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CHINESE SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON THE US-PROMOTED “INDO-PACIFIC” CONCEPT AND STRATEGY

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Introduction¹

In November 2019, the administration of US president Donald Trump adopted the construct of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ for its regional strategy.² In the Western academic literature, there has been ample discussion of the meaning and regional implications of this geopolitical notion, including even a handbook on Indo-Pacific studies.³ What has remained unexplored, however, is the ways that China-based scholars view this US-promoted concept and strategy. This is surprising since the concept has been framed around the apparent challenge that China poses to the region’s liberal order that is underpinned by US power. Guo Yanjun, of China Foreign Affairs University, has bluntly rejected the Indo-Pacific concept, asserting that it is just the latest iteration of the US’s “all-round suppression of China”. He has urged members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) not to give up on their “balanced diplomacy” (meaning not choosing sides).⁴ By the same token, Wei Zongyou, of Fudan University, has warned that the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy “will ratchet up economic, political, military, ideological, and technological pressures against Beijing.”⁵ Ji Xianbai, of Renmin University, has further developed and advocated for General Secretary Xi Jinping’s rival geopolitical frame of a “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind.”⁶

The scant English-language scholarly writings available, however, just scratch the surface of the Chinese scholarship that is available on the new topic. What is more, articles written in Mandarin and published in

China-based journals contribute to the domestic debate on foreign affairs within China. In fact, China-based scholars are in some way, shape, or form expected to work *for China*,⁷ and do so by advancing novel ideas to pursue. Hence the use of the term “China-based” and not “Chinese” in this article, as Chinese scholars can be based outside of China and publish without restraints. China-based scholars may self-censor their own writing to avoid being too controversial – particularly since the ‘grey zone’ of what is permissible shifts over time and punishment can be applied retroactively – and drafts are typically politically reviewed before publication in a journal. This tells us that when scholarly policy ideas are floated within China, these have been allowed to circulate. In turn, this means that they reflect the bandwidth of policy options that are before the central leadership, giving us a peek-by-proxy view inside the “black box” of decision-making in the government quarters of *Zhongnanhai* in Beijing. Further, this also provides for a predictive element. As Lynch observes, “studying [China-based scholars] images can be useful in trying to assess what trajectory (in Chinese foreign policy) is likely to emerge, precisely because [they] are operating inside parameters imposed” through the centre’s propaganda *xitong*, a hierarchical line of authority in the Party-state bureaucracy.⁸

Following David Shambaugh⁹ and Shaun Breslin,¹⁰ Feng Huiyun and Kai He have explained how this production and reproduction of International Relations (IR) ideas works.¹¹ Whereas staff at think tanks, who are often directly tied to a particular ministry or agency, generally put forward shorter-term analyses justifying the existing line, scholars at universities have the time and space to generate in-depth ideas on where the country should go. In the ‘free marketplace of ideas’ in which they compete, out-of-the-box, even paradigmatic departures from established practice can be proposed for adoption by the central leadership.¹² Yan Xuetong, of Tsinghua University, has provided a compelling example. In 2011–2013, Yan argued that China should abandon its non-alliance stance, well over a decade before Xi Jinping ‘purchased’ the idea in the form of a “no limits” strategic partnership with Russia in February 2022.¹³ Importantly, scholar-government interaction goes in both directions. Apart from conveying its position on a certain issue, the frames and slogans that Party and state officials espouse can signal what they could use intellectual elaboration on from scholars.¹⁴ Examples are the leadership’s call for the “democratization of international relations” (*quoji guanxi minzhu hua*) contra “US hegemony,” and the promotion of China’s “Global Security Initiative” (*quanqiu anquan changyi*) of supposedly “indivisible security.”

A relevant reservation in our inference must be that what is spelled out above is by no means a causal relationship; indeed, many scholarly ideas are not adopted. Moreover, often China-based scholars serve an information function shaping how policymakers in the ministries implement the course the central leadership has decided on. Nor is the output of China-based scholars monolithic. In fact, it is their diversity in viewpoint within the constraints of their discursive environment that is of interest in this article's approach, helping us to make sense of the ways that China may be heading.¹⁵

The following two-part research question is posited:

How have China-based scholars interpreted the Indo-Pacific concept and US strategy, and what have they advanced on how to deal with the challenges and opportunities the new notion poses to Chinese interests as they view them?

The journal articles and policy writing analysed are all in Mandarin and largely written by senior scholars, meaning, in the case of universities, associate or full professors. A smaller number of scholars are based at the elite social science academies that also operate under the State Council, and at the Central Party School that is tied to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Committee. The articles were mostly retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) online database by entering the keyword "Indo-Pacific" (*yin tai*) there. The sample consisted of 1,772 articles and was narrowed down by clicking on the category "strategy" (*zhanlüe*), yielding just the articles on the geopolitics surrounding the concept. This resulted in a final tally of 371, mostly from 2021 and 2022, which was then narrowed down further by selecting on the repute of the affiliated institution and to a lesser extent of the journal, and the number of downloads (preferably a thousand or more) and citations (preferably a handful at least). All affiliation of scholars are mentioned in the footnotes. Exhaustive of the authoritative viewpoints available, in the end 34 articles by 49 scholars were analysed in the article, with some added supporting sources.

The remainder of the article is straightforward. The next section elaborates on the main ways the Indo-Pacific concept and strategy have been interpreted. The third section details how the ways and means of the Biden administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific have been viewed. Subsequently, the perceived (expected) impact of the US Indo-Pacific strategy on particular Chinese interests is described in the fourth section. The fifth section lays out how the Indo-Pacific concept has been received and

incorporated by regional actors (tacitly) allied to the US. The policy limitations in the US strategy that scholars point out, and the countermeasures they propose, are laid out in the last sixth section. With the caveat that for some well-connected and/or (social) media-savvy scholars (one thinks of Zhang Weiwei, of Fudan University) their policy influence can occur in a different manner, the conclusion summarizes the common threads in Chinese observations and traces a key frame and idea that was adopted by the centre (*zhongyang*) in Beijing in 2023.

A realist, zero-sum interpretation of US intentions

The predominant theme in China's Indo-Pacific discourse is represented by the terms "hegemony" (*baquan*), "confrontation" (*duikang*), "check and balance" (*zhiheng*), "shaping" (*suzao*), "international positioning" (*guoji dingwei*), "wedging" (*xiezhi*), and "exclusive" (*paitaxing*). As their "realist" (*xianshi zhuyi*), "power politics" (*qiangquan zhengzhi*) connotation suggests, many authors frame the Japanese-American construct as a rhetorical vehicle intended to "contain China" (*ezhi zhongguo*) and "prevent China's rise" (*ezhi zhongguo jueqi*).¹⁶ The US' ultimate aim is to "create a bipolar regional security order,"¹⁷ and in that, China-based observers see great continuity between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations.¹⁸ What is more, Russia appears to play a larger role in Chinese discourse when compared to the situation prior to the war in Ukraine. The US, some China-based scholars believe, intends to drag the world into a new Cold War by "tying up" (*kunbang*) China and Russia into an "axis of authoritarianism," a notion that refers to Biden's "democracies versus autocracies" frame. Due to this, Ye Hailin and Li Ming'en, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), see no letting up in American strategic pressure on China.¹⁹ The Russo-Ukraine War has not changed the direction of American grand strategy. Zhao Minghao, of Fudan University, even sees the "extreme weakening" of Russia by Western military support to Ukraine as also aimed at weakening a (tacit) joint China-Russia bloc. China views the strategic partnership it has with Russia as a way to counterbalance US balancing with allies,²⁰ which could explain China's pivotal technological support in reconstituting Russia's military power.²¹ Furthermore, Biden's US Indo-Pacific strategy is viewed as not just designed to form an anti-China front to weaken China, its heightening of the "China Threat" discourse is also meant to bind together allies and partners. Hence, the US "will not and cannot consider relaxing its suppression of China."²²

US motivations are often explained from a systemic viewpoint, an angle that we know from the debate about “US decline” after the 2008 financial crisis.²³ The scholars under review often argue that the Indo-Pacific push is being driven by Americans’ realization that the US is declining relative to a rising China. To offset this, and retain its hegemonic position, they argue that the US introduced the Indo-Pacific concept in order to insert the other Global South heavyweight in the region, India, into the strategic equation.²⁴ Ge Tengfei, of the National University of Defence Technology, further sees Biden’s version of the US Indo-Pacific strategy as motivated by reversing the “chaos” (*hunluan*) of the Trump years, with Biden trying to restore the US’ dominant position and international status (reputation).²⁵ The “hasty withdrawal” and “strategic defeat” of the US in Afghanistan may have also played a role in the US doubling down on its focus on China and the region.²⁶ Still, even with Trump no longer at the helm, Fan Jishe, of the Central Party School, sees the more isolationist forces within the Republican Party continuing to be influential, leading him to question whether US commitment to foreign affairs will continue to a substantial degree in practice.²⁷

The ways and means of the Biden administration

Compared to Trump’s confrontational style towards allies, Yan Xuotong considers Biden’s “club strategy” to be remarkably more successful in mobilizing allies from both East and West, and therefore more daunting. The Biden administration works *with* allies instead of castigating them and places greater emphasis on diplomacy.²⁸ Yan’s view is broadly shared among scholars, who use similar terms to describe the main tenet of Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy: the rallying of allies and “quasi” (non-treaty) allies in informal, non-binding ways through a US-led “latticework”; “mini-multilateralism”; “multi-layered bloc politics”; the formation of various “small clubs.”²⁹ The lower bar for accession does not take away from the fact that a more unambiguous alignment in the competition between China and the US is signalled.³⁰

In the views of the scholars, the security and military plans of the Biden administration are more planned and thorough than those of its predecessor and are actually being implemented. Liu Lin, of the Academy of Military Sciences, points to Southeast Asia as the centre of geopolitical gravity in the US’ attempt to rebuild its alliances and partnerships to confront China. The US has enhanced these countries’ maritime capabilities and situational awareness, signed basing and rotation of forces agreements,

conducted joint exercises, and developed defence industry ties.³¹ Nevertheless, many scholars point to the site of the real challenge to China: what Wei Zongyou, of Fudan University, calls Biden’s “trinity” implementation plan. Next to military moves, there is the administration’s offensive “frontier diplomacy” with online and offline high-level meetings, and the strengthening of economic, trade and supply chain cooperation and coordination on China with “like-minded” countries. The full force of Biden’s whole-of-society approach was on display in the “Build Back Better” summit of the G7 in 2021.³²

In addition to this, a number of scholars assess the strength of Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy to rest in the common values that it promotes to “smear China.”³³ Tian Guangqiang, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and others point to “ideology” (*sixiang*) – liberalism – as the rhetorical glue that ties together in the Indo-Pacific not just the ‘Quad’, which consists of the US, Australia, Japan, and India, but also the European allies.³⁴ Whereas during the Cold War the West actively promoted its democratic system abroad to propel new democracies, liberal ideology is now said to be a means to keep (informal) alliances together.³⁵ “Under the guise of” Western values such as democracy and human rights, and a rules-based international order, the US ostensibly uses “agenda-setting and hot topics to rile up the [international] public [against China].” A group of Renmin University scholars view the American tactic as widening the ideological gap between China and the regional countries that are allied to the US.³⁶ Creating an unstable regional order, the US is accused of weaponizing liberalism to create rival “camps” (*zhenyi*).³⁷ In this author’s view, the apprehension, and accompanying wishful forecast of doom for the US strategy expressed by China-based scholars, point to significant worries about the effectiveness of “ideology” in tightening China’s perceived “big encirclement and suppression” (*da weijiao*) of China.³⁸

Perceived impact of the US strategy on Chinese interests

Because the US regional military alliances concern a long-standing reality and because China’s core geostrategic initiative to gain regional influence is economic, China-based scholars dedicate most attention to the Indo-Pacific Strategy’s impact on economics and on Xi Jinping’s signature Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). In this respect, Southeast Asia is viewed as the main battleground, a region where the US is believed to want to impede China’s economic access. Zhao Minghao states that it is *the US*,

not China, that is “manipulating” (*caozong*) vulnerable countries’ perception and does so on issues such as “supply chain security, technological competition, digital authoritarianism, and influence operations.”³⁹ Here, we can observe a proposed counter-narrative to the American-promoted discourse of a “debt trap”, which holds that China lures poor Third World countries into Beijing-funded infrastructure projects that they can ill afford. The focus on Southeast Asia is natural when we consider the fact that having a “friendly” and “peaceful” external environment (*waibu huanjing*) has traditionally had primacy in Chinese foreign policy.⁴⁰

Huang He and Zhang Yu-ting, of Fudan University, posit that the US’s “four circles” mechanism for the Indo-Pacific focused on bilateral American ties could challenge the ‘centrality’ of ASEAN,⁴¹ a founding principle of the Association that is aimed at preventing outside powers from coercing either individual members or the whole organization. For China, the US push into Southeast Asia could compromise China’s current regional position, a position where “China basically dominates the major [ASEAN ‘+’] cooperative frameworks in East Asia”, platforms that have allowed China to develop “rich relational power” vis-à-vis other major powers. The US effort is designed, it is argued, to create a US-centred order and “break the regional trend based on inclusiveness, openness, and cooperation”,⁴² a well-known juxtaposing frame in official propaganda.⁴³

Unsettling to China-based observers is the potential impact of the US’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), announced in May 2022, on Southeast Asian countries. The scholars focus, in particular, on the ways that the US is advancing a rival regime to offset the ASEAN-centred Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), favoured by China. The RCEP trade regime, which includes China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand as well as all ten ASEAN states, went into effect in January 2022 and introduced common rules and removed many tariffs. However, Cheng Hanping and Liu Zhe, of Nanjing University, note that Southeast Asian nations are still “in a state of exploration”, so therefore China still has room to manoeuvre as the concrete benefits of IPEF are not yet clear and the costs, for example in terms of limitations on third-party (Chinese) investments, may be considered undesirable by Southeast Asian governments.⁴⁴ Interestingly, Wang Chuanjian and Zhang Jia, of Tianjin Normal University, suggest that China has the duty to narrate the BRI story well (think of Xi’s dictum of “telling China’s story well” *jiang hao zhongguo gushi*)⁴⁵ to avoid (surely incorrect) criticism and misunderstanding by non-Chinese.⁴⁶

Reception of the US strategy by allied and aligned nations

Unsurprisingly, China-based analyses of, and the policy suggestions towards, those countries that have unequivocally chosen the US “camp” are different from those of states that are still regarded as redeemable or as having the “correct understanding” (*zhengque renshi*) of China. Described within the context of its history of non-alignment, India is presented as, in principle, still susceptible to Chinese arguments not to (fully) join a dreaded ‘united front’ against China. Still, the assessments under review follow the evolution of India’s foreign engagements over time and its growing assertiveness with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm. Cheng Hanping, of Nanjing University, and Zhang Jing, of the National University of Defence Technology, conclude that for India, the benefits of aligning with the US and confronting China now outweigh cooperation with China, as was demonstrated in India’s “tougher measures” with respect to the maritime leg of the Belt & Road Initiative.⁴⁷ For a long time, South Korea was spared in China-based scholarship, presumably because it was maintaining acceptable relations with Beijing. Under the unabashedly pro-American President Yoon Suk Yeol, however, South Korea is now also rebuked for yielding to Biden’s wooing, with Zheng Yulong, of Zhejiang International Studies University, lamenting that the Yoon administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy is “a complete replica” of the Japanese and American ones,⁴⁸ an assessment that is not unfounded.

Australia is portrayed by China-based scholars as a willing US “vassal” that has tried to ameliorate its strategic anxiety by accepting added US protection. As the US’s “southern anchor,” Australia’s geographic location provides the US with more launching grounds to “crush” (*fensui*) China’s “expansion of maritime power” beyond the semicircle of American allies that are located to China’s east. Australia is seen as the US’ “most trustworthy partner,” in large part because both countries are Western liberal democracies. According to these scholars another factor playing a role in US trust is the fact that Australia, unlike Japan, has “limited national strength” to pose a challenge to the US in the South Pacific.⁴⁹

Predictably, the most negative scholarly attention is reserved for Japan. Sun Xihui, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Jin Canrong, of Renmin University, argue that the “dominant variable” in Japan introducing the concept of an ‘Indo-Pacific’ region in 2016 was what they call the “complex structural contradictions” between China, Japan, and the US. Japan’s interpretation of its relative decline was

“mediated” via Japan’s domestic environment and the “Abe doctrine,” referring to the nationalist former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In Japan’s drive to change its external outlook into one of a “normal country,” Japan has tried to use (manipulate) US power and regional strategy.⁵⁰ Shi Yinhong, of Renmin University, maintains that Japan’s armament programme and closer military integration with the US, and its aligned statements on Taiwan policy in recent years, have “severely impacted (*chongji*) and even damaged (*sunhai*) the bottom line of the Taiwan issue, which is the political foundation of China–Japan relations.” Here, “bottom line” refers to adherence to Beijing’s One China principle. It is clear that Shi foresees Japan playing an active role if an overt war between China and the US over Taiwan were to occur.⁵¹

China-based scholars have also assessed the involvement of the EU and European countries with the Indo-Pacific. They argue that the motivations for major powers such as France and the United Kingdom to insert themselves into the region lie in securing their perceived regional interests as well as in trumpeting liberal norms. Their greater involvement follows their changed perception of China’s intentions to the negative.⁵² Just like the US, European nations stress that Southeast Asia is the geopolitical centre of gravity where they must play a role, and that ASEAN is the institution to support.⁵³ That said, the attention paid by the China-based scholars to NATO in 2021–2022, which back then had only incrementally taken steps to include China and the Indo-Pacific in its documents and statements, suggests that China fears the alliance and a “NATOization” (*beiyue hua*) of the region. The most viewed Indo-Pacific article in the CNKI portal, by this debate’s most influential scholar, Zhao Minghao, mentions NATO on eight different occasions, often as a reference point to explain US machinations.⁵⁴ Significantly, though, European countries’ limited number of naval assets means that they are generally not regarded as actors that can militarily act in the Indo-Pacific independently of the US.⁵⁵

Limitations of the US strategy, and proposed countermeasures

Delineating a difference between the intent of “foreign forces” (*jingwai shili*) – referring to the US and its “vassals” (*fuyong*) in Europe and the Indo-Pacific – and the means that they need to implement their plans, a number of scholars argue that the US-led Indo-Pacific grouping will inevitably be confronted with some of the problems that other great

powers faced in the past, namely limits on resources (capabilities), budgets, and personnel. Advancing the argument that states must avoid investing too much in geographic areas of secondary importance, this could be called the imperial overstretch argument. Quoting from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Ye Hailin and Li Ming'en liken the US Indo-Pacific strategy to a "snake in the mountain" posture, a posture with a "multi-point design that lacks focus in the use of means and geographical distribution."⁵⁶ As Shi Yinhong puts it, the strategy's main shortcomings are that, in practice, it covers a much smaller area than the vast Indo-Pacific region; horizontal coordination between different regions is minimal; and the degree of military cooperation between treaty allies and quasi-allies is thin.⁵⁷ Another observation contends that, by including more diverse members that have substantial differences with each other, and by having a looser institutional arrangement, the US will be confronted with the familiar collective action problem. If the US falters in safeguarding members' (diverging) demands and interests, this would damage the US' reputation, which would make promoting these kinds of informal multilateral schemes harder in the future, benefiting China.⁵⁸

Liu Feng, of Nankai University, and Zhong Zhenming, of Tongji University, argue that to "break up" (*chaisan*) the US quasi-alliances, China should employ "united front" (*tongyi zhanxian*) or "wedging" (*xiezi*) tactics. They advise China to "ally with different countries around different political, economic, or military issues," or apply "moderate pressure."⁵⁹ Another option, advanced by Wang Chuanjian and Zhang Jia, proposes that "China make full use of (exploit) the differences between the US, Japan, India, and Australia," leverage the benefits the BRI offers in relation to weaker countries, and "maintain active interactions" with Central and Southeast Asian states to "maintain stable (for Beijing, beneficial) relations."⁶⁰ Chen Jimin and Feng Zhennan, of the Central Party School, reaffirm what in Western discourse is known as China's "reactive assertiveness"⁶¹ as the appropriate posture to sustain. The scholars are blunt when they suggest that the preparation of countermeasures requires "strategic guidance and careful strategic deployment and tactical coordination."⁶² Here, we can think of the example of China's response to US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, when it conducted live-fire drills around the island. Concretely, China should adopt "targeted, operable, and effective strategies ... to divide the pressure group (the US-aligned nations) that the US tries to build." Beijing should sell this as "mutually beneficial" conduct.⁶³

This touches on China's main counter-narrative that projects China as adhering to "strategic neutrality" (*zhanlüe zhongli*).⁶⁴ Xin Qiang and Yu Jinyi, of Fudan University, echoed by others, propose that China frame the US Indo-Pacific strategy as a military-focused "group confrontation style" and contrast it with Chinese regional designs that are ostensibly aimed at fostering "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security," with China standing for an inclusive order with partnerships instead of military alliances.⁶⁵ This kind of rhetoric is typically mentioned within the context of China's supposed "genuine/true multilateralism" (*zhenzheng de duobian zhuyi*).⁶⁶ Ye Hailin proposes a mix of discrediting the US, such as counter-claims on the origins of COVID-19, racial injustice, and overseas war crimes, and employing Chinese cultural claims and "eastern ethics" to emphasize commonalities with neighbouring countries and legitimize the BRI.⁶⁷

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there are no scholars that advance Yan Xuetong's tough line on counterbalancing the US through a formal defence treaty with Russia.⁶⁸ China has long refrained from alliances; that is, apart from its exceptional relationship with North Korea that dates back to the early Cold War period. At most, Wang Peng, of Renmin University, argues, China needs to "pass the bottleneck period of [China's] rise" (being squeezed by the US on the last stretch to the finish of "national rejuvenation"), and "strengthen strategic coordination with Russia, Iran, and others countries, and strengthen the strategic pressure on the US in Eastern Europe and the Middle East" (to offset US pressure on China in the Indo-Pacific).⁶⁹

Conclusion

In the analysis of the Chinese scholarly discourse on the US Indo-Pacific concept and strategy, several common threads have become apparent. First, besides a handful of sources originating from the Central Party School, the writings by China-based scholars were largely realist, zero-sum in outlook, and often derived from a systemic rise and fall perspective. Here scholars further develop top cadres' refrain that "the East is rising while the West is declining."⁷⁰ Relatedly, everyone, with the exception of Liu Ming, Cheng Yong, and Shu Biquan of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, whose article was for that reason not representative, conveyed pessimism in their interpretation of the new notion and US intentions.⁷¹ In the debate on the Indo-Pacific within China, there is thus not much "diversity in viewpoint," as the introduction put it.

Either the strategic mood in China is universally pessimistic, or the Party line has narrowed to such an extent that a more positive, pro-engagement take is no longer accepted by censors. The former is probably the better explanation and this, in turn, dissuades scholars from arguing the latter viewpoint. To be sure, the across-the-board perception within China of a harsher external reality in the form of an augmented US-led confrontation is correct when we look at the Biden administration's "extreme competition" with China, led by his Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell.⁷² As such, China's perception mirrors that in the West, where the idea that a New Cold War has begun has set in.⁷³

With respect to Indo-Pacific countries, a recurring theme among the articles was the strategic distance from the US that these countries should maintain. Were they not to heed Beijing's advice and fall into the portrayed US strategic trap, doom is to befall them. Here we recognize a response to what Party propaganda juxtaposes as the inclusive "win-win" (*shuangying*) relationships offered by China versus the "Cold War mentality" (*lengzhan siwei*) harboured by the US; the scheming hegemon that attempts to divide countries in the region into "small circles" (*xiao quanzi*),⁷⁴ a frame we saw repeated in several of the articles. Disconcerting to China-based scholars was the possible impediment of China's economic access to Southeast Asia, which could compromise Xi Jinping's geo-economic Belt & Road strategy. What was further manifest were the various iterations of the "NATO" frame that were brought up. Psychologically, this suggests a significant fear that European and Indo-Pacific "vassals" could form a military bloc against China. A similarly hefty worry relates to the Biden administration's use of "ideology" as a rallying tool. As was the case with Biden's diplomatic "club" and its low bar to accession, China-based scholars judged this as rather effective in swaying countries to adopt clearer alignment with the US.

A relatively new trend and the most interesting insight is how freely some scholars talk about "countermeasures." Here, it was notable that Chen Jimin and Feng Zhennan of the Central Party School were most explicit. Perhaps they felt they could do so because of their Central Committee legitimacy and access. Long deduced from Chinese behaviour on the ground or on the sea, moves such as "united front" divide and rule tactics, or applying "moderate pressure" vis-à-vis weaker states, are now openly discussed. Here, again, scholars fill in how the government can tackle a flagged problem for China. In this respect, Xi commanded in 2023: "Once our strategy is set, we must stick to it in the long term

and not change it arbitrarily. We must follow it in principle while showing tactical flexibility.”⁷⁵

Lastly, we must reflect on Feng Huiyun and Kai He’s model of scholar-government influencing. Although the regime’s lack of transparency means that it is not possible to establish a verified causal link between the two, the NATO frame and the idea that such an alliance would be a great danger to the region has been most visibly “purchased” by the central leadership and propaganda channels. Zhu Feng, of Nanjing University, was one of the first scholars that proposed this line of response in 2020.⁷⁶ In July 2023, *Xinhua*, China’s official state media outlet, characterized NATO’s tilt towards the East as an “unpopular plot” (*tumou* is also translated as conspiracy) and regional countries as “wary” (*jingti*) thereof.⁷⁷ It featured a propaganda poster saying, “no NATO, no war.” In the same month, *People’s Daily*, the Party’s official mouthpiece, emphasized the impotence of European NATO members by pointing to their limited capabilities.⁷⁸ This is decidedly an expert assessment and was presented by several of the scholars in our sample.⁷⁹ The European impotence claim is likely meant to convey to audiences in the Indo-Pacific region that the Europeans, like the US, cannot be counted on to act as a balancing force to China. While it is by no means new for the US to be the “black hand” (*heishou*) behind all ills in the region,⁸⁰ NATO is now also used to frame European and Indo-Pacific allies and partners as “vassals.” Since an editorial in state media must have the explicit approval of the Central Committee Propaganda Department, it was instructive to see the copying of Yan’s US “club” label by *China Daily’s* Editorial Board.⁸¹ The *Global Times* underscored that a sizeable threat for China emanating from the US Indo-Pacific strategy lies in its economic initiatives when it depicted them in the context of a potential “economic NATO.”⁸²

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NOTES

1. This article draws on some of the ideas put forward by Julie Chen in Julie Yu-Wen Chen, Jagannath Panda, and Richard Ghiasy, 'Positive Paranoia: Chinese Interpretations of Indo-Pacific Geopolitics'. *Institute for Security & Development Policy*, May 6, 2024, <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/positive-paranoia-chinese-interpretations-of-indo-pacific-geopolitics/>.
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