CASE STUDY

The rise and fall of China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’: Implications for US-China geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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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’ (BBC News, 2021). 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’ (Dyer, 2021). This, according to some observers (Dyer, 2021), 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’ during his attendance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Peru in November 2016 (Global Times, 2016).

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 (US Mission to ASEAAN, 2017). 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’ (US Mission to ASEAAN, 2017).

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) through the advancement of its ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy’ (US Department of State, 2019), from Beijing’s perspective, has exacerbated the mutual suspicions, or what is known as ‘strategic distrust’, between the two major powers (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2019).

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, the emerging prominence of assertive nationalism in China’s foreign policy (Whiting, 1983) 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 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 (Majedec, 2021), 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 (Zhu, 2020). 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 (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012). The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the clash.

1 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.

2 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.

3 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/antonio-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). Dingding Chen, ‘The Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Background Analysis’, Instituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale (ISPI) Commentary, 4 June 2018.

4 ‘Peaceful rise/peaceful development’ is a new concept being introduced in 2003 by Zheng 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 Zheng, 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.
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 (Cui, 2012; Global Times, 2021). As a result of an average 10% annual GDP growth that China has experienced between 1978 and 2018 (Yao, 2020) 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 (World Bank, 2021). 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’ (Mearsheimer, 2014).

China’s forty years of reform and development have attracted worldwide attention. Yet China’s seemingly inexcusable rise has prompted some Internal Relations scholars such as John Mearsheimer, the leading proponent of offensive realism (Myšička, 2021), 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’ (Mearsheimer, 2014). As such, the rise of China, as Professor Mearsheimer (2014) 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 Zheng Bijian (2003), 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, Zheng (2005) 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 Zheng (2005), 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’\(^\text{3}\) employed by the United States (Shambaugh, 2013). 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 war - using violence to pillage resources and seek world hegemony’ (Okuda, 2016, p. 125). 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’ (Guo & Blanchard, 2008). 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’ (Hu, 2005). 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’ (Hu, 2005). 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 (China Internet Information Center, 2005).

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, President Xi (2017) 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’ (BBC News, 2017; Xi, 2017).

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’ (China Daily, 2014). 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’ (Ferdinand, 2016).

This great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, accordingly, can

\(^3\) 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 inevitably 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.
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.’ (Xinhua, 2017a). This notion of the ‘Chinese Dream’, however, can only be implemented through the path of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (Xinhua, 2017b), 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’ (Sørensen, 2015).

Along with his notion of the ‘Chinese Dream’, the other cornerstone of Xi’s thinking is his advocacy of ‘four confidences’ (China Internet Information Center, 2016). 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 (China Daily, 2018). These were later officially referred to as the ‘four matters of confidence’, and are added to the Party Constitution in 2017:

“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 (China Internet Information Center, 2016).

Perhaps most fundamentally, Beijing’s growing self-confidence has emboldened China to act more assertively in its foreign policymaking (Johnston, 2013). 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 Dream’ has been defined as ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (China’s Peaceful Development, 2006). While China has been following this ‘wolf-warrior diplomacy’ strategy for decades, the push to a more assertive direction, known as ‘wolf-warrior diplomacy’ (Zhu, 2020). Named after two domestic blockbuster movies Wolf Warrior (2015) and Wolf Warrior II (2017) (Zhang, 2017), this new approach is a fundamental transformation of Chinese diplomacy ‘from conservative, passive, and low-key, to assertive, proactive, and high-profile’ (Zhu, 2020). 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 (The State Council of The People’s Republic of China, 2011).

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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021), have pursued increasingly assertive tactics to shape how China is perceived online, through hitting back at criticism from Western powers over China’s handling of the Covid-19 outbreak via Twitter (Brandt & Schafer, 2020). 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 (Lee, 2015). The construction of ports, military installations, and airstrips in the Paracel 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 (BBC News, 2014; Karambelkar, 2020).

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’ (Shambaugh, 2013). 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.

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6 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.
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 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2013a). 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 to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017b). 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’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017b).

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 (Aryal, 2021). 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’ (China Daily, 2017; Foot & King, 2021).

In this sense, Beijing’s subtle promotion of its own brand of state capitalism is not entirely unanticipated because, as suggested by Ian Taylor (2011), 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’. Kerry Brown (2018), one of the most influential Western thinkers about Chinese politics, has described the Chinese leaders’ mentality on the BRI:

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’ (Allison, 2017). 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 (Walt, 2021). 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 (White House, 2015a). 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 (Clinton, 2011; De Castro, 2018). 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’ (Condon, 2011; White House, 2015b), it 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 (Zhao, 2019).

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 (Gracie, 2015), underwent a significant change. On 18th December 2017, the Trump administration released its first National Security Strategy (NSS) (White House, 2017). 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’ (Sevastopulo, 2017).

Of particular importance is the Trump administration’s attempt to highlight the geopolitical dimension of the Indo-Pacific (White House, 2021). 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 (Sevastopulo, 2017). 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’ (Doyle & Rumley, 2019; Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

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 January 2018 and June 2019 respectively (US Department of Defense, 2018; US Department of Defense, 2019). 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 (US Department of Defense, 2018), 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’ (US Department of Defense, 2019).

With the US Pacific Command being renamed as the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in May 2018 (Ali, 2018), 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 (Garamone, 2017), after the continuous use of the term in official US strategy papers since 2017 (The Daily Star, 2019). The tactic used by the Trump administration, primarily as a response to China’s BRI (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020), to use the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific, ‘is no mere wordplay’, as Professor Rory Medcalf (2020) 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 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 (CNN, 2004; Grossman, 2005). 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 (Sharma, 2007).

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’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2007). 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’ (Khurana, 2019). Since then, this new geopolitical concept has been employed and (somewhat) institutionalized across the official documents of the Quad countries (Department of Defence, Government of Australia, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 2019; Ranjana, 2019).

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 (Khurana, 2019; Wilkins, 2020), 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’
(Jash, 2021). This is largely attributed to the Trump administration’s effort to revitalize the Quad through the resumption of a formal dialogue in late 2017 (Brunstrom, 2017).

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 (Hindustan Times, 2019). 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 (Bagchi, 2020).

The unifying elements among the Quad partnership are twofold (Mehra, 2020): 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 democratic security diamond (Abe, 2012), and Canberra’s search for a values-based security and foreign policy, (Reilly, 2020), in particular, have helped transform the Quad into ‘an inharmonious concert of democracies’ (Chellaney, 2007).

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 (Sidhu & Rogers, 2015). 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-Pacific (The Japan Times, 2020) and tackle what the US called China’s ‘exploitation, corruption, and coercion’ of smaller states in the region (The Japan Times, 2021). In this sense, China, amidst the birth of a revitalized Quad, can be considered as what Ramesh Thakur (2020) 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’ (Hindustan Times, 2021). 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’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). This, therefore, explains Beijing’s outright rejection of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept and refusal to use the term ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (The Economic Times, 2021), 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 (Chen, 2018; Saeed, 2017).

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’ (US Department of State, 2018), 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’ (Liu, 2020). 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 (Xinhua, 2021b).

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 (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012).

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 (Lieberthal & Wang, 2012).

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 (Zhao, 2015), while the US is feeling increasingly uneasy about China’s growing assertiveness on the world stage and the potential challenge China poses to the rule-based international order (Al Jazeera, 2021; Zhao, 2017). 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’ (Yan, 2021), 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 (Yuan, 2011). 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 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 (Zhao, 2013). 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 (Al Jazeera, 2021). Therefore, even though Beijing has vowed never to seek hegemony (Xinhua, 2021a), 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 Yan Xuetong (2021), ‘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 (Yan, 2014). 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.

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 (Cheng, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017a), 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 long 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.
Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future.


FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific.

Trump labels China a strategic competitor.

China as the godfather of Quad 2.0.

China Goes Global: The Partial Power.

China’s Strategic Ambitions in the Indian Ocean

China Overview: Development news, research, data.

Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit

Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared

From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S.

One Belt, One Road: A New Roadmap for a Sinocentric World?

“Quad” nations vow to step up coordination for free and open Indo-Pacific.

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