

China's Alternate Gaze towards the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

China's perspective of the Indo-Pacific as a set of strategies initially developed by Japan but mainly driven by the United States (US), appears to be shifting. Beijing originally viewed such approaches as directly countering its influence in the mega-region of the same name. Yet, more recently China has made pronouncements that seem to suggest its relative support of particular state and regional organisation's Indo-Pacific strategies. This article explores this changing perspective and the dilemmas facing China as a rising global power in a liberal international order through the lens of strategic narratives. On the one hand China understands that it needs to engage the global system and cannot isolate from it, and at the same time, Beijing seeks to challenge the US-led liberal international order to achieve its ambitions.

This dual approach is explained through China's use of alternative diplomacy and is further explored through two examples. The first is China's engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific and specifically Africa (an emphasis of this journal volume), where it remains a strategic partner in the political and tangible economic sense. Secondly, at the conceptual level, the Indo-Pacific is not yet an institutionalised concept and its contours and future are left open to interpretation. Since allegiances and interests are shifting, China has the opportunity to contribute to the very ideas and norms that inform what



the 'Indo-Pacific' means in ways that can further its own strategic interests.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, Asia-Pacific, China–Africa, Global South, Belt and Road Initiative, strategic narrative, discourse power, world order

1. Introduction

Unlike the other states featured in this edition, China is an anomaly in the conversation on the Indo-Pacific that encapsulates various strategies related to the geo-economic and geo-political aspects of the Indian and Pacific oceans, predominantly promoted by the US and its partners. China's growing influence – and aggression in places like the South China Sea – has been singled out as a challenge to the existing global order originally established during the Cold War with the US-led Western bloc, which then expanded globally in the 1990s. In response China initially rejected the notion of the Indo-Pacific viewing it as a strategy to contain it that has implications for China's own security environment as well as its trans-regional Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In fact, in reaction to the revival of the Quad grouping in 2018 – represented by Australia, India, Japan and the US, all of which subscribe to the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a foreign policy concept – China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked that the group was simply a 'headline grabbing' idea and it would soon dissipate like 'sea foam' (The Times of India 2018). Two years later during a visit to Malaysia, Wang further remarked that the group posed a security risk as an 'Indo-Pacific NATO' that would spur geopolitical competition and a Cold War mentality (Rej 2020). China's hesitance in supporting an Indo-Pacific concept is also reflected by the absence of an explicit strategy towards it and persistent referral to the 'Asia-Pacific region' instead, even when officials are asked about the former (Liu 2020).

However, a further shift took place where, instead of resistance, China appeared to support selected state and regional approaches to the Indo-Pacific (detailed in next section). This suggests the softening of China's attitude from one of complete rejection of the Indo-Pacific idea to that of accommodation. This would not be the first time that Beijing has seen fit to pivot in response to the region's tepid response to a Chinese-led initiative – this was the case of the BRI, where China rebranded it as a work-in-progress following concerns as to its underlying intentions – and it bears closer analysis.

This article will endeavour to understand China's changing approach to the Indo-Pacific. In the current liberal international order, China displays two seemingly contrary approaches where it is both deepening its engagement within the current system, and simultaneously challenging it with alternative diplomacy. While in rhetoric, China displays support for the growing adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies, Beijing continues to counter the concept in other ways. This opposition is reflected upon in two instances: China's actual engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific and more specifically Africa

(a focus area of this volume), where it is inextricably a part of the mega-region in the tangible, geographical sense. Then in a context where the Indo-Pacific remains undefined and has yet to gain widespread acceptance on its physical boundaries and shared meaning amongst states, China's new position in accepting the concept provides Beijing an opportunity to help chart the course of the ideas that will increasingly inform it.

2. The Indo-Pacific: conceptual framework on strategic narratives and China's response

2.1 Great power competition reframed as strategic narrative for the 21st century

Whether characterised as a visionary reimagining the Asia-Pacific, or as a concrete operationalising of grand strategy, the notion of the Indo-Pacific is rooted in great power competition amongst Asian states and the US. In the first instance it is a by-product of expanding economic competition between Asian powers for markets in and around the Pacific and Indian oceans. This economic competition has significant developmental dimensions reflecting the fact that the protagonists are emerging economies, namely China and India as well as established economies like Japan and the US. Secondly, the Indo-Pacific is a response to the increasingly fractious relations between a rising China determined to assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea against the position of the US as a security guarantor of the regional status quo. China's maritime expansion through port infrastructure development along the countries of the Indian Ocean coastal littoral and its deployment of its 'blue water' navy, point to its broader regional ambitions. Thirdly, the Indo-Pacific is focused implicitly (if not explicitly) on conceptually countering the BRI's ideological framing of the restoration of China's leading economic and political role in the Eurasian land mass and Indian Ocean region. It is an alternative vision founded on Asian support for maintaining the US-led liberal international order.

The literature on strategic narratives offers insights into the framing – and reframing – of international politics in which foreign policy can be more readily and successfully pursued. According to Rosselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon (2017):

Put simply, strategic narratives are tools that political actors employ to promote

their interests, values, and aspirations for the international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment. These narratives define “who we are” and “what kind of world order we want.”

Roselle (2017) also recognises the importance of leaders in articulating and projecting strategic narratives:

The formation, projection, and reception of narratives can be understood through careful study of leadership narratives found in speeches, analysis of media structure and content, and through an assessment of public opinion polling results and focus group audience narratives.

In this context, media (including social media) and public diplomacy become tools to project strategic narratives into target regions and communicate intent to foreign audiences and domestic publics. This media ecology characterises the ambit within which strategic narratives evolve, propagate and are received by targeted actors. According to Peters (2015), they hold greater significance as ‘civilisational ordering devices’ that communicate from the powerful to other states and societies.

During the Cold War great power strategic narratives helped build alliance systems and mobilise domestic politics for costs and use of force. Post-Cold War strategic narratives subsumed the bipolar narratives of competition to lay a foundation for the new era of US dominance and democratic ascendancy (the era of ‘globalization’ and ‘end of history’). Neoliberalism, which championed the promotion of liberal market economies and democratic polities, became the ideological cornerstone of the liberal international order under conditions of US unipolarity. American foreign and economic interests were embedded in the ideological and institutional manifestations of the liberal international order (Ruggie 1982). The restructuring of regions across the world in what scholars called New Regionalism, created or enhanced regional institutions oriented towards open markets such as the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) founded in 1989 and furthered through the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The notion that a country can attain increased geopolitical power by setting international agendas that profoundly influence the political order and values both domestically and in foreign countries suited Beijing, especially as it grappled with the problems of asserting its global position in this established US-led liberal international order. As early as 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognised that developing

and operationalising strategic narratives that frame global agendas would place China in a better position to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Characterised as discourse power by Chinese scholars, this new approach featured as part of the adoption of ‘Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics’ (GPD) at 18th CCP Congress¹. President Xi Jinping built on earlier efforts to promote Chinese influence and norms-making through increasing China’s active involvement in international conferences and institutions. According to Masaaki (2022,16-17):

(A)n important source of such influence is not the coercive statements of government agencies, but the structural domination of the international discourse space through the leadership in setting international norms and standards. Thus, the competition for international discourse power among countries is, in effect, a competition for discourse power over the setting of international rules (Masaaki 2022,16-17).

The information space, powered by media and online platforms, offers China an effective alternative to its prior “non-intervention” stance by allowing the country to project the “China Story”—i.e., to project the positive image through storytelling in the media landscape, both domestic and abroad (Roberts 2020). The earliest iterations of the BRI – the ‘Iron Silk Road’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ launched in 2013 – were manifestations of this new thinking and sought to galvanize governments across the Eurasian land mass, South and Southeast Asian area, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa.

It is in this context that the debates on ‘Indo-Pacific’ can be placed. As a concept, it displaces the abiding economic logic of ‘new regionalism’ prevalent in the 1990s and manifested in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) (and its successor CPTPP²). China saw relative success in getting states to sign up to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a competitor to the TPP/CPTPP, as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) against US active resistance. Coupled to this were deepening security competition in the South China Sea and East China Sea that has spawned its own strengthening of institutionalised approaches to security, including expansion of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the revival of

1 A party congress held every five years.

2 Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

the US-led Quad and the hedging strategies by ASEAN.

Indeed the literature on strategic narratives emphasises how defining the international context, coupled to the application of foreign policy concepts that are geographically informed, helps set the agenda meaningfully reinforced through socialisation. China's willingness to adopt a tactical retreat in the face of obvious tepid support or even resistance to its summary dismissal of the Indo-Pacific demonstrates the limited reach of its own discourse power to date. Support for Chinese leadership through the BRI remains largely transactional amongst partners at this stage, frustrating Beijing's efforts to firm up its alternative to the US-led liberal international order.

However, other regional 'theatres' of the Indo-Pacific such as the Western Indian Ocean, lack a distinctive story for great power – and local state actors' – involvement. In other words, a strategic narrative that can serve as an organising principle. This gap enabled China's BRI to achieve greater recognition and local acceptance in the Western Indian Ocean and Africa. Given the relative strength of China's position within Africa, an expansion that includes the Western Indo-Pacific, there may be ample opportunity for Beijing to exert afresh its influence over this evolving concept.

2.2 The rise of Indo-Pacific strategies and China's response

The origin of the term 'Indo-Pacific'³, as it is currently applied, dates back to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinto Abe who spoke of the 'confluence of the two seas' in his address to the Indian Parliament in 2007 (Abe 2007). Further details of the idea were outlined when Abe (2016) proposed 'the union of two free and open oceans and two continents' in his opening speech at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Nairobi in 2016. Abe's reference to the connection of two oceans, in the context of the oldest Asia-Africa summit process, was initiated in 1991 when Japan, still at the peak of its economic power, underscored the degree to which it understood the Indo-Pacific to fundamentally include Africa. Abe's focus on the development dimensions of Japanese-African relations spoke to the centrality of these concerns to promoting of a 'free and open Indo Pacific', and suggested the place that Africa had in the process was primarily as a terrain of great power competition. Indeed, the deliberate emphasis that he placed on 'quality' infrastructure, educational training programmes and even the evocation of Japan's contribution to UN

3 The use of the term can be traced back to the 1920's, by German geographer, Karl Haushofer.

peacekeeping, all seemed to respond directly to the BRI's expanding policy initiatives in these same sectors underway across the African continent.

The responsiveness on the part of Indian policy makers to the concept has been slow and uneven. Certainly the Indo-Pacific fitted within the ongoing ruminations within the Indian defence community over the country's changing perception of China's role in the region. While elements within the defence establishment had been employing geo-strategic readings to the Indo-Chinese relationship as far back as the early 1960s, these assessments had not taken in the maritime domain to any serious degree. The launching of the Asia-Africa Economic Corridor in May 2017 under the auspices of India and Japan signalled the explicit activation of a developmental dimension of the concept as recognised in Abe's 2016 speech. However, like the India-Africa Forum Summit this seems to have gained little momentum in the face of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. (See more in the volume's India article). The experiences of Japan and India reflect increased acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept, amongst some leading Asian states.

In the case of the US, a year after Japan's articulation of the Indo-Pacific, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson echoed the Trump administration's support for the concept, concentrating on the same four themes utilised by the Japanese prime minister. At the same time, whereas Abe had been indirect in his articulation of the concept as an alternative to China's BRI, Tillerson did not mince words in declaring that Chinese development finance was in fact 'predatory economics' (Szechenyi and Hasaya 2019,1). By 2018 the US had formalised its designation of China as a 'strategic competitor' in its National Security Strategy and slowly the machinery of state began to operationalise appropriate policies. A gathering storm of restive domestic sources hostile to China ensured that, despite Trump's replacement by Joe Biden in 2022, a bipartisan consensus on 'containing' China continued. The revival of the Quad – US, Japan, Australia and India – highlighted how central allied security interests were to maintaining a 'free and open Indo Pacific'.

In February 2022, the US published a new Indo-Pacific strategy stating that several of its allies, including the Quad members and some European nations, view the region spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans as the world's 'centre of gravity' (United States 2022, 4-5). The document explains that the US' renewed attention towards the Indo-Pacific is also due to the mounting challenges in it, with specific mention of China's aggression and acute influence that challenges existing rules and norms. Interestingly, the mention of China preceded other major challenges such as climate change and

the Covid-19 pandemic — a clear statement of the centrality of the ‘China threat’ to defining US interests in the region. The Indo-Pacific appears to be the latest area of contention between the US and China. China set up the BRI in 2013 partly in response to the TPP – part of the US’ strategic pivot towards the Asia Pacific under Obama – and the current Indo-Pacific is in turn frequently cited as a response to China’s BRI engagement in the region (Liu and Dunford 2020).

Beijing’s initial response to the US’ specific strategy was unequivocally hostile (Wang 2022). Yet at the same time, paradoxically, it tacitly acknowledged the ‘Indo-Pacific Initiative’ as a meaningful concept for local actors (Business Standard 2021). The same source states that while China originally spurned the notion of the Indo-Pacific, it specifically “recognised India’s and ASEAN countries’ outlook for a free and open Indo-Pacific region that gained traction among the South East Asian countries”. Wang Yi also declared that China was even willing to work with the US and the Group of Seven’s (G7) Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, a global infrastructure plan now repurposed as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) in 2022 (despite the fact that it is considered a counter to China’s influence and BRI projects) (Tian 2022). These overtures are a marked difference from Wang’s remarks in 2018.

What explains this shift? China’s stance reflects the dilemma of its role as the second-largest global economy where it increasingly displays confidence in its foreign policy, but is aware that its capabilities (such as military) do not yet match that of the US’ (Global Fire Power 2022). Buzan (2010,18) describes China as a reform revisionist where it accepts some international institution such as the Westphalian principle of sovereignty, and it respects the role of the United Nations (UN); but China also seeks to challenge and reform certain liberal order norms and practises that it did not help design. This is reflected in China’s support of alternative economic initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI.

China, along with like-minded states such as other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations, are aware of the limits of the current global order. Besides the real economic and pragmatic interests involved in this grouping, this also somewhat explains the abstained votes of China and democracies India and South Africa, during the UN vote against Russia’s offensive in Ukraine in March 2022 (Borger 2022). Several other Indo-Pacific states – such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam – and even Pacific Island states have been as hesitant to openly condemn Moscow (Grossman 2022). There is growing concern by such states of being caught in a proxy struggle between Russia and the US and the impact thereof, as well as general caution over the

repercussions (such as sanctions) for rising powers who seek to challenge the existing order (Ramani 2022).

While China displays support for certain Indo-Pacific strategies (as noted earlier, in the case of ASEAN and India), it appears particularly focused on building on historical and practical relations with states who are physically situated at the centre of this mega-region. In this way China's and its partners' interests are brought in line through socialisation and interaction. This will be further explored in the next section. Yet, China is not fully in support of the Indo-Pacific as a foreign policy concept, as being driven by the US. Its approach can be read as a form of alternative diplomacy (Wang 2015) where it seeks to create a new international environment without directly challenging existing institutions and ideas.

The remainder of this article will therefore explore how China has engaged the Indo-Pacific in an 'alternative' fashion, where it engages regional partners without directly challenging current structures. First, is its physical and practical engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific region and Africa, which makes its presence difficult to dismiss; and second, is the very fact that the Indo-Pacific is still a concept under construction and therefore affords China the opportunity to contribute to what the idea means.

3. China's engagement with the Indo-Pacific

3.1 China's role in the Western Indo-Pacific

The western part of the Indo-Pacific, with particular reference to the African continent, is unevenly accounted for in the strategic documents of various states and international organisations. Africa is not mentioned once in the US' 2022 strategy document; rather, the emphasis is on northeast and southeast Asia and Oceania (including the Pacific islands). There is also much more emphasis on collaboration with Quad members and ASEAN, albeit the new US strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa (2022) reflects intent to include the region, which declares 'we will integrate African states in Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific forums...'. India and Japan, on the other hand, as mentioned, view Africa as part of the 'Indo' component of the concept and their shared outlook includes the aspiration to expand Asia and Africa economic links (Wu 2022,4). Meanwhile African partners themselves are yet to formulate strategies towards this increasingly significant mega-region (Wu and Schoeman 2022).

Although China demonstrates support for selected Indo-Pacific outlooks, its BRI is another perspective that overlays this geographic space, and the Indian Ocean is an important component of it. Unlike the Indo-Pacific, which remains largely associated with defence and security approaches – although this could change with the US’ launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)⁴ in May 2022 – China’s BRI emphasises development over geopolitics. This focus has in turn contributed to a relatively positive outlook towards China’s economic influence amongst African states as well as their citizens, as outlined by an Afrobarometer survey (Sanny and Selormey 2021).

China has progressively included the African continent in the BRI since late 2015 (Wu 2022,10). By November 2021, two days before the triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Dakar, China’s (2021) State Council Information Office released a China-Africa white paper that dedicated a section to BRI cooperation. This was an advancement from the casual mentioning of the initiative at previous forums. It is also taking note of developments in the western Indo-Pacific. In January 2022, Wang Yi visited Africa as part of an over thirty year tradition of a Chinese foreign minister kickstarting their overseas travel by visiting the continent. This particular trip took place along the African Eastern seaboard, specifically Eritrea, Kenya, and the Comoros (and later, further afield to the Maldives and Sri Lanka). Interestingly vague remarks were also made about developing Eritrea’s Red Sea coastline, which suggests not only the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean but an important connection to the Red Sea (Miriri 2022). This could see China’s engagement overlap with other developments, such as the creation of the Red Sea Council, a new council involving eight countries in the Red Sea Corridor (Globalsecurity.org 2020).

During May 2022, Wang also toured the South Pacific – including the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor – a vast area traditionally in Australia and the US’ orbit. While development partnership with China is welcomed (and is identified as a key area of collaboration with the region for China), the move raised Western anxiety as well as in some Pacific island states, over the potential instability created by military posturing in the region since China’s agreement proposals included the areas of policing and cybersecurity (Global Times

4 So far, economic initiatives supported by the US, which relate to the Indo-Pacific, have been absent on delivery. For instance, President Biden proposed the Build Back Better World (B3W), a counter infrastructure plan to the BRI at the 2021 G-7 meeting. Yet a year later, the initiative was repackaged as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), a scaled back version of the B3W.

2022; Shepherd 2022). This came off the back of China and the Solomon Islands signing a security pact in April 2022. This hesitation highlights the greater value placed on economic development, rather than security, as a basis for cooperation amongst Indo-Pacific states – which was also highlighted in a study by RAND Corporation (2020).

In this respect, China's engagement in Africa offers it a reprieve from geopolitical tensions as seen in the South Pacific as well as other physically removed territorial disputes. It can promote the BRI in Africa because African partners also welcome it and support it. For example, in 2018 leaders from Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa publicly defended that their relations with China were not defined as a debt trap (The South African 2018). Notably, China's partnership with Africa is not simply based on economic interests, there is also political salience. While China-Africa trade rose by a surprising 35% in 2021 amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the continent still only makes up 3.83% of China's total global trade (Mureithi 2022). China is also increasingly showing its support for African peace and security through its role in UN peacekeeping and measures such as the annual meeting with African defence ministers initiated after FOCAC in 2018. In fact, it appointed senior diplomat Xue Bing as special envoy to the Horn of Africa, and this took place around the same time that the US re-appointed a special envoy to the same region (Blinken 2022).

Moreover, the strength of the Chinese position in Africa offers China an opportunity to draw in a host of partner states who, while not uncritical of particular policies and practices it pursues, generally view China's involvement on the continent as a positive-sum gain. Chinese leadership in promoting African interests in global forums is widely acknowledged, its development experience is seen as a model for Africa, and African governments have willingly embraced the language of the BRI in joint communiques at bilateral and regional levels. Such support has had tangible consequences for China's foreign policy and translated to diplomatic backing for Beijing in the UN on a range of issues, be it endorsing China's role in development, or defending its human rights record. In short, the expansion of the Indo-Pacific to include the Western Indian Ocean and in particular coastal and island African states offers an opportunity for China to work within this still fluid conceptual framework from a basis of support of shared interests and even tacit acknowledgement of its leadership.

3.2 Negotiating concepts and meanings

China's BRI emphasises the creation of shared meaning rather than following a prescriptive engagement. With respect to Africa, China supports the AU's development Agenda 2063. In content both Agenda 2063 and the BRI share similar interests, such as transport infrastructure, regional connectivity, and industrialisation (Liu 2021). China emphasises the role of partnerships and the need for support for the BRI, as it is aware that it cannot build mega projects on Chinese financing and construction alone (Aris 2016,2). Likewise, is China's support for certain state approaches to the Indo-Pacific. It seems aware that in a negotiated world order (Chin 2015), gaining support means transcending the US-China global competition narrative to include the perspectives and interests of other partners. This emphasis is important, as neither the US nor China is actually 'winning' outright in terms of their influence amongst Indo-Pacific states (RAND Corporation 2020).

China's role in this mega-region has implications for the development of the Indo-Pacific as a concept. At the moment the Indo-Pacific is still developing at the conceptual level to become a durable foreign policy idea. In this regard, as pointed out by He and Feng (2020,154), to be embedded the concept needs executive (central and operational coordination) and ideational (the ability to influence through new ideas) leadership. Unlike the Indo-Pacific, China's BRI has gained some degree of executive leadership through the funds it has secured, the creation of a BRI summit that has attracted state and multilateral partners in attendance (along with various Memoranda of Understanding signed), and it has even made its way into the language of some commercial banks. By comparison, the Indo-Pacific does not have operational coordination, although this could shift as the Quad – who have driven this concept – have decided to meet more regularly (Rajagopalan 2022).

Importantly, the Indo-Pacific is yet to develop from an ideational perspective as there is not yet widespread acceptance of it as a concept with shared meaning, like the previous Asia-Pacific. For example, the geographic parameters of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific by states who promote it, are not agreed upon (this was illustrated earlier and by other author contributions). There is also no agreement of the parameters of the Indo-Pacific and its focus which, as mentioned, is perceived as largely security focussed. There is, however, interest in expanding the offering as noted by the US' IPEF, but this is still at its early stages. Likewise, the Quad has expanded their focus to include vaccine manufacturing, climate, cybersecurity, infrastructure and research fellowships in STEM fields, although emphasis on peace and stability appear to remain central (Japan MFA 2022).

The Indo-Pacific is still emerging as an institutionalised foreign policy concept and China's efforts to shape this seminal strategic narrative for the 21st century through engagement as opposed to resistance, could focus on the following approaches:

- **Overlapping regional economic frameworks:** China's role in the Indo-Pacific continues to deepen and like the case of the BRI and Africa, mentioned above, its physical involvement cannot be disregarded in new conceptions of the region: A 2022 CSIS report (Goodman and Arasasingham 2022), notes that the Indo-Pacific region – which interestingly (for the authors of the report) does not include African states – includes members of multiple overlapping economic structures. For example, almost the same number of states (albeit membership make-up differs) that are part of the US' Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIFA) are also members of the BRI. Moreover, there are further options for energy, infrastructure and trade for some members who are also involved in other agreements, such as the RCEP, an agreement between ASEAN members and their free trade agreement partners. China's physical role in the Indo-Pacific would make it difficult to outright exclude it, especially from the perspective of Indo-Pacific states themselves.
- **Shifting alliances:** The Indo-Pacific is made up of multiple interests or strategies and interpretations. Importantly, the stance of states in this mega-region and even Quad members are still evolving. For instance, there is general hesitance to directly counter China by some Quad member states and their positions depend, to a degree, on China's own aggressive or cooperative stance on issues like the South China sea (Wu 2022:5). Notably, while India is seen as being in competition with China in the Indian Ocean, they also collaborate with China through the BRICS grouping, as reflected to some extent by their parallel positions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- **Co-constituted partnerships:** China's engagement with Africa reflects the importance of thinking beyond the current conceptual boundaries of the Indo-Pacific. It has been far more proactive in including the African continent (the western-most part of the Indo-Pacific) in global initiatives such as the BRI, even though the continent was hardly mentioned in original conceptions of the initiative around 2013. Meanwhile, Quad members are yet to collectively include Africa in their own Indo-Pacific strategies. This has earned China support for the BRI in Africa, being perceived as a partner that creates policy

‘with’ rather than ‘for’ others. Similarly, China’s support for certain Indo-Pacific strategies and the matching of interests, provides it with an opportunity to help shape the future of the concept itself. Notably, China’s vision is also impacted. The year 2023 will mark the ten-year anniversary of the BRI, yet its future remains uncertain given that analysts note that Chinese officials are increasingly promoting the Global Development Initiative – proposed during Xi’s September 2021 speech at the UN General Assembly – in place of the BRI. It is described as a repurposed version of the BRI that emphasises sustainability and quality⁵ (Brinză 2022). This article has thus reflected China’s flexible approach towards both the Indo-Pacific as well its own BRI, where others’ responses and strategies, and changing contexts have also shaped its approaches.

4. Conclusion

This article has outlined China’s view of the Indo-Pacific within the context of competitive strategic narratives framing and functioning in a mega-region encompassing the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

China was initially largely opposed to the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a set of strategies, perceived to be largely driven by the US. However, it has adapted its response to somewhat supportive, particularly with regards to the strategies of specific partners, such as ASEAN. This reflects China’s complex engagement with the liberal international order where it challenges it in some respects, and supports it in others, to further its interests.

We explain China’s change in stance, in part, by strategic narratives that are central to the construction of the logic of a new international (and regional) order. The Indian Ocean – and the Western Indian Ocean in particular – has been the equivalent of a blank spot on the strategic map, largely overlooked. This has changed as emerging powers, coupled to great power competition, have sought to project power in the region. Strategic narratives around the Indo-Pacific represent the articulation of foreign policies, and great powers to build a sustainable collective consensus on possible new and competing orders.

5 Amid accusations of poor quality and standards, ecological impact and issues with loan repayments.

Furthermore, while China retreated from outright rejection of the concept and shows its support for some Indo-Pacific strategies, it also challenges the current order in two ways:

First is its physical presence through its BRI that overlays its own interpretation on the Indo-Pacific region. Yet its initiative builds on existing relations with and its inclusion of the western part of the region that is, African partner states. Moreover, the BRI engagement in Africa has been characterised as economic- and development-focussed over geopolitics, and similar to China's support for certain Indo-Pacific outlooks, there is support for African partners' aspirations and outlooks. This would likely continue, even if the BRI were to morph into considering the introduction of a new initiative, the GDI.

Second, while China appears as an anomaly to the discussion on the Indo-Pacific, a concept partly promoted in response to its rise in this mega-region, it has a significant role in shaping the future meaning and understanding of it. This is because there is no single interpretation of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific and its physical parameters. China could impact future understanding of the Indo-Pacific in the following ways: firstly, China's own physical and deepening role in this greater region (also exemplified by its BRI engagement in Africa), secondly, the fact that alliances in this space seem to be continually shifting and changing (some contingent on China's own stance on issues) and thirdly, China's amenable approach in co-constituting initiatives that meet both its interests and those of its partners.

For China, the significance of strategic narratives to foreign policy led the CCP to adopt a specific approach based on 'discourse power.' While China has been able to utilise its formidable capacity to promote its national interests through the promulgation of meta-narratives such as the BRI across the region, the dynamics of systemic change and the response of other state actors underscore the degree to which Beijing is still unable to set the agenda on matters like the Indo-Pacific. These tactical moves and even strategic shifts on the Indo-Pacific and BRI make clear that China is both shaping and being shaped by the discourse around the Indo-Pacific.

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