

CHINA'S VIEW AND COUNTER-STRATEGIES TOWARD THE INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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Abstract

How does China view the Indo-Pacific construct, and how would China respond to the challenges imposed by the Indo-Pacific construct? This paper uses information from Chinese government documents and recent academic studies on the Indo-Pacific construct to answer this question. It finds that Chinese scholars define Indo-Pacific as an "alliance network" aiming to contain China's increasing influence in the region. The alliance network consists of multiple minilateral quasi-security alliances centered on the US leadership to contain China; however, it is also less robust than a formal alliance such as NATO. The weak links in the alliance network, such as the US-ASEAN relations, allow China to wedge against the Indo-China strategy. Because of such structure opportunities for wedging, China will use soft balancing strategies to wedge and weaken the Indo-Pacific construct. Hard balancing remains a possible option for China when China perceives the security threats from the Indo-Pacific escalate to a dangerous level. For a successful soft balancing, China needs to continue providing public goods, such as investment, trade, and regional stability to the region, particularly to nations that are less interested in helping the US contain China. Thus, its state-led economic programs, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, play critical roles in China's wedging against the Indo-Pacific construct.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Indo-Pacific, NATO, USA

Introduction

The U.S. 2018 National Defense Strategy describes China as "leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries" and calls for the alliance of "like-minded China-concerned nations" around the concept of Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) (Scott, 2018). Interestingly, China has not clearly defined a counter-strategy to the IPS by 2021, and Chinese diplomats have deliberated avoided using the term "Indo-Pacific" in their official documents and public speeches. China's vague attitudes toward the IPS create confusion and uncertainty among foreign leaders and observers. Such confusion and uncertainty could lead to strategic misunderstandings and unnecessary tensions in the region.

Many studies have tried to clarify China's attitudes and counter-strategies toward the IPS. However, analyses based on specific policies or case studies suffer the issue of biased data collection. Studies using public or expert opinions in China to infer its foreign strategies face the issue of causal plausibility. This research develops a method of building a comprehensive database on Chinese expert studies of the IPS published between 2010 and 2021. Then it categorizes the opinions observed in this database into three groups depending on whether they see the IPS as a high, intermediate, or non threat to China. Then, this paper generates three hypotheses of China's optimal counter-strategies under different levels of perceived threats from the IPS. This research uses two case studies—China's response to Japan and India in the IPS—to test these hypotheses.

The finding shows that China tends to view the IPS under the concept of "Networks of Alliances (NoA in short)," which refers to a network of bilateral or minilateral geopolitical and security cooperation organized around some loosely shared strategic goals. NoA is less institutionalized than a formal alliance like NATO, and the strength of the ties within the network varies. The characteristics of an NoA allow the target state to use soft strategies, such as soft balancing, hedging, and institutional balancing, to offset the threats imposed by the NoA. This paper finds that China has mostly used soft balancing and hedging in response to India and Japan in the IPS case. It finds little evidence that China aims to use hard balancing or external balancing against these two nations at least by the end of 2021, as hard balancing or external balancing can further strengthen the security ties within the IPS.

The Evolution of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) emerged in 2010.⁶⁶ In an interview with the Foreign Policy Magazine in 2011, Hillary Clinton explained why the Asia-Pacific concept in U.S. strategy has evolved into an "Indo-Pacific" concept:

"Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian—that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy. ...At a time when the region is building more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, U.S. commitment there is essential."⁶⁷

The Trump administration significantly developed the strategic and security component in the IPS and clarified that through the IPS, the U.S. aims to contain and balance against the increasing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. The 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States used a chapter to discuss the significance of the IPS. It claimed that "a geopolitical competition between the free and repressive vision of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region," and "China seeks to displace the United States...but the United States must marshal the will and capabilities to compete and prevent unfavorable shifts in the Indo-Pacific."⁶⁸ The U.S. aims to achieve such goals by 1) forward deployment of the U.S. military forces; 2) strengthening bilateral and minilateral strategic and security cooperation with traditional allies such as Japan and Australia; and 3) constructing security cooperation

⁶⁶ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Engagement in the Asia-Pacific" (U.S. Department of State, October 28, 2010), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/150141.htm>.

⁶⁷ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century" (The U.S. Department of State, October 11, 2011), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/10/175215.htm>.

⁶⁸ The U.S., "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (The White House, December 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. P. 45.

with other "like-minded China-concerned" regional powers such as Vietnam, Singapore, and India.⁶⁹

While Trump's administration significantly advanced security cooperation under the IPS, the economic aspects lagged. In July 2018, Pompeo announced that the U.S. would invest \$113 million to "expand economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific;" however, scholars notice that the amount the U.S. spent was tiny compared to China's investments in the Indo-Pacific region (Scott, 2018). The Biden administration has taken some actions to strengthen the economic component in the U.S. IPS. In September 2021, the leaders of the Quad Security Dialogue (India, Japan, Australia, and the United States) held the first in-person summit in Washington DC. In this summit, Quad leaders discussed non-security cooperation such as COVID management, climate change in the region, education, people-to-people exchange, and space technology cooperation.⁷⁰ Specifically, the Quad summit also agreed to establish joint working groups in infrastructure construction and Information and Computer Technology (ICT) development (including 5G network construction, launching a Quad Technical Standard Contacting Group and a Quad Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative) to offset China's advantages in the Indo-Pacific region.⁷¹

The Methodology of Studying China's Attitudes toward the IPS

While the U.S. IPS has clearly targeted to contain China, Beijing has not responded in a clearly defined counter-strategy. The absence of the Indo-Pacific concept in China's official documents brings some challenges to outside observers, and it requires scholars to develop a methodology that clearly defines China's views on the IPS.

Scholars notice that Beijing has deliberately ignored the term "Indo-Pacific" in its strategic documents and continued to use "Asia-Pacific" to refer to the region (He & Li, 2020). For example, China released the "White Paper of National Defence in the New Era" in 2019. This White Paper uses a section to discuss the increasing tension in the Asia-Pacific Region and condemn the U.S. for "increasing its military presence in the region [...and] creating a strategic imbalance in the Asia Pacific region."⁷² However, the White Paper did not mention the term "Indo-Pacific" throughout the document. When foreign reporters specifically invite the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to comment on the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the MOFA spokesperson always deliberately evades the "Indo-Pacific" term and instead uses "Asia-Pacific" in their responses.⁷³ The MOFA spokesperson have been instructed never to use the term "Indo-Pacific" in their speeches. Such deliberate evasion of the Indo-Pacific concept in Chinese official speeches and documents shows

⁶⁹ The U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁷⁰ The White House, "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit," September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>.

⁷¹ The White House.

⁷² State Council of China, "Xinshidai de Zhongguo Guofang [The White Paper on China's National Defence in the New Era]," July 2019, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm.

⁷³ For example, see Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "2017 Nian 11yue 13ri Waijiaobu Fayaren Genshuang Zhuchi Lixing jizhehui [The 2017-11-13 Daily Media Briefing Hosted by MOFA Spokesman GenShuang]," November 13, 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/t1510045.shtml; and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "2021 Nian 9yue 17ri Waijiaobu Fayaren Zhao Lijian Zhuchi Lixing Jizhehui [The 2021-9-17 Daily Media Briefing Hosted by MOFA Spokesman Zhao Lijian]" (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 17, 2021), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/zcjd/t1907872.shtml.

cautious and alarming attitudes towards the IPS. However, the lack of discussion on IPS in China's official statements and policy documents also causes confusion. Scholars and foreign leaders face high levels of uncertainty, and they often lack the information to predict China's policy responses toward the IPS accurately.

Some recent publications on China's foreign policymaking suggest that we can use the attitudes observed in Chinese academic studies (specifically articles published in top Chinese International Relation and Political Science journals) to study China's views on certain international relation concepts or policymaking issues (Feng & He, 2019). For example, Liu and Liu (2017) review how Chinese scholars debate whether China should form security alliances. Han and Papa (2020) apply automatic content analysis to Chinese alliance studies and find that Chinese understandings of international alliances have developed to include new elements such as economic partnership and informal channels of communication. By observing opinions in Chinese academic publications, these studies clarify China's understanding of international alliances and shed some light on China's contemporary foreign policies.

This paper also uses opinions observed in Chinese academic studies to explore how China views the IPS. However, selectively reviews of Chinese academic studies may suffer the issue of biased data collection. Some studies also question to what extent do academic opinions matter in China's foreign policymaking. Critiques also raise the question of causal directions. Such critiques suggest that since the state has monopolized foreign policymaking power in China, academic opinions often do not influence state decision-making. Instead, when the state launches a new foreign policy, the academic community mobilizes its members to produce research supporting the state agenda. In response to these criticisms, this research makes two points to improve the method.

This paper develops a method of constructing a large-N database of Chinese academic studies on IPS. Using "*Yintai*" (the Chinese translation for "Indo-Pacific") as the keyword, I searched articles published in the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database⁷⁴ between 2010 and 2021. As a result, I collected 342 Chinese studies on IPS published in the eleven years. Then I skim through the summaries of the articles and categorize them into three groups depending on how they perceive the level of threats imposed by the IPS. The first group sees the IPS as a serious security threat to China; the second group suggests the IPS only has limited security threats to China; the third group argues that the IPS is a toothless coalition doomed to fail. Through this data collection and categorization, this research provides a comprehensive image of China's views on the IPS and mitigates the issue of selective bias in the data.

Furthermore, this research treats the attitudes observed in these three groups as competing hypotheses and uses China's foreign policy behaviors to test them. Thus, this paper does not claim that the observed expert opinions affect China's policies. Instead, it uses China's policy behavior to test which expert opinions best explain foreign policy outcomes. This paper uses how China's relations with Japan and India are affected by their participation in the IPS.

⁷⁴ The CNKI database is the largest online Chinese digital library system. For the details about the CNKI database, see <https://global.cnki.net/index/>.

Chinese Views on the IPS

The first group of Chinese experts sees the IPS as a robust security alliance and argues that the IPS imposes serious security threats to China. Since the publication of the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy, many Chinese studies have noticed that the U.S. has tried to institutionalize the IPS and build a "NATO in Asia."⁷⁵ This view emphasizes the deepening security cooperation under the IPS and highlights its threats to China. For example, Lin Minwang (2021), a leading scholar in China's India studies, suggests that:

"India sends navy officers to the U.S. Navy Forces Central Command headquarter in Bahrain, while the U.S. sends a navy officer to India's Information Fusion Center in Gurugram, New Delhi. The Quad has enhanced its maritime information sharing and intelligence collection through formal agreements such as the White Shipping Information Exchange Agreement and the U.S.-India Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation. They have also established the mechanisms of sharing logistic supply facilities in U.S. military bases in the India Ocean."

Specifically, this group of studies highlights three recent trends in the development of IPS. The first trend is the institutionalization of multilateral mechanisms in the IPS. Cao Xiaoyang suggests that the Biden administration has emphasized multilateralism and institutionalization in their IPS practice and encouraged its allies to play a more active role.⁷⁶ The second trend is that the IPS has strengthened its economic and non-traditional security cooperation to offset China's regional economic strategy. Under the Biden administration, the U.S. has developed new economic programs such as the Blue Dot Networks, the High-Standard Infrastructure Coordination Group, and the Quad Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative to offset China's economic leadership in the region (Mao & Dai, 2021). Thirdly, studies also stress how the U.S. is promoting a shared "democracy identity." For a long time, scholars have pointed out the lack of shared identity among U.S. allies in Asia explains why there is no NATO in Asia (Hammer & Katzenstein, 2002). The lack of shared identity in Asia may change under the IPS. Chinese studies suggest the U.S. has used shared democracy identity to consolidate the U.S.-led alliance system in the Indo-Pacific (Wang, 2021).

This view perceives that the IPS poses a high threat level to China; thus, China and Asian nations will have fewer strategic space to hedge against uncertainties. However, it also understands that China cannot engage with the U.S. in a full-scale hard balancing game. These studies often suggest limited hard balancing, robust internal balancing, and potential external balancing (particularly by strengthening the strategic partnership with Russia) in response to the IPS strategy. Some limited hard balancing can help China defend its national core interests; however, China and the U.S. need effective communication channels to ensure the hard balancing game would not escalate into a military conflict (Qu, 2015). Meanwhile, many studies emphasize that China should focus on its domestic economic and technology development. Such domestic development provides a solid foundation for internal balancing

⁷⁵ For example, see Shengli Lin, "Meiguo Zai Yataidiqu Gao 'Xiaoquanzi' Buderenxin Zhuding Shibai [The U.S. Efforts of Building a 'Small Circle' in Asia Is Doomed to Fail.]," *The PLA Daily*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.huaxia.com/c/2021/10/21/833615.shtml>; Xiaoyang Cao, "Meiguo de 'Yintai Zhanlue' de Xinjinzhan Jiqi Dui Zhongguo de Tiaozhan [The New Progress of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Challenges to China]," *Journal of North East Asia Studies*, no. 58 (September 2021): 106–21.

⁷⁶ Cao, "Meiguo de 'Yintai Zhanlue' de Xinjinzhan Jiqi Dui Zhongguo de Tiaozhan [The New Progress of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Challenges to China]," P. 117.

against the IPS.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, some studies argue that if the IPS expands, it will eventually threaten Russia's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, China can consolidate its comprehensive cooperative relations with Russia to balance against the IPS (Li, 2019). China thus can co-develop a Eurasia continental strategy with Russia (Andre, 2021).

In short, we draw hypothesis 1:

If China views the IPS as a robust security alliance balancing against China, it should adopt limited hard balancing, internal balancing, and potential external balancing against the nations participating in the IPS.

The second view agrees that the IPS imposes security threats to China, but it does not see the IPS as a "NATO in Asia." Instead, this view often defines the IPS under the "networks of alliances" concept. It highlights the weaknesses in the IPS and argues that China can use soft balancing, strategic hedging, and wedging strategy to weaken the IPS.

The NoA concept develops the U.S.-centered hub-and-spokes system in Asia. Table 1 summarizes how Chinese scholars distinguish the concept with a multilateral alliance (such as NATO) and the hub-and-spokes system in post-WWII Asia. According to this view, the power of the leading hegemon in an NoA system is weaker than its power in the other two concepts;⁷⁸ however, the members of the NoA system are still tied together under some shared security interests. In the IPS case, the shared interest is to check and balance against a rising China. The declining power of the "center" means the hegemon's control over some bilateral relations in the NoA system is also weakened.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, small and middle powers in the NoA system also have more space and incentives to pursue self-interested foreign policies.⁸⁰ Thus, small and middle powers in the NoA system often proactively take the leadership to reshape the NoA system. For example, Japan, India, and ASEAN have announced their own versions of the IPS; Japan also led the construction of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Koga, 2021). Such proactive foreign policies also mean small and middle powers in the NoA system can build and strengthen connections between them—Chinese scholars define such relations as "horizontal ties" and suggest such horizontal ties are often missing or weak in the hub-and-spokes system (Cao & Shi, 2021).

Because of these attributes, the NoA structure is flexible and contains complicated internal dynamics. The future of the IPS contains uncertainty. It may evolve into a robust security alliance; however, it also has many weaknesses and is vulnerable to soft counter-strategies such as wedging, strategic hedging, and soft balancing. Applying the concept of NoA to the IPS analysis, Chinese scholars highlight several weaknesses in the IPS. First of all, members of the IPS have different interests and often want to pursue different policy goals (Choong, 2019). Because China is providing important public goods to the region, some IPS members are concerned that antagonizing China will incur high costs to the region (Liu & Guo, 2021). Small nations in the IPS are also concerned about the risks of entrapment and abandonment

⁷⁷ Cao, "Meiguo de 'Yintai Zhanlue' de Xinjinzhan Jiqi Dui Zhongguo de Tiaozhan [The New Progress of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Challenges to China]." P. 117.

⁷⁸ For example, see Qu, "Zhongguo Jueqi Beijing Xia 'Rimeiaoyin Minzhu Tongmeng' de Goujian [The Construction of a 'Japan-US-Australia-India Alliance of Democracy' in the Context of China's Rise]." Pp. 138-141.

⁷⁹ For example, see Liu Yuchen, "Meiguo Yintai Lianmeng de Wangluohua: Jiegou-Guanxi de Shijiao [The Networking of U.S. Indo-Pacific Alliance: A Structural-Relational Perspective]," *Forum of World Economics and Politics* 2021, no. 4 (2021): 61-92. Pp. 67-68.

⁸⁰ See Seng Tan, "Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 131-48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz227>.

when they join an alliance (Snyder, 2007). For these reasons, their commitment to the political agenda of the leading hegemon can be questionable in some cases. Second, some regional powers are less incorporated in the IPS. ASEAN has expressed its concerns towards the IPS and deliberately emphasized the "inclusiveness" idea in the ASEAN version of Indo-Pacific.⁸¹ Current IPS also overlooks Russia. Some Chinese studies point out that if the IPS continues to expand, it will eventually threaten Russian interests in the region.⁸² African nations in the Indian Ocean region are also excluded from the IPS (Zhao, 2021). Third, many Chinese studies note that the U.S.-led IPS is weak in terms of economic opportunities for the region.⁸³ The Biden administration has built some new projects (such as the Blue Dot Networks and the Quad Semiconductor Supply Chain Initiative) to address this weakness; however, these new projects still need time to develop.

In terms of counter-strategies, the NoA view downplays the significance of internal balancing and external hard balancing; instead, it emphasizes that China should use soft balancing, strategic hedging, and wedging to compete with the IPS. As part of the hedging and wedging strategy, China should also soften some of its assertive foreign policies and reassure the region (Liu, 2020). Cao Pengpeng and Shi Bin summarize China's counter-IPS strategies as:

"China should continue with its 'partnership, no alliance' principle...It needs to reassure the Indo-Pacific region nations and address their concerns and uncertainty associated with China's Rise... China can build an economic cooperation mechanism with India, Japan, and Australia to wedge the Quad alliance. China also needs to deepen its economic integration with ASEAN and strengthen the China-ASEAN strategic partnership, since ASEAN refuses to choose a side and has fewer incentives to balance against China."⁸⁴

In short, the discussion on the NoA concept leads to hypothesis 2:

If China views the IPS as a Network of Alliances, it tends to use soft balancing, strategic hedging, and wedging to undermine the IPS.

The third view argues that the IPS is inherently flawed and doomed to fail. Hu Bo, the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative director, argues that the IPS is an "imperial overstretch" for the U.S. (Hu, 2020). The IPS tries to coordinate countries' foreign policies in a wide geographic area and with significant differences in domestic institutions, culture, religion, and levels of development. Hu Bo suggests that such a complicated project is not feasible when the U.S. power and influence are declining in the region. Many Chinese studies also point out that practices in the IPS are incompatible with local norms, such as the norms expressed in the ASEAN Way (Wei, 2020). Liu Ming from Shanghai Social Academy points out the U.S.-led infrastructure development projects under the IPS cannot compete with China's BRI because powerful private sectors in the U.S. economy are less interested in such projects. (China's state-led capitalism can mobilize more resources for such infrastructure construction in developing countries) (Liu, 2020).

⁸¹ Tan, "Consigned to Hedge."

⁸² Andre, "'Yintai Zhanlye' Yihuo 'Rennei Mingyun Gongtongti' [Indo-Pacific Strategy or Community With a Shared Future for Mankind]."

⁸³ Cao and Shi, "'Yintai' Shiyu xia 'Siguoji' de Tongmenghua jiqi Xiandu [Quad under the IPS: Alliance Making and its Limits]"; Scott, "The Indo-Pacific in U.S. Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts."

⁸⁴ Cao and Shi, "'Yintai' Shiyu xia 'Siguoji' de Tongmenghua jiqi Xiandu [Quad under the IPS: Alliance Making and its Limits]."

	Multilateral alliance	Hub-and-Spokes system	Networks of alliances
Example	NATO	The Hub-and-Spokes System in post-WWII East Asia	The IPS
The Power of the leading hegemon	Strong, and can have multiple stronger leaders	One powerful leader state	A leader state, powerful but in decline
The levels of institutionalization	Formal and legalized treaties	Multiple bilateral treaties, but lacks institutionalization at the multilateral level	Multiple overlapping bilateral and multilateral agreements (often less formalized)
The influence from the leader state to followers	Strong	Strong	Varies, leader's influence over some followers may be weak
The influence from followers to the leader state	Weak	Weak	Followers can play more active roles to shape the outcomes
Connections between follower states	Defined under the multilateral alliance treaty	Weak	Vary. Some follower states can develop their own cooperation networks
Shared indemnity and norms	Strong, security community	Weak	Weak but under construction
Issues of cooperation	Security	Security	Expanding agenda, covers a wide range of cooperation

Table 1: The conceptual differences between alliance, NoA, and the Hub-and-Spokes system

Since this view predicts the IPS has a gloomy future, it suggests China's counter-strategies should focus on what it has done right. It stresses that China should maintain its "strategic focus."⁸⁵ In Chinese, the concept of "strategic focus" (*Zhanlue Dingli*) refers to the political confidence and persistence in successful strategies that serve long-term national strategic goals. In Chinese political discourses, it means the confidence and persistence over China's fundamental political institutions, its successful economic development model, and important foreign policies that emerged under Xi's leadership (especially the BRI) (Gong, 2017). Many studies in this group stress that with the progress of the BRI, the U.S. IPS will fail. For example, Zhao Minhao writes:

"Facing the pressure from the U.S., China needs to maintain its strategic focus. On the one hand, it should bring co-development to the region through progress in the BRI...On the other hand, when nations face the challenges caused by the pandemic and economic recessions, the significance of the BRI will increase. U.S. hostilities against China and the BRI will be unpopular in the region."⁸⁶

In short, hypothesis 3 suggests:

If China believes the IPS is inherently incompetent and will fail, China should disengage with the IPS policies and continue to strengthen its successful policy initiatives such as the BRI.

Japan and its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy"

This paper uses two empirical cases to test China's view on the IPS. In the two case analyses, Japan is a traditional ally of the U.S.. India is an important actor in the U.S.-led IPS, but it also cooperates with China on many issues. Notably, both countries have developed their versions of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Therefore, China may perceive different levels of threats from their participation in the IPS, and these two cases provide tests on whether China's perceived levels of threats determine its strategies in response to the IPS.

Before the U.S. announcement of the IPS, Japan had proposed its own "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (FOIPS) in 2016. However, the Japanese FOIPS contains significant vagueness, and Japanese FOIPS practices have also oscillated over some crucial issues.⁸⁷ Some Chinese studies notice that the Japanese FOIPS initially prioritized U.S. leadership in the region, security cooperation with the Quad, and strategic preparation for major power competition in the region (Cai, 2021). Between 2017 and 2019, however, Japan shifted to a new FOIPS agenda by prioritizing cooperation with small and middle powers in the region, the centrality of ASEAN and other regional forums, and norm entrepreneurship based on local values (such as the norms expressed in the ASEAN way) (Cheng, 2020). Such policy oscillation was partly due to changing U.S. policies—when the U.S. withdrew its commitments to international institutions and allies under Trump's administration, Japan had to rely on regional partners to advance its FOIPS.

⁸⁵ For example, see Minhao Zhao, "Meiguo de Zhiheng Zudang Buliao 'Yidaiyilu' Qianjin Fangxiang [U.S. Balancing Cannot Stop the Progress of the BRI]," *World Affairs*, no. 12 (2021): 23–26.

⁸⁶ Zhao, "Meiguo de Zhiheng Zudang Buliao 'Yidaiyilu' Qianjin Fangxiang [U.S. Balancing Cannot Stop the Progress of the BRI]." P. 26.

⁸⁷ Yun Cheng, "Ribei 'Yintai Zhanlue Gouxiang' Tuijin Guocheng zhong de 'Zhongxinhua' yu 'Qu Zhongxinhua' [The centralization and de-centralization in the progress of the Japanese Indo-Pacific Construction]," *Japanese Studies* 2021, no. 5 (2021): 87–108; Koga, "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question."

The vagueness and oscillation in Japanese FOIPS policies offer space to China for strategic hedging. On the one hand, China recognizes that establishing the Quad security alliance could bring China into two-front (Pacific and India ocean) confrontations (Ye, 2018). China also recognizes Japan's ambition of becoming a leader of the liberal states, which defines China as an economic and political competitor. Therefore, China has adopted some "necessary internal balancing" to offset the risks of potential clashes with Japan. Meanwhile, between 2018 and 2020, China engaged with Japan and cooperated on several critical political and security issues. In October 2018, Xi met with Abe in Beijing and announced that both countries agreed to construct a "mutually beneficial and non-threatening cooperative partnership."⁸⁸ Both countries also reached agreements on security hotspot issues, including the North Korea Nuclear Crisis, North Korea abductions of Japanese citizens, the Japan-U.S. alliance, and regular meetings for their joint chief of staff.⁸⁹ In 2018, China and Japan launched the East China Sea Maritime and Airspace Communication Mechanisms to regulate their military contacts.⁹⁰

China and Japan also achieved noticeable success in their economic cooperation. During Abe's visit to Beijing in 2018, China and Japan signed the MoU on Currency-Swap Agreement and the MoU on Third Party Market Cooperation.⁹¹ Japan, China, along with other 13 Asia-pacific nations, jointly launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in December 2020.⁹² China also mobilized non-state and quasi-state actors to promote economic cooperation with Japan. In 2017, China invited Nikai Toshirihō, the Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan, to Beijing's Belt and Road Global Summit. During the visit, China welcomed Japan to join the BRI and suggested that both countries negotiate a new framework to develop the BRI projects jointly.⁹³

It is important to note that Japan shifted to closer cooperation with the U.S. when the Biden administration reassured its commitments to U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region. While Japanese policies to the IPS continue showing much uncertainty, vagueness, and oscillations, China still can strategically hedge. Meanwhile, this analysis finds little support to hypotheses 1 and 3 that China should adopt hard balancing or disengagement towards Japanese participation in the IPS. However, China hesitates to wedge Japanese participation in the IPS. Many Chinese experts suggested that China understands the resilience of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, Japanese commitment to liberal ideologies, and Japan's ambition to be a leader in the liberal bloc.⁹⁴ Thus, it is impossible for China to drive a wedge between Japan and the liberal bloc. Thus, China has mostly adopted hedging and soft balancing against Japan to manage the risks and damages associated with Japanese participation in the IPS.

China-India Relations under the IPS

⁸⁸ Honghua Men, "Hua JIngzheng Wei Xietiaode Xinshidai Zhongri Guanxi [The Sino-Japanese Relations in the New Era: Turning Competition into Coordination]," *Japanese Studies* 2020, no. 5 (2020): 31–55. P. 38.

⁸⁹ Embassy of Japan In China, "Anbei Jinsan Zongli Fanghua (Gaiyao) [Prime Minister Abe Shinzo Visits China(Summary)]," November 8, 2018, https://www.cn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_zh/00_000044.html.

⁹⁰ Xinhua Net, "China, Japan to Launch Communication Mechanism to Address Maritime, Airspace Differences," May 17, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/07/c_137161910.htm.

⁹¹ Embassy of Japan In China, "Anbei Jinsan Zongli Fanghua (Gaiyao) [Prime Minister Abe Shinzo Visits China(Summary)]."

⁹² Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement," December 24, 2020, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/page2e_000001.html.

⁹³ Men, "Hua JIngzheng Wei Xietiaode Xinshidai Zhongri Guanxi [The Sino-Japanese Relations in the New Era: Turning Competition into Coordination]." P. 40.

⁹⁴ Ye, "'Yintai' Gainian de Qianjing Yu Zhongguo de Yingdui Celue [The Perspectives of the Indo-Pacific Concept and China's Responses]." Pp. 12-14.

China-India relations have significantly deteriorated after the 2020 border conflict. Beijing recognizes the increasing levels of hostility against China and understands that India is very concerned about China's increasing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, Beijing also notices that India's vision of the IPS is different from the U.S. in many ways. China also notices India's strategic advantages in the IPS structure, which prevents China from using hard balancing or wedging strategies against India's IPS policies. Thus, China has used hedging and soft balancing in response to India's participation in the IPS.

Lou Chunhao (2019), the deputy chair of the South Asia Research Center of the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations, summarizes six differences between the Indian version of IPS and the U.S. IPS.

- 1.) In India's vision of the IPS, Indo-Pacific refers to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, not India and the Pacific Ocean. Other nations in South Asia, West Asia, and African should be included in the Indian vision of IPS. The U.S. is less interested in other nations around the Indian Ocean.
- 2.) India holds that ASEAN should play a central role in the construction and implementation of the IPS.
- 3.) India resists the ideas of Cold War style alliances and major power competition. India shares the values of freedom and liberty with the U.S., and it also shares the interest to check and balance an assertive China. However, India also wants to maintain strategic independence and balanced relations with all major powers.
- 4.) India emphasizes an institutional and rule-based (not power-based) approach to the IPS. Specifically, India emphasizes inclusiveness in its vision of the IPS.⁹⁵
- 5.) While the U.S. IPS mainly aims to balance and contain China, India has multiple strategic goals in its vision of IPS. India also wants to enhance its international status and seek opportunities for technology and economic development.
- 6.) India emphasizes economic integration and development through the IPS. It also calls for regional cooperation to address the lack of infrastructure in the region.

China has noticed that India, Japan, and many other following countries in the IPS have strategic goals and policy practices different from the U.S.. The "network of alliances" concept thus captures such discrepancies and highlights the strategic space for China. However, in the India case, China also notices that India has some strategic advantages that limit China's options in response to India's vision of IPS.

Increasing levels of security cooperation in the Quad and the IPS mean China faces higher risks of a two-front confrontation. In such a geopolitical environment, India has high leverage against China. India can impose credible threats to the west frontier of China with relatively less input of resources. If China adopts a hard balancing against India and invests significant resources in its west front line, China may not effectively balance the U.S. and Japan on its east front line.⁹⁶ Therefore, on the west frontline, China needs to carefully control the tensions with India and avoid intense hard balancing. Meanwhile, the possibilities for China to drive a wedge between India and the other Quad states are limited too. If China uses

⁹⁵ For example, see Narendra Modi, "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)," Government of India, June 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

⁹⁶ Ye, "'Yintai' Gainian de Qianjing Yu Zhongguo de Yingdui Celue [The Perspectives of the Indo-Pacific Concept and China's Responses]." Pp. 10-12.

wedging strategy, India may demand China back up on some issues (such as the border disputes) that China cannot compromise.⁹⁷

Therefore, China's strategies against India and the IPS mostly fall in the categories of hedging and soft balancing (particularly through institutions such as BRICS, RIC, SCO, and the ARF). China and India held two informal summits in Wuhan (2018) and Chennai (2019). Xi and Modi discussed the border conflicts and agreed to establish a framework based on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles that India and China signed in 2005.⁹⁸ They also agreed to form a High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue Mechanism to facilitate economic cooperation and address the asymmetric trade relations between China and India.⁹⁹ In the border conflict between April and October 2020, China and India engaged in intense hard balancing; however, both countries noticed that hard balancing policies did not serve their complicated strategic interests. Some studies notice that after October 2020, both countries relaxed the tension and shifted back to hedging and institutional balancing. China and India utilized their shared memberships in some international institutions for institutional balancing and hedging. The BRICS, SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and RIC (Russia-India-China Foreign Minister Summit) have functioned as important channels of communication and negotiation. Russian mediations through these platforms also played an important role. On September 10, 2020, Russia, China, and India foreign ministers met in Moscow and reconfirmed their shared interests in multipolarity and multilateralism, reforming global economic governance, defending sovereignty and the UN system, and many other issue areas such as climate change negotiation, and counterterrorism.¹⁰⁰ In February 2021, India also relaxed the ban against Chinese investments imposed after the Galwan Valley conflict and approved 45 investment projects from China (Li, 2021). Beijing predicts that pandemic control and economic recovery will be the most urgent tasks for the Modi administration; therefore, economic cooperation with India can help to control the tension.

Conclusion and Discussion

In both cases, China's responses to the IPS lend support to hypothesis 2: China sees the IPS as a Network of Alliances that contains noticeable space for soft counter-strategies; thus, China has mostly used soft balancing, hedging, and limited hard balancing to counter the IPS. While this paper finds little evidence showing China also uses wedging strategy against the IPS in these two cases, it does not mean China will not use wedging strategy in the future and other cases. As Chinese scholars point out, it is not the right timing for China to drive a wedge between India and other Quad nations.¹⁰¹ In other words, the timing of wedging is also an important variable calling for future studies.

While this research finds some general patterns in China's response to the IPS, it also highlights the differences in China's response to the U.S.-led IPS, Indian IPS, and Japanese IPS. Due to the limited space, the analysis in this research leaves some important variables for future studies. Domestic factors (such as rising nationalism in Asian nations, leadership changes in major regional powers, and party politics favoring populism) could limit strategic

⁹⁷ Ye. Pp. 10-13.

⁹⁸ India Minister of External Affairs, "2nd India-China Informal Summit," Government, December 10, 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31938/2nd_IndiaChina_Informal_Summit.

⁹⁹ India Minister of External Affairs.

¹⁰⁰ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wangyi tan Zhongeyin Sanguo de Gongtong Liyi [Foreign Minister Wangyi discusses the Shared Interests between China, Russia, and India]," November 9, 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/t1814003.shtml>.

¹⁰¹ Ye, "'Yintai' Gainian de Qianjing Yu Zhongguo de Yingdui Celue [The Perspectives of the Indo-Pacific Concept and China's Responses]."

choices available for state leaders. Meanwhile, contingent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and potential conflicts over the Taiwan issue, could bring significant shocks to the regional order and create long-lasting impacts. This research has not tested China's responses to other regional players' participation in the IPS. Among these regional actors, the attitudes and practices of ASEAN are critical. Southeast Asia is the geographic center of the Indo-Pacific region, and ASEAN is a crucial forum granting legitimacy to regional initiatives. Future studies could also explore the complicated interactions between IPS and local multilateral forums in the region.

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