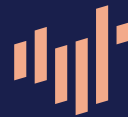


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Perspectives from Chinese scholarship on India's role in the Quad: The prospect of an "Asian NATO"

Lisa Zhang

Executive summary

- The Quad is a partnership between Japan, Australia, the United States and India that works to advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. This conceptual framework forms the ideological core of the Indo-Pacific's regionalisation, a region first envisaged by former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in 2007.
- The Chinese government claims that the Quad is a US-led attempt to form a military alliance in the region, often referred to as an "Asian NATO". While Chinese scholars concur, they believe the probability of this occurring to be low, primarily due to India's foreign policy of strategic autonomy.
- Chinese scholars note that India has changed its approach from a cautious to an active one and benefits from being part of the Quad. However, they also identify limits to cooperation. Besides India's policy of strategic autonomy, other factors include differing interests among the Quad members, as well as India's special relationship with Russia and its desire to participate in multilateral organisations such as the BRICS.
- Chinese scholars predict that India will continue to actively engage in the Quad, resulting in deeper and broader collaboration. Some of these scholars offer policy recommendations to counter the Quad, such as upgrading the Russia-India-China trilateral, strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries and improving China-India relations.
- While the Chinese government might share scholars' view that the Quad is unlikely to become an Asian NATO, I suggest that its confrontational rhetoric on the partnership seeks to oppose opponents such as the US, appeal internationally and project strength. I also predict that if the government follows the advice of Chinese scholars, we might see more efforts to improve relations with India.

Introduction*

This report analyses recent Chinese scholarship on India's role in the Quad, a diplomatic partnership which comprises Japan, Australia, the United States and India that aims to achieve a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Initially formed as a relief response to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the grouping has, according to many commentators, since become a security dialogue responding to a rising China. The Chinese government claims that the Quad is a US-led attempt to establish a military alliance in the region, often referred to as an "Asian NATO". Chinese scholars agree but view the likelihood of success as very low due to India's approach to the partnership. Analysing this Chinese scholarship is valuable because it offers a proxy measure of Chinese leaders' reasoning behind policymaking decisions, a process that remains opaque. At stake is the larger question of how China

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imagines it will navigate an evolving international order in which the United States, China and India are projected to become the world's three largest economies during the current decade.¹

Beginning with a short background on the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region and the FOIP as its conceptual framework, the report briefly outlines the entwined development of the FOIP and the Quad. The FOIP is commonly deployed in strategic visions and strategies. It constitutes the ideological core of this new region, and the Quad is its foremost institutionalisation. I then review Chinese scholarship published between 2019 and 2023 on India's role in and approach to the Quad. Finally, drawing on the analyses, predictions and policy recommendations of Chinese scholars, I provide a few suggestions on how to interpret the Chinese government's rhetoric regarding the Quad and its potential future policies towards India.

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region

The current envisaging of the Indo-Pacific can be traced back to a speech delivered by former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to the Indian parliament in 2007.² During that speech, he spoke of a vast network encompassing India, Japan, the US and Australia, which would connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans.³ In 2012, Abe developed this concept in an article that argued that a “democratic security diamond” should be formed with the three aforementioned countries to prevent the South China Sea from becoming “Lake Beijing”.⁴ This illustrates that from its early history, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has been linked to anxieties about China's behaviour in the region.

In 2016, while in Kenya, Abe set out what would become the FOIP in a speech, referring to “free and open oceans and continents”.⁵ However, it was not until 2017 that the conceptual framework for an Indo-Pacific that was free and open gained significant momentum. The term was adopted by official Japanese discourse that year,⁶ but the main catalyst for its rise in the strategic firmament was the publication of the US National Security Strategy, which identified the Indo-Pacific as the principal area of interest amid intensifying rivalry with China, and the FOIP as a strategic interest.⁷ Since then, the trajectories of the Indo-Pacific and FOIP have diverged somewhat, the former becoming more descriptive and the latter more normative.

These differing approaches to the Indo-Pacific and the FOIP can be seen in ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (2019), the US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022) and the European Union (EU) Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2021). ASEAN's approach is cautious, defining the Indo-Pacific in terms of geographical scope and trade opportunities.⁸ In contrast, the US has adopted a proactive strategy on advancing the FOIP, justifying its focus on the region as due to China's “coercion and aggression” there.⁹ The EU maintains that it will cooperate “on issues of common interests” while pushing back where there are “fundamental disagreements” with China.¹⁰ Neither ASEAN's outlook nor the EU strategy mention the FOIP. In 2024, Sweden published a defence policy direction on the Indo-Pacific that highlights the dynamic between China and the US in the region.¹¹ It also does not employ the language of the FOIP.

Since the publication of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2022, the Chinese government has viewed the Indo-Pacific concept with hostility, seeing it as an attempt by the US to contain

China.¹² For this reason, China prefers to refer to its neighbouring maritime region as the Asia-Pacific.¹³ Prior to the US publication, the Chinese government had a more ambiguous stance on the regionalisation.¹⁴

The Quad and its FOIP framework

Even though the Quad is arguably the strongest institutional expression of the FOIP today, the two have different origins. The history of the Quad is usually divided in retrospect into two phases: Quad 1.0 and Quad 2.0. Quad 1.0 dates back to 2004, when Japan, Australia, the United States and India formed a short-lived “core group” in response to the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in that year.¹⁵ The grouping became active again in 2006,¹⁶ but support waned in 2007, particularly following Abe’s election defeat, as he had been a driving force.¹⁷ Its last hurrah is usually considered to be the Malabar naval exercise that year, which involved all four countries.¹⁸ Australia formally withdrew from the grouping in 2008, marking the end of Quad 1.0.¹⁹

Its revival as Quad 2.0 and Abe’s security diamond in 2017 was largely due to three factors: the development of bilateral and mini-lateral networks among the members; increased military-to-military ties; and China’s growing global assertiveness, including towards each of the four countries. For instance, India experienced a tense stand-off with China at the Doklam trijunction between Bhutan, India and China in 2017.²⁰ In 2019, the foreign ministers of the Quad countries agreed to meet annually, Australia rejoined the Malabar exercise in the following year, and in 2021 it was decided that regular summits would be held.²¹ The first summit resulted in the launch of the Quad Vaccine Partnership to address frustrations over management of the Covid-19 pandemic in the region.²² The recent intensification of collaboration within the partnership has led some commentators to suggest that the Quad might be entering a 3.0 phase.²³ Others have proposed that the Quad is becoming “Quad+” as it might find new potential partners.²⁴

In the communiqué issued after the first leaders’ summit in 2021, it was made clear that the group had adopted the FOIP as its framework. The communiqué stated that the partnership’s “vision” was to promote a “free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond”.²⁵ Since 2017, the Quad has been progressively institutionalised through various collaborations, which have included at least eight working groups spanning areas from climate to critical technologies;²⁶ partnerships on providing real-time regional maritime data;²⁷ fellowships aimed at strengthening people-to-people ties; initiatives in areas ranging from agriculture to artificial intelligence,²⁸ mechanisms to address international standards; and platforms that cater to business.²⁹

The Quad has been careful not to mention China directly in official statements. Instead, it has made oblique references, such as expressing concern over the South China Sea.³⁰ While external factors driven by worries about China’s behaviour are bringing the partners closer, internal factors are also keeping them apart. As the only non-US ally, India’s vision of the international order differs markedly from that of the other three. India has sought to avoid any outright containment of China and is reluctant to offer unconditional support for the US strategic framework.³¹ This dynamic was illustrated during the 2024 summit, when Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi said in his opening statement that the Quad was not against

anyone, a remark widely interpreted as a signal to China.³² Later, former US President Joe Biden was caught on a hot mic telling the other leaders that China's continued aggressive behaviour was "testing" the four countries.³³ The Quad's softer approach contrasts with that of AUKUS, a trilateral defence and technology partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US, which explicitly aims to strengthen military deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region.³⁴

Chinese scholarship on India's role in the Quad

In 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) dismissed the Quad as a "headline-grabbing" idea that would "soon dissipate" like "sea foam".³⁵ By 2024, however, the Chinese government had changed tack and spokespersons from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were adopting a significantly more alarmed tone, describing the Quad as the most important grouping in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, a strategy designed to contain China and perpetuate US hegemony in the region.³⁶ The Chinese government's position is clear – that the Quad is a US-led attempt to establish an "Asian NATO". What are Chinese scholars writing on the subject, and why might studying their scholarship be a productive endeavour?

Historically, scholars have been held in great public prestige in China. They are taken seriously by both the state and the public.³⁷ Political scientists Huiyun Feng and Kai He have described the relationship between Chinese International Relations (IR) scholars and Chinese leaders as both "complicated" and "mutually constitutive". While Chinese IR scholars "influence leaders' views on international politics", leaders' policy choices "construct a boundary for Chinese IR scholars as to what to think and write".³⁸ Academics comply with the government's rules on public discourse, but this does not mean uniformity of scholarship and a wide range of values and views are expressed.³⁹ Overall, Chinese IR scholars are not directly involved in policymaking, but studying their writing can be important as they serve as a "proxy measure" of the reasoning within the Chinese policy community and government. This is particularly valuable given the opacity of the leadership's decision-making process.⁴⁰

Following historian Timothy Cheek's characterisation, I identify "Chinese intellectuals" as individuals who were "born Chinese *and* live and work in the PRC [People's Republic of China]". Cheek writes that if a person does not fulfil these criteria, for example, a Chinese national born in China but working abroad, they would be considered a foreign commentator and thus unable to speak authoritatively within the Chinese intellectual world. As the purpose of this report is to analyse Chinese scholarship as a "proxy measure", I am mainly interested in scholarship written by individuals who can speak authoritatively within the Chinese domestic discourse. When I refer to Chinese scholars, I am therefore referring to those recognised as Chinese intellectuals in this sense.⁴¹

I searched for Chinese academic articles using the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, the largest of its kind. The search term "India (印度)" was chosen in conjunction with the various Chinese translations of the Quad (as yet there is no standardised translation). These included different ways of expressing quadrilateral (四方/四边) in combination with security (安全) and/or dialogue (对话) and mechanism (机制), or just the four Quad countries US-Japan-Australia-India (美日澳印) in different orders. Because of the report's limited scope, I chose articles in which both the Quad and India occurred in the title, thereby excluding others that may have addressed the topic but had a slightly different

focus. The search yielded seven articles, all of which had policy implications since they made predictions and/or policy recommendations (Appendix).

The first articles were published in 2019 and the most recent appeared in 2023. The authors are affiliated with various research institutions, such as the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China (the highest-level party school for training cadres),⁴² the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (probably China's oldest IR think tanks, funded mostly by the Ministry of State Security and catering mainly to the Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Leading Group),⁴³ as well as Sichuan University and Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (both leading institutions in South Asian Studies in China). Four of the articles were produced as part of funded research projects, including a major grant from the National Social Science Fund.⁴⁴ Despite the small number of articles, the variety of authors from different prestigious research institutions, along with the fact that the research received external funding, indicates that the topic is at least on trend, if not also politically relevant.

India's ambivalence towards the Quad

All the surveyed articles address India's motives for and constraints on participation in the Quad, including the two published in 2019 by Chen Jianshan (陈建山) and the article co-authored by Zhang Li (张丽) and Wang Hongxu (王红续). In their article, Zhang and Wang discuss India's ambivalence towards the Quad: its ambition to use the Quad to balance China, but also its reluctance to commit more fully, since India does not want its participation to affect its trade with China. The article focuses primarily on the factors limiting India's engagement, such as its need to navigate US hostility towards Russia while maintaining good relations with Moscow, and its participation in both Japan-America-India (JAI) and Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral meetings. The authors also argue that India's continued pursuit of its traditional non-alignment foreign policy means it has no interest in turning the Quad into an Asian NATO.

Drawing on their analysis, they recommend three concrete policy measures to the Chinese government. The first is to exploit the divergent interests of the Quad members: Japan wants political allies; India wants to advance its Act East policy, which aims to strengthen economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries, and to fortify its position in the Indian Ocean; Australia wants to protect the South Pacific; and the US wants to contain China. The second recommendation is to make use of US trade policy on India. In 2018, the first Trump administration imposed high tariffs on Indian imports, after which India signalled to Japan, Russia and Australia that they should collaborate more closely to circumvent such policies. In the future, China could take advantage of these kinds of situations. The third policy recommendation is to institutionalise and elevate the RIC trilateral meetings to regular summits as a stronger RIC would naturally counter and contain JAI and the Quad.⁴⁵

Chen Jianshan also makes policy recommendations in his article, offering the general assessment that "regarding India's overall perception of 'Diamond 2.0 [Quad]', in general, China need not be overly anxious, but should prevent its development in directions that are unfavourable to China".⁴⁶ This assessment is founded mainly on his overview of India-based expert and media statements on the Quad, which Chen categorises into two groups. The first group, which advocate cautious engagement, does so because it believes that the US is an unreliable partner, and that Japan is chiefly interested in short-term gains and suffers from a volatile domestic situation (as demonstrated by the ending of Quad 1.0 after Abe's

resignation). It believes that the Quad will provoke China and that it would contradict India's foreign policy of strategic autonomy. The other group holds that it is in India's interests to be more active as this would facilitate a stronger relationship with the US, and because Japan is now striving to develop a Quad 2.0 from which India could benefit. This would help to boost India's economy and security, advance its Act East policy and counterbalance China.

Having outlined India's mixed attitudes to the Quad, Chen states that India's reason for joining was self-interest. This means that the Quad will not become a military alliance as India wants to remain strategically autonomous and does not seek to contain China. However, China should still act to prevent India and the Quad from developing in an "unfavourable" way. It should do this, first, by improving China-India relations by building strategic trust, maintaining open communication and increasing people-to-people exchanges; second, by leveraging the differing interests of the Quad members while strengthening China's bilateral relations with each member; third, by developing relations with Southeast Asian countries to make them "strongholds" in an effort to counter the Quad; and, fourth, by supporting "morality and justice" by fostering a "community with a shared future for mankind" (China's slogan for foreign policy) with Indo-Pacific nations.⁴⁷

India's turn towards the Quad

While the articles published in 2019 portrayed India as being on the fence about whether to actively engage with the Quad, articles published after 2020 agree that India had chosen to do so. This change in opinion perhaps reflects the Chinese government's transition in rhetoric from describing the Quad as "sea foam" to labelling it as an "Asian NATO" in the making. It also corresponds with the sharp deterioration in China-India relations following the deadly Galwan Valley border clash in 2020, a point also emphasised by Chinese scholars. Both Wang Shida (王世达) and Liu Siwei (刘思伟) analyse this change in their articles published in 2021. In his article, Wang points out that India's active engagement has enabled the Quad to evolve; regular summits are being held, various proposals and measures have been introduced to rebuild global supply and production chains, and the Malabar exercise now includes all four Quad members.

Wang explains India's changed approach from political, economic and security perspectives. Politically, India sees the Quad as key to advancing the Indo-Pacific concept, thereby enhancing its global strategic influence by centring India in the regional imagination. In terms of security, the Quad could provide India with resources to counter China. This need became apparent after the Doklam stand-off in 2018, which Wang argues was the concrete event that led India to favour a stronger Quad. Similarly, the Galwan Valley conflict led India to invite Australia to rejoin the Malabar exercise. Economically, the Quad helps India to achieve its great power ambitions by increasing economic cooperation with the other members while reducing its reliance on China. These factors have all contributed to India's more active engagement with the Quad, but the political aspect is the most important.

In the short to medium term, Wang predicts that India will actively engage with and use the Quad, leading to an expansion of the Quad network (Quad+) and substantial collaboration within it. This is because India now recognises the political, security and economic advantages offered by the partnership. However, this expansion and deepening of collaboration will remain limited. Although India has abandoned its non-alignment policy, it still follows a "multi-alignment" approach, meaning that India will prioritise its own interests. Given its history of colonisation and desire to become a great power, India will refuse to become anyone's "little

brother” in the Quad. Furthermore, India’s clearer understanding of its role in the partnership enables it to use the Quad for mutual benefit while shaping its development in line with its own interests, which include seeking to avoid it being directed against any particular country. These limitations mean that the Quad will not become an “Asian NATO”.⁴⁸

Of all the reviewed articles, Liu Siwei’s is the most downloaded by far. Her article analyses India’s changed approach to the Quad from a neoclassical realist perspective, holding that foreign policy can be explained by the distribution of power in the international system, as well as by “intervening variables” which are often domestic variables that can shape foreign policy. Three such variables form the main discussion in her article: India’s perception of the international system, the preferences of its policy and strategic communities and the power of the government. Liu writes that she adopted an “Indian perspective”, arguing that while most previous scholarship has tended to divide the history of the Quad into Quad 1.0 and Quad 2.0, a more significant turning point for India’s cautious to active approach was the transition from the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–2014) to that of Modi (2014–).

During the Singh administration, while India recognised that China was rising and the US declining, it was unclear whether India required foreign support to counterbalance China’s rise. While the policy and strategic communities had misgivings about China, they still pursued a non-alignment policy and wanted to avoid becoming too close to the US, preferring to keep their distance from the Quad. As both of Singh’s governments were coalitions, and some coalition parties viewed the US as an imperialist power, it was difficult to establish close relations with the US during this period—despite significant improvements. India’s perception of the international system changed under the Modi government. China was perceived as a greater threat, particularly after the Doklam standoff and Galwan conflict. China’s rapid rise and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were also contributing factors. The policy and strategic communities realised that India had a special position in the Quad and the importance the US assigned to India. In tandem, India shifted from a non-alignment to a multi-alignment policy, viewing the US as a more useful partner. The Modi governments have also been single-party majority governments that can implement new policies more easily.

Liu makes some predictions for the future. If India continues to believe that China’s rise is at India’s expense, it will continue to actively engage with the Quad to counterbalance China. However, this engagement is constrained by India’s desire to maintain good relations with Russia and to continue to participate in forums such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). India will continue to actively participate in non-military and soft power initiatives and will also pursue greater security and economic cooperation. These engagements will, nevertheless, not result in the Quad developing into a military alliance. India may have adopted a multi-alignment approach, but it still wants to maintain the greatest possible strategic autonomy. The Quad will therefore never be used in the China-India border dispute. Lastly, because the Quad members have different interests, India’s approach towards the Quad may still change in the future.⁴⁹

Zooming in on the Quad’s potential as a military alliance

Although both Liu Siwei and Wang Shida analyse India’s shift in approach to the Quad, they reach different conclusions on why this change has taken place. Liu highlights domestic intervening variables, foregrounding the differences between the governments of Singh and Modi. Wang focuses more on India’s great power ambitions, arguing that the Indo-Pacific

concept has been pivotal in shaping its approach to the Quad. Despite their differing analyses, both scholars agree that India is likely to continue to actively engage with the Quad, albeit without it becoming a military alliance. Two subsequent articles published by Song Haiyang (宋海洋) and Hu Juan (胡娟) in 2022 also account for India's altered engagement with the partnership. However, these articles home in more on the potential security and military implications of the Quad and India's role in such developments.

Song Haiyang's article attributes India's engagement with Quad 2.0 squarely to the deterioration in its relations with China. In security terms, India is anxious about China's rise, because of its implications for bilateral relations and its wider international and regional impact, particularly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. These concerns have prompted India to join the other Quad members in containing China and countering the BRI. Due to these concerns, India is now willing to collaborate with the other Quad members on military matters in the Indo-Pacific region, as demonstrated by the Malabar exercise. However, India's engagement with the Quad is still restricted. Song repeats many of the reasons mentioned in previous articles, while adding new ones that reflect the current political situation. These include the differing interpretations of international maritime law between the US and India, India's neutrality in the "Russia-Ukraine conflict", disappointment with the Quad Vaccine Partnership and its desire to maintain good relations with ASEAN.

Like others, Song predicts that India will continue to play an active role in the Quad, resulting in closer collaboration (Quad 3.0), an expanded network and the possibility of new members (Quad+). In particular, the Quad is predicted to increase its infrastructure collaboration to counter the BRI. As the Quad expands and increases its collaboration, there is a chance that the partnership will evolve into a platform for addressing multiple types of issues beyond just a security dialogue. However, Song also suggests that the Quad might remain informal and avoid establishing a permanent institutional setup due to members' different strategic outlooks. In addition, India wants the Quad to remain a strategic partnership so that it can continue to participate in organisations such as the BRICS, the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Hence, the Quad will not become an alliance.⁵⁰

Hu Juan's article is entirely dedicated to discussing India's role in the partnership and the possibility of the Quad evolving into a military alliance. She argues that the US has progressively worked to establish an Asian NATO, first by developing the concept of the Indo-Pacific, then by implementing an Indo-Pacific strategy, and finally by attempting to create an Indo-Pacific alliance system. Specifically, the US has sought to achieve this in two ways: by pushing NATO to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy and by encouraging the Quad to become a military alliance. The main reasons for this are US perceptions of China as a rising threat, coupled with its recognition of the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region and India's rise. Despite US efforts to turn the Quad into an Asian NATO, Hu maintains that India would not support such a development, citing the same reasons as earlier scholars.

Among all the authors, Hu makes the most policy recommendations. She reasons that, as India is the Quad's "shortcoming", China can most effectively counter US attempts to build an Asian NATO by targeting India. She suggests strengthening the RIC format and proposes domestic measures to bolster China's economic and military power. She also emphasises the need to defend globalisation and free trade in order to counter the Quad's attempts to establish alternative supply chains that exclude China. China should use international

fora such as the World Trade Organization to achieve this. The Chinese government should also continue to promote a “community with a shared future for mankind”, especially in the surrounding region through the BRI. To avoid a further deterioration in relations between China and India, China should manage their differences and avoid hard confrontations. Lastly, China could learn from Russia’s experience of sanctions. One way to address possible future sanctions against China would be to strengthen the multilateral organisations in which India participates, such as the SCO, the BRICS and the AIIB.⁵¹

The most recent article, published in 2023 by Lou Chunhao (楼春豪), differs from the others in that it was not published in an academic journal. Although it is classified as such in CNKI, *World Affairs* is a popular magazine on international affairs published by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Lou’s article is shorter, less nuanced and more aggressive in tone. Like previous scholarship, Lou observes that India has shifted from a cautious to an active approach to the Quad. He also notes that India has deepened its strategic alignment with the partnership. Finally, he argues that India’s strategy towards the Quad will be difficult to reverse. The Indo-Pacific strategy is advantageous for India because it improves the country’s geopolitical standing, enabling it to use its status to influence other countries in balancing China. India could also distance itself further from China and become more reliant on the Quad as US-China rivalry intensifies. Since India is the “weak link” in the partnership, this would result in a more stable Quad. There are, however, still constraints. China-US relations could change and the US is critical of how India treats its minorities. As neighbours, India could ill-afford full-scale competition with China.⁵²

Trends and common points

Although the primary material only consists of seven articles, it is interesting how the focus of the articles shifted over the years. The two articles from 2019 focus on India’s ambivalence towards the Quad, as India considered whether it should adopt a cautious or active approach. This changed in the two articles published in 2021, which observed India’s increased engagement in the Quad and analysed the reasons behind this shift. In the following year, the two articles mainly addressed security and military issues. While the scholars provided different explanations for this change, they all agreed that deteriorating China-India relations played a significant part, as did India’s realisation that the partnership offered various benefits. Most of the scholars predicted that India would continue to engage and invest in collaboration with the other Quad members. This trajectory corresponds with the Chinese government’s own shifting rhetoric on the Quad.

As the Chinese government is mainly concerned that the Quad will develop into a military alliance, and sets the boundaries for research, it is unsurprising that all the authors address the prospect of an Asian NATO. They all write that the chances are slim. According to these scholars, this is because of India’s own considerations and role in the partnership. India’s position in the Quad is, among other things, described in the articles as the “fulcrum”,⁵³ a “special status”,⁵⁴ the “weakest link”,⁵⁵ a “weak link”,⁵⁶ and a “shortcoming”.⁵⁷ The logic is that although India might be the weakest link, the Quad would not exist without it, so it is therefore also its fulcrum. The scholars provide different reasons why India is restricting the Quad, but they all acknowledge India’s own great power ambitions and its desire to maintain strategic autonomy. Other often mentioned explanations are the differing interests of the Quad members, India-Russia relations, India’s desire to participate in multilateral organisation, such as the BRICS, and India not wanting the Quad to affect its trade with China.

The three articles offering policy recommendations suggest seven measures to prevent the Quad from developing in an unfavourable direction for China. These measures reflect the analyses and predictions of other scholars. Among the notable recommendations mentioned by at least two authors are to strengthen the RIC format, maintain good China-India relations, promote a “community with a shared future for mankind” in Southeast Asia and exploit the differing interests of the Quad members. Whether these measures are feasible or will be heeded by the Chinese government is another matter. In 2019, Chen Jianshan recommended that China should improve its relations with India. In the following year, the Galwan Conflict—the first fatal border clash since 1975—derailed relations.

The prospect of an Asian NATO and China’s approach to India

In their famous article from 2002, Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein asked “Why is there no NATO in Asia?”. The two scholars argued that part of the answer lay in the cultural construction of US national identity in the 1950s: US officials believed that Asians were too different civilizationally and racially to form an alliance with.⁵⁸ Three years later, fellow scholar Amitav Acharya responded that this was an incomplete explanation as “missing from the picture is any consideration of the norms and collective identities of the Asian themselves”.⁵⁹ The international situation has changed since then, with both the Chinese government and Chinese scholars stating the US to be declining and China rising. To compensate for its diminishing power, the Chinese government claims that the US is trying to establish a military alliance in the region, with the Quad at its forefront. Chinese scholars write that while the US is seeking to contain China and is keen to form a military alliance, the Quad is unlikely to develop into such an alliance, mainly because of India’s foreign policy strategy.

If Chinese scholars unanimously agree that the Quad will not develop into an Asian NATO, does the Chinese government believe the same? Spokespersons from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs often adopt an uncompromising, confrontational style to dismiss their opponents’ views, while appearing detached to convince an international audience.⁶⁰ Not appearing weak to a domestic audience is also important.⁶¹ Since IR scholarship can serve as a proxy measure of the reasoning of the policy community and the government, one interpretation might be that although the Chinese government shares the strategic community’s analysis, it chooses a confrontational stance in order to silence opponents such as the US and reassure nationalistic domestic audiences, while attempting to gain international support by criticising the Quad in an “objective” manner.

Feng Huiyun and Kai He suggest four models for how Chinese IR scholarship interacts with the government: as an epistemic community providing knowledge for policymaking, as a free market where policymakers consume a marketplace of ideas provided by scholars, as a signalling mechanism in which scholars can test societal and international responses to new policy ideas and as a mirror that reflects Chinese foreign policy orientations. These models, Kai and Feng emphasise, are tentative and not mutually exclusive.⁶² In Chinese scholarship on India’s role and approach to the Quad, mirroring can be seen in the thematic trajectories of both the government and scholars, as well as in their shared focus on an “Asian NATO”.

Since China has implemented many of the recommendations set out in the scholarship in recent years, it does appear that IR scholars and the government enjoy substantial interaction, making them “mutually constitutive”. Relations between China and India have

eased following a new patrol agreement reached in 2024, a first step towards improving a relationship that had been highly strained since 2020.⁶³ China has expressed an interest in resuming RIC meetings, which India put on hold following the Galwan conflict.⁶⁴ Seven ASEAN countries have already agreed with China to build a “community with a shared future for mankind”.⁶⁵ Assuming that the Chinese government believes that Chinese scholars are correct in suggesting that the deterioration in China-India relations was crucial to why India became more active in the Quad, and that India would be decisive in whether the Quad evolves into a military alliance, it would make sense in China’s strategic calculus to further improve China-India relations. Consequently, we might see China making greater efforts to improve relations with New Delhi in the near future, although such recommendations have not been acted on in the past.

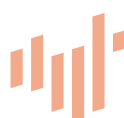


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