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The Age of Quad in the Indo-Pacific: The Purpose & Potential

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A large, stylized graphic of a book or document. The main body is a yellowish-gold color with a white top and bottom edge. The spine is a light blue color. The year '2021' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif font on the blue spine. The graphic is set against a light blue background with some darker blue geometric shapes.

2021



The Age of Quad in the Indo-Pacific: The Purpose & Potential

Dr Satoru Nagao

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One of the important features of Japan's Foreign Policy in the 21st century is its concept of the Indo-Pacific. Japan was the pioneer in creating the concept of the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's (QUAD) role in it. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech to the Indian parliament in 2007, entitled "Confluence of Two Seas," introduced the idea. He said, "By Japan and India coming together in this way, this 'broader Asia' will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely."¹ Therefore, the key question of Japan's foreign policy is, "Why did Japan need these concepts?" Indeed, since 2007, the security situation around Japan has changed. China has escalated its activities in the entire area of the Indo-Pacific, the US has stepped up its efforts to counter it, and US-China competition has escalated as a result. The QUAD has an important role to play in the resolution of this issue, and this chapter will focus on the origin and future of the QUAD in the Indo-Pacific.

(1) What is the Indo-Pacific and the QUAD?

Why did Abe need these concepts? From his speech, one can see three reasons. First, he needed a way to link both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. "Indo-Pacific" replaced the concept of "Asia-Pacific," which did not include the Indian Ocean region. Because of rapid economic development, both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions are increasingly emerging as influential regions in world politics. The International Institute for Strategic Studies in the UK pointed out that nominal Asian defense spending (excluding Australia and New Zealand) overtook that of NATO Europe in 2012² Therefore, to explain current trends in world politics, Abe saw a need for new concepts that tied in all ascendant regions, including both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions.

Second, Abe wanted to introduce both the Indo-Pacific and the QUAD concepts at the same time because he believed that the rising Indo-Pacific should not be a China-dominated region. He explained this idea in his article, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond," which was published in Europe just before he was sworn in as prime minister for a second time in 2012³. The Indo-Pacific is a geographic concept that includes all the countries surrounding China. The QUAD includes all the great powers except China.

Third, Abe wanted to emphasize the importance of India and its integration into the QUAD with the concept of the Indo-Pacific (instead of the Asia-Pacific, which did not include India). Both Japan and Australia are longtime US allies with established modes of cooperation. India was the newcomer. To cooperate with India, Japan needed the QUAD.

Abe introduced these ideas with a view to maintaining order in the rising Indo-Pacific. After Abe's speech, many other countries created their own definitions of the "Indo-Pacific." But because the US Indo-Pacific strategy was created based on Abe's original concept, his strategic formulation has survived⁴.

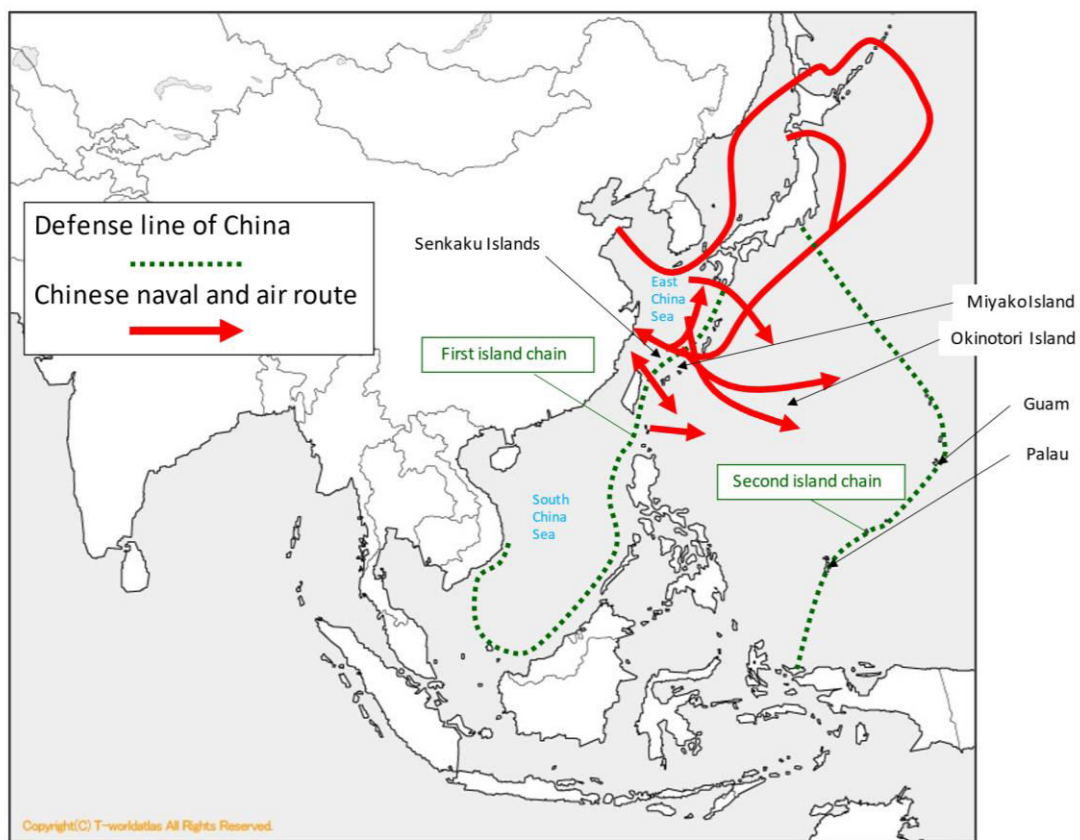
(2) China's escalating activities in the Indian Ocean

However, the concept did not anticipate the speed of China's assertiveness. In the same article⁵, Abe wrote, "I must confess that I failed to anticipate that China's naval and territorial expansion would advance at the pace that it has since 2007." China's activities have escalated in the sea around Japan, the South China Sea, the India-China border, and the Indian Ocean.

a. The Sea around Japan

For Japan, the main concerning points are China's activities in the sea around Japan. For example, in 2004, a Chinese nuclear attack submarine violated Japan's territorial seas in the East China Sea. China has also been carrying out naval exercises on the Pacific side of Japan since 2008. Figure 1 below indicates the route the Chinese navy has been using. These activities have expanded the defense line of China from the first island chain to the second island chain.

Figure 1: China's naval and air activities around Japan



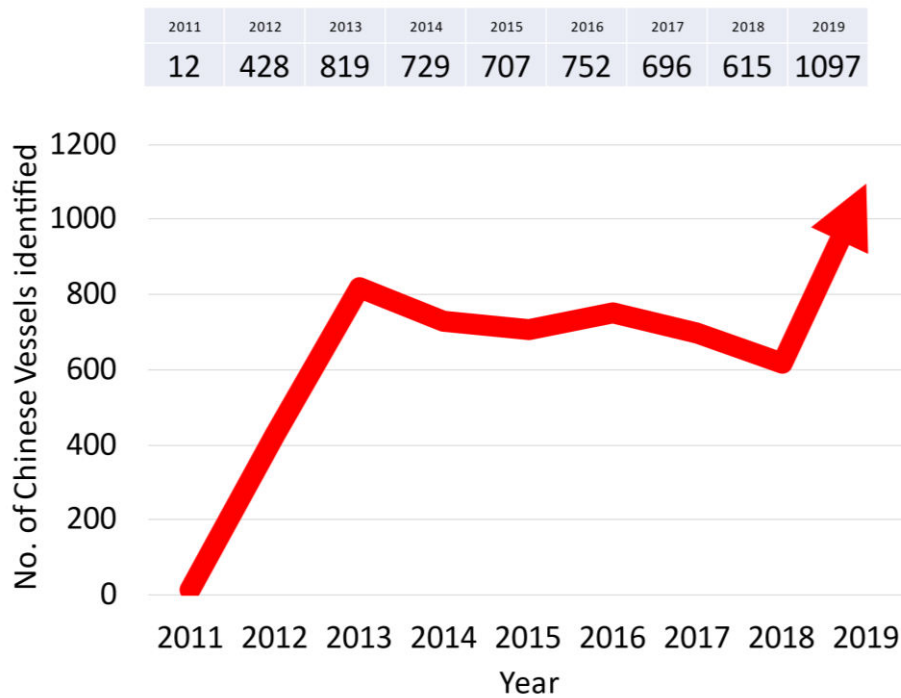
Source: Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Defense of Japan 2020*, p.73

https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2020/pdf/R02010202.pdf



China has stepped up its activities both militarily and para-militarily. In the sea around the Senkaku Islands of Japan, China has employed its coast guards and increased its activities. In 2011, the number of Chinese vessels identified within the contiguous zone in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands in Japan was only 12. But the number increased to 428 in 2012, 819 in 2013, 729 in 2014, 707 in 2015, 752 in 2016, 696 in 2017, 615 in 2018, and 1097 in 2019. By 2019, the number had reached 1097 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of Chinese vessels identified within the contiguous zone in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands in Japan



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response”
https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html

b. Taiwan

Around the Taiwan Strait, China’s rapid military modernization is changing the strategic balance with Taiwan and provoking Taiwan militarily. Chinese fighter jets have repeatedly entered Taiwan’s air space. On April 12, 2021, in one day, 25 Chinese military planes entered Taiwan’s Air Identification Zone.⁶ And its activities on the Pacific side of Taiwan, where a Chinese aircraft carrier battle group made repeated visits, are of particular concern. If Chinese armed forces deploy there permanently, it would cut Taiwan off from the United States and Japan. Chinese submarine activities are also cause for concern. Given all this, US Indo-Pacific commander Adm. Philip Davidson recently warned that China could invade Taiwan within six years.⁷



In addition, Taiwan is facing diplomatic isolation. Since June 2017, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Burkina Faso, El Salvador, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati have abandoned formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan as a result of Chinese pressure, including economic assistance and infrastructure projects. This leaves only fifteen countries with formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The COVID-19 crisis has made many countries aware that Taiwan cannot join international organizations like the World Health Organization because of Chinese opposition.

c. The South China Sea

From Japan's point of view, the situation in the South China Sea is a serious matter. While in 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rejected China's claim to ownership of 90 percent of the South China Sea, Beijing is ignoring the verdict and building three new airports on seven artificial islands in the South China Sea. This has provoked Japanese concern, and Prime Minister Abe, in the above-referenced article⁸, noted that, "Increasingly, the South China Sea seems set to become a 'Lake Beijing,' which analysts say will be to China what the Sea of Okhotsk was to Soviet Russia: a sea deep enough for the People's Liberation Army's navy to base their nuclear-powered attack submarines, capable of launching missiles with nuclear warheads." His statement underscored the possibility of China deploying ballistic missile submarines under the protection of fighter jets launched from these artificial islands, and excluding all foreign ships and airplanes that might identify their submarines⁹. Abe pointed out that, "if Japan were to yield, the South China Sea would become even more fortified"¹⁰.

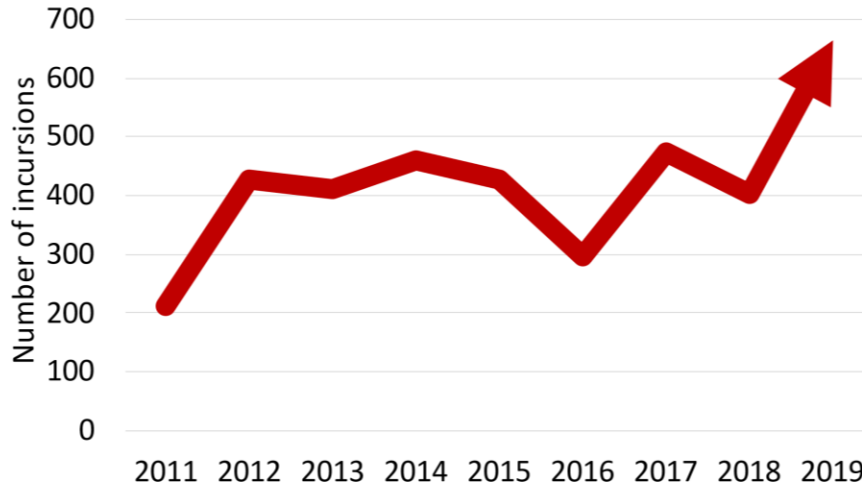
d. The Indo-China Border Area

Since 2000, China has been developing infrastructure projects in the Indo-China border area, increasing the number of strategic roads, trains, tunnels, bridges, and airports. The military balance in the Indo-China border is changing because of China's rapid military infrastructure modernization. Along with these infrastructure projects, Beijing has started to deploy more armed forces in the area. In 2011, India recorded 213 incursions in the Indo-China border area, but in the following years, the numbers were larger: 426 in 2012, 411 in 2013, 460 in 2014, 428 in 2015, 296 in 2016, 473 in 2017, 404 in 2018, and 663 in 2019 (see Figure 3). These incursions are similar to China's activities around the Senkaku Islands of Japan. Based on the number of Chinese incursions in the Indo-China border area and Chinese activities in sea around the Senkaku Islands, it becomes apparent that China has increased its activities in 2012 and 2019 in both areas (see Figure 4).



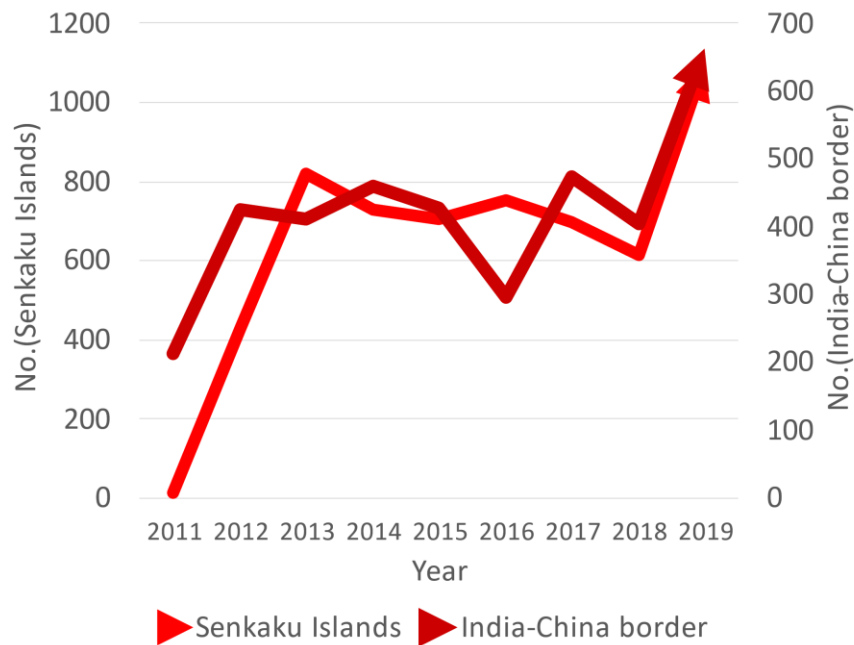
Figure 3: Chinese incursions in the Indo-China border area

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
213	426	411	460	428	296	473	404	663



Source: Compiled by the author using major media reports

Figure 4: Comparison of Figure 2 and 3





China is deploying troops in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan where a part of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is a core project of the Belt and Road Initiative, is situated¹¹. Beijing is also developing infrastructure projects to connect to Nepal. It has entered the Doklam heights, claimed by both China and Bhutan, insisting on building a new road to deploy more forces. This led to Indian and Chinese armed forces facing each other in a standoff along the 4,000 km Indo-China border (including the Line of Actual Control, a line separating the territory controlled by India from the territory controlled by China).

And in 2020, the situation escalated further. China entered the India side in the spring and the two sides clashed in June. At least 20 Indian soldiers sacrificed their lives and 76 Indian soldiers were injured. After that, China continued to redeploy fighter jets and missiles from other areas of its territory. For example, China moved H-6 bombers that can employ cruise missiles from Wugong to Golmud and Kashgar. China also deployed DF-21 missiles to Kailash Mansaravar. (DF-21s use new types of warheads that the US and Japan cannot intercept through missile defense systems.) At the Hotan air base, China has been increasing heavy fighters and bombers such as the J-11 and J-16. Also at the Hotan base, many other types of military aircraft such as the Y-8G electronic reconnaissance aircraft, the KJ-500 early warning aircraft, and the CH-4 drone were present. The latest J-20 stealth fighter jets are also deployed. To protect these airfields and missiles, China is deploying S-300 surface-to-air missiles. India has repeatedly conducted missile tests to deal with China's buildup. Over six weeks in 2020 (September to October), India conducted more than 12 missile tests.

In February 2021, China withdrew more than 200 tanks from the Indian side of Pangong Tso in Ladakh, reducing tensions dramatically. However, China has still entered the Indian side in at least four areas. And China has maintained many of its missiles and jets in the Indo-China border area.

e. The Indian Ocean

China has expanded its activities in the Indian Ocean, which has caused worry for India. Beijing insisted on solving its “Malacca Dilemma”—that it must avoid excessive dependence on the Malacca Strait, which is a strategic shipping lane for China's oil and is controlled by the US Navy. As a result, China is creating alternative routes such as a Middle East-Pakistan-Xinjiang Uygur route and a Middle East-Myanmar-China route. These are a core part of China's Belt and Road Initiatives.

Beijing is investing in developing ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar in the Indian Ocean. Because of the sheer size of China's investments and the 6-8 percent interest rates it charges on loans, these countries now have enormous debts (the World Bank and Asia Development Bank, in contrast, charge 0.25-3 percent)¹².



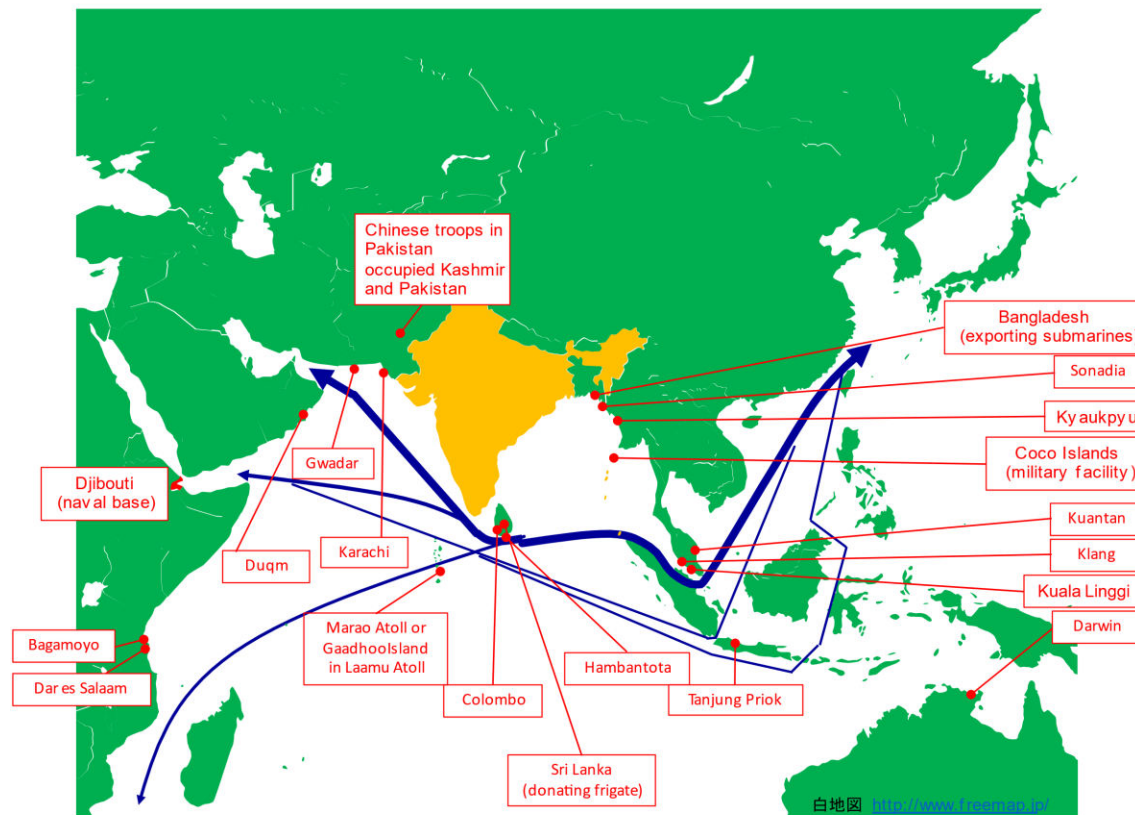
With Hambantota, Sri Lanka was unable to repay its loan. It thus became a victim of China's "debt diplomacy" and in December 2017 handed over the port to China as part of a 99-year lease agreement.

In the meantime, in order to secure sea routes, China has started to expand its military forces in the region. China expanded its military activities in the Indian Ocean starting in 2009, when it joined anti-piracy measures off the coast of Somalia. Chinese submarines have patrolled since 2012, and the Chinese surface fleet has called at ports in all the countries around India, including Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. According to Admiral Sunil Lamba, Chief of the Indian Naval Staff, Beijing has deployed 6-8 warships in the Indian Ocean¹³, while in Pakistan it has started to deploy ground forces. Referring to China's operation of the Hambantota port, some raise concerns that if the Chinese navy begins to use civil-purpose ports as naval supply bases, China could overcome its weakness, which is its lack of a naval port in the region.

In addition, China also exports submarines to countries around India. Bangladesh received two in 2016, and Pakistan decided to import eight Chinese submarines for its navy. In particular, Islamabad's willingness to possess nuclear submarines must not be overlooked. Because it lacks the technology, there is a reasonable possibility that China will support such "indigenous" nuclear submarines to counter India.

The activities of these submarines indicate that they could potentially attack India's nuclear ballistic missile submarines, aircraft carriers, and sea lines of communication. This means that these submarines will, to a great extent, regulate India's activities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: China's activities in the Indian Ocean



Source: author

(3) Three important similarities of China's territorial expansion

As mentioned above, China's territorial expansion has three features. The first feature of note is China's repeated disregard for international law when laying claim to new territory. In the East China Sea, China did not claim the Senkaku Islands before 1971. China's attitude has since changed due to the potential existence of oil reserves in the East China Sea. And at the same time, the Senkaku Islands are in a strategic location to pressure Taiwan. In the South China Sea, China has expanded its territorial claim, ignored the verdict of an international court, and built artificial islands. Despite insisting these islands have no military purpose, China has started to deploy missiles and military planes there. In the case of the Indo-China border, the Tibetan exile government stated that these areas belong to India¹⁴. China has ignored current international law and expanded its territorial claim in all three areas.

The second feature of China's territorial expansion is timing. Beijing has exploited the situation whenever it finds a power vacuum. For example, China occupied half of the Paracel Islands just after France withdrew in the 1950s, and occupied another half of the Paracel Islands one year after the US withdrew from South Vietnam in the 1974. China occupied six features of the Spratly Islands after the



Soviet Union decreased its military presence in Vietnam in the 1980s. And in 1995, China occupied Mischief Reef three years after US troops withdrew from the Philippines¹⁵. According to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, from 2011-20 China increased its military expenditure by 76 percent. During the same period, India increased its military expenditure by 34 percent and Japan by only 2.4 percent.¹⁶ China has tried to expand its territorial claims not only in the South China Sea, but also in the East China Sea and the Indo-China border because it sees a power vacuum in these areas.

A third feature of China's territorial expansion is economic control. China has used foreign infrastructure projects—known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—to expand its sphere of influence. In addition, countries with significant Chinese investment and debt are hesitant to criticize China, even when it flouts international rules. As this shows, China's territorial ambitions are closely related to its economic power.

(4) Analysis of the US stance toward China

To counter China's provocations, the US has chosen a tough stance that has three aspects. Militarily, the US has tried to maintain a balance, but economically, the US has tried to decouple from China and reduce China's budgetary advantages and has demanded that China respect "Western values." In June 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained why the number of US troops in Germany has been reduced and why US troops had also withdrawn from Syria and Afghanistan: "This is going to dictate that in certain places there will be fewer American resources. There'll be other places—I just talked about the threat from the Chinese Communist Party, so now threats to India, threats to Vietnam, threats to Malaysia, Indonesia, South China Sea challenges, the Philippines. We're going to make sure we're postured appropriately to counter the PLA [the Chinese People's Liberation Army]. We think that's the challenge of our time, and we're going to make sure we have resources in place to do that"¹⁷. Because China tends to expand its territorial claim when it finds a power vacuum, maintaining a military counterbalance is the proper way for the US to respond. Although the current Biden administration is reviewing, it is expected that the long-term course will remain similar to that of the Trump administration.

In its economic policy, the US could afford to take a more aggressive posture, because China's rapid military modernization and the BRI are dependent on an ample budget. Reducing China's budgetary advantages could thereby ease China-related problems. During the Trump administration, both the trade war and the high-tech war excluded China's participation in the US economy. As a result, US experts have started to use the word "decoupling" when referring to relations with China, and Trump himself indicated the possibility¹⁸. So far, the Biden administration has continued this policy.

The US has also focused on humanitarian issues with regard to China. In May 2020, the White House published the *United States Strategic Approach to The People's Republic of China*. In this document, the US government clearly mentions three challenges to US interests from China: economic challenges, challenges to Western values, and security challenges¹⁹. In January 2021, Pompeo determined that China's atrocities in Xinjiang were "genocide,"²⁰ and the Biden administration has also repeatedly mentioned that what China has done there amounts to genocide. In the US, there is concern that the



number of democratic countries worldwide has been declining. According to Freedom House, the number of “free countries” declined from 89 in 2005 to 82 in 2020, and the number of “not free” countries increased from 45 to 54²¹. If other countries believe that non-democratic China is a model for success, the US will increasingly lose influence in the future. The US has stepped up its efforts to promote democratic norms and values in its relations with China.

Indeed, there is a strong possibility that such tough policies toward China will remain long-term policy for three reasons. First, during its 245-year history, the US has taken only 169 years to transform from a single colony of the British Empire into the world’s only superpower, and it has kept this status for the past 76 years. During this time, all rivals of the US, including Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, disappeared. It is possible that the US has developed a long-term strategy to prepare for a serious challenge from China. For example, during World War II, the US had an “Orange Plan” to defeat Japan and implemented it, as well as a “Black Plan” against Germany and a “Green Plan” against Mexico. But when these plans were declassified in 1974, the world was surprised to learn that there was also a “Red Plan” to defeat Britain and Canada. (Canada was very upset.) Because the US designated China as a “competitor” in the *National Security Strategy* in 2017, one can assume that it has a contingency plan to defeat China as part of its long-term security strategy.

Second, the tough stance toward China is not the product of the Trump administration alone. For example, the high-tech war, which banned products from Huawei and ZTE, started when the *Investigative Report on the U.S. National Security Issues Posed by Chinese Telecommunications Companies Huawei and ZTE* was published in 2012, during Barack Obama’s presidency²². The Biden administration has not changed the essence of the China policy that the Trump administration developed. Republicans and Democrats share many similar goals toward China.

Third, now is the proper time for the US to act if it wants to remain ahead of China. The *National Security Strategy* was published in December 2017. At that time, according to the *Military Balance 2018*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, the US defense budget was \$603 billion compared with China’s \$150 billion—a large gap²³. However, from an overall economic perspective, US GDP was \$19.39 trillion, compared with China’s \$12.24 trillion, according to the International Monetary Fund’s World Economic Outlook Database for 2018²⁴ (IMF, 2018). Compared with the defense budget, the economic gap between the two countries is narrow. And according to UNESCO Institute for Statistics figures published in 2018, the US invested \$476 billion for research and development and China invested \$370 billion²⁵. That gap in technological spending is very small. If the US acts now, it will gain an advantage over China, but without such efforts its advantages will gradually narrow. Indeed, the Centre for Economics and Business Research predicts that China will overtake the US to become the largest economy by 2028²⁶.

(5) What will the future of the Indo-Pacific and the QUAD look like?

The Indo-Pacific has become an increasingly ascendant region, and the QUAD concept has sought to restrain China’s dominance there. But these ideas were created when China’s threat was more moderate. At that time, it seemed that including China and restraining its assertiveness by engaging Beijing was a



practical option. However, China's activities have been escalating far beyond expectations. The US has stepped up its efforts to counter China recently, leading to a strong possibility that the US will eventually prevail in the competition with China. Going forward, what should other QUAD countries like Japan, India, and Australia do in the Indo-Pacific?

The potential of the QUAD could be very big. First, the QUAD will be the most powerful counter-China framework in the US-China competition. Second, if the US prevails in this competition, the QUAD has the potential to play a leading role in the new order of the Indo-Pacific because all of great powers in the region except China are members. Therefore, the more US-China competition escalates the more importance the QUAD holds.

China's lack of respect for international law, expansion of territorial claims where there are power vacuums, and attempts at economic dominance abroad are all common themes of China's exploits in the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and now the Indo-China border. To deal with China's bad behavior, the US has been seriously stepping up its efforts. Thus, the question remains: what role does the QUAD have in the situation and how should other QUAD members (Japan, India, and Australia) respond? Knowing the pattern of China's behavior points toward the answer: they should do the opposite of what China wants. For example, the QUAD must continue to respect and insist upon a rule-based order grounded in current international law. QUAD countries need to fill military power vacuums by increasing their defense budgets. And the QUAD needs to integrate economic efforts into its overall strategy.

First and most importantly, Japan, India, and Australia should show their support towards the US effort to maintain a rule-based order. In March 2021, during the US-Japan 2+2 foreign and defense minister-level meeting, the US-Japan joint statement for the first time mentioned China by name multiple times and expressed concern over China's activities in the East China Sea and South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang²⁷. Such a clear stance shows Japan's support of the current rule-based order and democratic norms. Following the G7 Foreign Ministers meeting with Indian and Australian Foreign Ministers in May 2021, the joint statement also mentioned Tibet²⁸.

Second, to enhance their defense capability, QUAD countries need to focus on an offensive-defensive balance. Along with the US, Japan, India, and Australia are all planning to possess 1000-2000km long-range strike capabilities such as cruise missiles and F-35 jets with glide bombs. Indeed, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea are also increasing their strike arsenal with surface-to-surface missiles. These moves could be the key. For example, if both Japan and India possess long-range strike capabilities, their combined capability forces China to defend multiple fronts. Even if China decides to expand its territories along the Indo-China border, it still needs to expend a certain amount of its budget and military force to defend itself against Japan. In addition, to deal with the route China is using to expand its territories, long-range strike capability is useful. If the straits or other choke points are under the range of the QUAD's strike capability, China loses confidence in using these routes. In the case of the mountainous Indo-China border area, India can attack strategic bridges, tunnels, or airports anytime by using missiles. This reduces China's confidence in using these strategic infrastructures.

Third, QUAD countries need to integrate their economic efforts and reduce their reliance on China. Although China is the first- or second-rated trading partner for Japan, India, and Australia, if these



countries depend too heavily on trade with it, their economies will be like passengers of a sinking ship. Therefore, decoupling and risk-diversifying of supply chains and markets are necessary. Indeed, Japan has already begun to do so. Because Japan has relocated its factories from China to Southeast Asia and South Asia, the number of Japanese citizens living in China has decreased from 150,399 in 2012 to 111,769 in 2020. At the same time, the number of Japanese living in the US has increased from 410,973 in 2012 to 426,354 in 2020²⁹. In addition, Japan earmarked \$2.2 billion of its 2020 economic stimulus package to help local manufacturers shift production out of China³⁰.

When the first QUAD summit was held in March 2021, the four countries agreed to set up three working groups, including a group for providing COVID-19 vaccines to many countries in the Indo-Pacific, a critical and emerging technology working group, and a working group on climate change³¹. These working groups will be a very important aspect of the QUAD's collective security. Currently, China is the main provider of vaccines in the region and is expanding its influence in many developing countries. The QUAD needs to neutralize this influence. China is also the main supplier worldwide of rare-earth elements that are needed for new technologies, so the role of the technology working group is very important for technological development and supply chain diversification. QUAD countries should continue these efforts to create new markets and supply chains that do not depend on China.

China's aggressive territorial expansion spurred the US to take a tough stance toward it. And now QUAD countries must show how strong they are. The more China escalates the situation, the more the defense capabilities of the QUAD will be institutionalized in the Indo-Pacific.



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