-laud-strategic-move> (accessed 22 September 2021).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 13–32; T.S. Wilkins, “Whose “Indo Pacific”?: competing visions of regional order,” *The Japan Institute of International Affairs Policy Brief*, 12 November, 2020, Available at <https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/news/policy-briefwhose-indo-pacific-competing-visions-of-regional-order.html> (accessed 21 September 2021).

⁸⁹ A. Jash, “The Quad Factor in the Indo-Pacific and the Role of India,” *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 04, no. 02 (Spring 2021): 78–85.

⁹⁰ D. Brunnstrom, “U.S. seeks meeting soon to revive Asia-Pacific ‘Quad’ security forum,” *Reuters* 28 October, 2017, Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asia-quad-idUSKBN1CW201> (accessed 18 September 2021).

⁹¹ “Minister-level Quad meet an elevation of Indo-Pacific dialogue, says US,” *Hindustan Times*, 28 September, 2019, Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/minister-level-quad-meet-an-elevation-of-indo-pacific-dialogue-says-us/story-JU7P3AT9Vmd6tUjiumZJCM.html> (accessed 19 September 2021).

⁹² I. Bagchi, “New alliances, grouping being created in response to Covid-19,” *The Times of India* 14 May, 2020, Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/new-alliances-grouping-being-created-in-response-to-covid-19/articleshow/75745739.cms> (accessed 20 September 2021).

⁹³ J. Mehra, “The Australia-India-Japan-US Quadrilateral: Dissecting the China Factor,” *ORF Occasional Paper No. 264* Observer Research Foundation, August, 2020.

democratic security diamond,⁹⁴ and Canberra's search for a values-based security and foreign policy,⁹⁵ in particular, have helped transform the Quad into 'an inharmonious concert of democracies'.⁹⁶

Another unifying element is the convergence of interests among these four countries in addressing China's seemingly inexorable rise and Beijing's assertiveness regionally and internationally.⁹⁷ Although the Quad is of course not acknowledged (even among the four Indo-Pacific democracies) as a formal anti-China alliance, it is hard to dispute the impact of the China factor on the (re)shaping of the quadrilateral grouping. The attendees at the second Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting held in October 2020 in Tokyo, for instance, vowed to take stronger action to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific⁹⁸ and tackle what the US called China's 'exploitation, corruption, and coercion' of smaller states in the region.⁹⁹ In this sense, China, amidst the birth of a revitalized Quad, can be considered as what¹⁰⁰ called 'the godfather of Quad 2.0'.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this revitalized Quad, or Quad 2.0, from Beijing's perspective, is nothing more than what the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman called 'an exclusive clique rallying countries to work against China'.¹⁰¹ This US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, in the words of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, is a 'big underlying security risk', whose objective is 'to trumpet the old-fashioned Cold War mentality [and] to stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition'.¹⁰² This, therefore, explains Beijing's outright

⁹⁴ S. Abe, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," *Project Syndicate* 27 December, 2012, Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzo-abe> (accessed 24 August 2021).

⁹⁵ B. Reilly, "The return of values in Australian foreign policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2020): 116–23, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693503>.

⁹⁶ B. Chellaney, "'Quad Initiative': an inharmonious concert of democracies," *The Japan Times* 19 July, 2007. Available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2007/07/19/commentary/quad-initiative-an-inharmonious-concert-of-democracies/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

⁹⁷ J.S. Sidhu and R.A. Rogers, "China's Strategic Ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region, India's Anxiety and the United States' Concerns," *Malaysian Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 1 (2015): 75–104.

⁹⁸ 'Top U.S. diplomat rallies Asian allies in face of 'aggressive' China,' *The Japan Times*, 14 December, 2021, Available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/12/14/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/antony-blinken-indonesia-speech/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

⁹⁹ "'Quad' nations vow to step up coordination for free and open Indo-Pacific," *The Japan Times*, 6 October, 2020, Available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/06/national/politics-diplomacy/quad-free-open-indo-pacific-china/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰⁰ R. Thakur, "China as the godfather of Quad 2.0," *The Strategist*, 20 July, 2020, Available at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-as-the-godfather-of-quad-2-0/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰¹ "Quad an exclusive 'clique', working against China: Foreign ministry," *Hindustan Times*, 12 May, 2021, Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/quad-an-exclusive-clique-working-against-china-for-foreign-ministry-101620821263120.html> (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: U.S. 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' Undermines Peace and Development Prospects in East Asia," 13 October, 2020, Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1824140.shtml (accessed 20 September 2021).

rejection of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept and refusal to use the term ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’,¹⁰³ since this conceptual shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, in Beijing’s eyes, represents an encirclement and containment strategy directed against China.¹⁰⁴

When a confident China meets a vigilant America: an irreversible confrontation

It has become clear that the growing acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept, in particular the US-led ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and the revitalization of the Quad since 2017, have been increasingly at odds with China’s BRI and Xi’s advocacy of ‘Asia-Pacific Century’. Beijing is not convinced by Washington’s claim that ‘the free and open Indo-Pacific Strategy is not just about China’,¹⁰⁵ as this strategy is, in the eyes of many Chinese observers, nothing more than ‘the most recent US response to China’s rise and to the consequential changes in the regional landscape’.¹⁰⁶ In this context, Beijing’s outright rejection of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept is evidenced in the continuous use of the ‘Asia-Pacific region’ by the Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons.¹⁰⁷

This growing sense of hostility between the United States and China, however, has to be situated in the specific context of the worsening strategic distrust between an increasingly confident China and an increasingly vigilant America. In important respects China’s strategic distrust of the United States is induced by four fundamental structural changes in the international system since 2008: Firstly, China’s strong sense of self-worth about its ascendance as the first-class global power; secondly, China’s assessment of America’s relative decline since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Thirdly, the emergence of an alliance between Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the five foremost emerging economies in the world known as the BRICS countries, and their willingness to challenge Western dominance and lastly, the growing acceptance of China’s development model as an alternative to Western democracy and free market economy for developing countries to learn from.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ ‘China for the first time acknowledges Indo-Pacific Initiative,’ *The Economic Times*, 23 November, 2021, Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-for-the-first-time-acknowledges-indo-pacific-initiative/articleshow/87874902.cms?from=mdr> (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰⁴ D. Chen, “*The Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Background Analysis* (Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) Commentary, 4 June 2018); M. Saeed, “From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-US Strategic Competition,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 3, no. 4 (2017): 499–512.

¹⁰⁵ US Department of State, “Briefing on the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” A.N. Wong, deputy assistant secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Washington DC, 2 April, 2018, Available at <https://my.usembassy.gov/deputy-assistant-secretary-for-east-asian-and-pacific-affairs-alex-n-wong-on-the-indo-pacific-strategy-040218/> (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰⁶ F. Liu, “The recalibration of Chinese assertiveness: China’s responses to the Indo-Pacific challenge,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 9–27.

¹⁰⁷ Xinhua, “U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy “hegemonic”: FM spokesperson,” 13 January, 2021b, Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/13/c_139664977.htm (accessed 20 September 2021).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

America's strategic distrust of China, on the other hand, is mainly driven by China's growing confidence in asserting itself on the world stage politically, economically and militarily. Politically speaking, this is evidenced in China's one party authoritarian political system and Beijing's rebuttal of Western style liberal democracy; Economically speaking, China's attempt to export (albeit indirectly) its path of economic development as an alternative development model for the developing countries is a reflection of Beijing's desire of implementing its system of self-confidence; Then, military speaking, China's military modernization and the aspirations for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) dominance in the region constitutes a potential challenge for American freedom of access and action in international waters.¹⁰⁹

The inevitable consequence of the growing mutual distrust between Washington and Beijing, is the intensification of US-China strategic competition. The BRI launched by an increasingly confident China and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' advocated by an increasingly vigilant America are on a collision course: China feels confident enough to redefine itself distinctively in ways that a Chinese model of development can be offered as an alternative to the rest of the world,¹¹⁰ while the US is feeling increasingly uneasy about China's growing assertiveness on the world stage and the potential challenge China poses to the ruled-based international order.¹¹¹ In this context, the nature of the clash between an increasingly confident China under Xi and an increasingly vigilant America since Trump is twofold. First, as 'China has gone through the stages of standing up and getting rich and is now advancing to the stage of becoming strong',¹¹² this suggests that China's success in narrowing the gap in power with the United States has resulted in what many Chinese scholars called 'structural contradictions' between a hegemon and a rising power.¹¹³ These 'structural contradictions' have resulted in fundamental changes in the style and substance of Chinese foreign policy making. The emergence of the wolf-warrior diplomacy, as mentioned earlier, is indicative of Beijing's unwillingness to avoid confrontation with Washington, and the launch of BRI is a reflection of Beijing's

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁰ S. Zhao, "The China Model: An Authoritarian State-Led Modernization," in *Handbook on China and Developing Countries*, C.P. Freeman (ed.), (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), 21–50.

¹¹¹ Al Jazeera, "Blinken slams 'aggressive' China; vows stronger Indo-Pacific ties," 14 December, 2021, Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/14/blinken-vows-stronger-defence-economic-alliances-in-indo-pacific> (accessed 22 September 2021); S. Zhao, "American Reflections on the Engagement with China and Responses to President Xi's New Model of Major Power Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 106 (2017): 489–503.

¹¹² X. Yan, "Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 4 (July/August, 2021): 40–48.

¹¹³ P. Yuan, "Contradictions and Strategic Anxieties in China-US Relations," *China-US Focus*, 9 October, 2011, Available at <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/strategic-reassurance-bidens-post-afghanistan-challenge-in-southeast-asia> (accessed 20 September 2021).

enthusiasm to lay out a distinctive path of economic development model (which is uniquely Chinese and different from the Western model) on the world stage.

Additionally, the growing strength of assertive nationalism in China cultivated a stronger sense of self-confidence.¹¹⁴ This has generated a deeper sense of hostility among its leaders and people, leading to the view that the United States is an inevitable enemy of China, since the country has been elevated to the status as a stronger and more influential power.¹¹⁵ Therefore, even though Beijing has vowed never to seek hegemony,¹¹⁶ the interplay between China's BRI and US-led 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' does reflect a strategic competition over international leadership and prestige. China's quest for greater international prestige, from Beijing's perspective, is totally justifiable and desirable because, in the words of Professor,¹¹⁷ 'China believes that its rise to great-power status entitles it to a new role in world affairs—one that cannot be reconciled with unquestioned U.S. dominance'.

Conclusion

By carrying out a comparative-historical analysis of China's BRI and the US-led 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy', a principal issue and a recurring theme has become apparent: the fundamental shift of China's foreign policy from 'keeping a low profile' under Deng Xiaoping to 'striving for achievement' under President Xi Jinping.¹¹⁸ This triggered an inevitable decline of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy under President Hu Jintao, and the emergence of the assertive nationalism characteristic of wolf-warrior diplomacy.

There are three important conclusions to draw from this comparative-historical analysis. The first is that the launch of the BRI, along with President Xi's advocacy of 'Asia-Pacific Century' is not a reflection of China's commitment to benefit people across the world by achieving economic integration and interconnected development. Instead, China's BRI can be seen as a reflection of Beijing's growing sense of confidence in projecting China's path of economic development as an alternative development model on the world stage.

¹¹⁴ S. Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: the strident turn," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22 no. 82 (July 2013): 535–53.

¹¹⁵ B. Wong, "Chinese People Think China Is Popular Overseas. Americans Disagree," *The Diplomat*, 4 November, 2021, Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/chinese-people-think-china-is-popular-overseas-americans-disagree/> (accessed 22 September 2021).

¹¹⁶ Xinhua, "China will never seek hegemony, expansion, sphere of influence: Xi," 20 April, 2021a, Available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c_139892934.htm (accessed 22 September 2021).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–48.

¹¹⁸ X. Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 153–84.

The second conclusion is that China's desperate desire for 'striving for achievement' under President Xi Jinping and cultivating a 'New Model of Major Power Relations' with the United States,¹¹⁹ is primarily driven by the growing influence of assertive nationalism characteristic of wolf-warrior diplomacy. Instead of aiming at making China a strong but humble (and peace-loving) country, China's foreign policy under Xi, is revealed in Beijing's increasing willingness to defend China's self-proclaimed core (national) interests in a confrontational manner.

The third conclusion to draw is that the divergent 'worldviews' expressed by the American and Chinese leaders, represent a divergence (and eventually a clash) of fundamental strategic interests between Beijing and Washington. On the one hand, China no longer wants to be integrated into the US-led international order and the US, on the other, no longer sees integrating China as possible or desirable. In this context, Beijing's leaders tend to see wolf-warrior diplomacy as more useful, perhaps even necessary, to advance China's self-proclaimed core national interests and counter foreign interference. Arguably, an increasingly confident Chinese leadership is convinced that the advocacy of 'peaceful rise/ peaceful development' by promoting China's rise as 'peaceful' and 'non-threatening' in nature, would no longer be necessary for positioning China on the world stage. The US, on the other hand, appears to be increasingly convinced that working with its partners and allies to advance a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific region through a revitalized Quad, is crucial for its success in counterbalancing China's quest for greater prestige and co-equality as a great power.

With this in consideration, the inevitable clash between China's BRI and the US-led 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' will remain a key characteristic of the long-term strategic competition between Washington and Beijing: An increasingly confident Chinese leadership no longer feels the need for reassuring the world about the peaceful and non-threatening nature of China's 'rise'. Therefore, the tension between the United States and China, as a result of the fundamental clash of strategic interests between the two sides, is likely to persist in the coming decades. This indicates not only the dramatic shift of the three-decade foreign policy of 'keeping a low profile' in Deng Xiaoping's China, but also the demise and burial of China's 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy under Hu Jintao.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

¹¹⁹J.Y.S. Cheng, "Xi Jinping's "New Model of Major Power Relationships" for Sino-American Relations," *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 15, no. 2 (2016): 226–254; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi Talks about the Essence of Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics: To Promote More Countries' Understanding and Recognition of Socialism Path with Chinese Characteristics," 19 October, 2017a. Available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1503756.shtml (accessed 17 September 2021).