



## THE INDO-PACIFIC GEOSTRATEGY AND THE QUAD: THE PACIFIC CENTURY AND CHINA-USA DISPUTES

### A GEOESTRATÉGIA DO INDO-PACÍFICO E O QUAD: O SÉCULO DO PACÍFICO E AS DISPUTAS CHINA-EUA

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**Abstract:** In 2011, during the Obama Administration (2009-2017), changes in the course of the United States' geostrategy for Asia were named “America's Pacific Century”; which marks the shift in the US foreign policy towards a focus on the Pacific in the 21st century, and on the great powers present in the region, mainly China. Such actions are mainly based on the geopolitics of Offensive Realism as a strategic premise. In order to oppose the Chinese rise in the interstate system and maintain the primacy of its interests in Asia, the US proposes the Indo-Pacific strategy, in order to balance the Chinese role in the continent; in addition to the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), together with Japan, Australia, and India, to establish a security partnership with those considered the greatest adversaries, in the US view, to Chinese interests in the Pacific. This strategy for Asia seeks to counteract the gradual Chinese preponderance in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, this article proposes to analyse the origins and main motivations for the establishment of a structure to contain China in the Pacific by the United States, as well as the Chinese positions and considerations for the region.

**Key-words:** China. United States. Asia. Geopolitics.

**Resumo:** Em 2011, durante o governo Obama (2009-2017), as mudanças no rumo da geoestratégia dos Estados Unidos para a Ásia foram denominadas *America's Pacific Century*; o que marca a mudança da política externa dos Estados Unidos para o Pacífico no século XXI e para as grandes potências da região, principalmente a China. Tais ações têm a geopolítica do Realismo Ofensivo como premissa estratégica. Para se opor à ascensão chinesa no sistema interestatal e manter a primazia de seus interesses na Ásia, os EUA propõem a estratégia do Indo-Pacífico, a fim de contrabalançar a atuação chinesa no continente; além da formação do *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* (Quad), juntamente com Japão, Austrália e Índia, para estabelecer uma parceria de segurança com aqueles considerados os maiores adversários, na visão dos EUA, aos interesses chineses no Pacífico. Essa estratégia para a Ásia busca neutralizar a gradual preponderância chinesa na região da Ásia-Pacífico. Portanto, este artigo se propõe a analisar as origens e principais motivações para o estabelecimento de uma estrutura para conter a China no Pacífico pelos Estados Unidos, bem como as posições e considerações chinesas para a região.

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## **Introduction**

Geopolitics<sup>3</sup>, as a theoretical field, deeply influenced realist theories and interstate analysis since its foundations, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in the historical period of the Concert of Europe between colonial empires. The first geopolitical theoretical-conceptual clash took place between theories of land power and theories of naval power.

Mackinder's Geopolitics of the Heartland influenced all United States (US) strategies during the 20th century, and nowadays by highlighting the political power gained from the influence of great powers in Eurasia. In order to perpetuate an international order favourable to its interests, it is part of the US geostrategy<sup>4</sup> to influence Eurasian political trends – and therefore, to keep land power under control and prevent its transformation into amphibious power. According to Mello (1999, p. 45-47),

[...] the Heartland is a strategic idea, theoretically conceived in the early [20th] century and empirically tested over two world wars. [...] The Heartland was incomparably the most extensive region of plains in the entire globe. [...] The Eurasian amphibious regions formed around the Heartland a great inner or marginal arc that Mackinder called the Inner Crescent. [...] The control of the Inner Crescent by the island powers or their veto of its domination by a continental power ensured the balance of power in Eurasia and the world hegemony of maritime power (Authors' translation).

Since the end of the Great Wars and the establishment of the Cold War, maintaining control of the shores of Heartland became a US geostrategic priority, in order to contain the Soviet Union (USSR); and currently, also China. The maritime superpower – the USA – seeks, based on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Europe, and the military alliances with Japan, Australia, and South Korea, to keep the Eurasian margins restricted to the access of the pivot of the basic continent (Mello, 1999, p. 69).

The importance of maritime power in US strategy resumes Mahan's writings, from his work “Influence of Maritime Power on History” (1890). Since then, it has become a US strategic imperative to control the main maritime routes and surroundings of the land power, in order to maintain the supremacy of maritime power (Costa, 2008, p. 68-75).

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<sup>3</sup> Geopolitics as theory, throughout this article, is treated as the science that studies the relationship between power and space, and how power is projected and exercised in the geographic space (Teixeira Júnior, 2017, p. 35).

<sup>4</sup> Geostrategy, throughout this article, is a similar concept to Geopolitics, to determine how a strategy is formulated and conducted in the space-territory; that is, a strategy is considered a course of action aimed at acquiring power, often by military means and force (Teixeira Júnior, 2017, p. 101).

The control of the marginal regions of Eurasia, therefore, becomes part of the geostrategy of Spykman's Rimland, as well as Brzezinski's Great Game, the formulators of the American-Soviet confrontation in the 20th century, and which later influence Offensive Realism in the current China-USA dispute. The Rimland is therefore

[...] American intervention to keep powers divided and balanced in Europe and Asia, as well as to ensure uncontested hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, [...] the main vector of US grand strategy in world politics. [...] [A] vision of the world as a closed political system, from which the United States could not keep itself apart without serious consequences for its territorial security and its national interests (Mello, 1999, p. 98 -99, Authors' translation).

Technological advances, especially the strategic use of nuclear weapons and military aviation, made a hemispheric defence, in the US geostrategy, fragile and vulnerable, which gave rise to the US quest for a worldwide projection in the 20th century.

Therefore, to prevent the siege of the American continent, it would be necessary to encircle Eurasia first; in this way, divide it between powers in balance of power, so that a preponderant power would not be able to gather the necessary capabilities to threaten the *Pax Americana*.

As highlighted later by Brzezinski, a Sino-Russian counter-hegemonic coalition in Eurasia would be an obstacle to maintaining the international order desired by the US. Spykman shares the same position, highlighting the following situation:

If Europe and Asia were dominated by a single power or a constellation of powers, they would accumulate an uncompensated force that could project itself into the Atlantic and Pacific, and in a pincer movement, encircle the western hemisphere. If, on the contrary, a division and a balance of powers were maintained both in Europe and Asia, the United States would have a surplus of power capable of projecting itself into both oceans and encircling both ends of Eurasia (Mello, 1999, p. 103-105, Authors' translation).

The identification of pivotal powers in Eurasia, their division within and among themselves, and the avoidance of coalitions, as highlighted above, are part of this continuous and constant effort of the US foreign policy; which highlights the strategic vision of Offensive Realism in the 21st century, mainly in its confrontation with China.

This article is structured, in order to analyse how the geostrategy of the Indo-Pacific is formed, by the United States, in an effort of Chinese containment. After this introduction on what geopolitics, geostrategy, and the US foreign policy is, the second section explores how Offensive Realism, as an international relations theory, influences the conception of the Indo-Pacific, naming China as the main competitor and geopolitical challenge for the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The third section explores the historical formation of the Indo-Pacific, based on the *Quad* as the main influential powers for the establishment of this geostrategy with American leadership. The

fourth section analyses the growing Chinese presence in Asia-Pacific, the main concerns and objectives in the Beijing perspective, and the main interdictions for the preponderance of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Finally, the last section states the main flaws of the US containment strategy, especially the emphasis on an anti-China rhetoric and the lack of an economic development perspective for its main allies in the region.

### **1. Offensive Realism**

Offensive Realism, as a theoretical perspective, considers the accumulation of power as the primary political objective in the interstate system. In the case of this theory, power is defined as latent and military capabilities. The former refers to the necessary ingredients for building military power – wealth, population, and technology, especially; while military power is the effective power in international politics, the ultimate definer of the distribution of power in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 68).

Competitions between great powers for resources, privileged access to markets, and political alliances are driven, in this perspective, by the accumulation of power and a privileged position vis-à-vis other powers in the system, which obtain relatively less favourable conditions from the rise of another rival power.

The given conditions of the structure of the interstate system shape the behaviour towards competition for power. Therefore, the anarchic and uncertain character of the interstate system makes great powers acquire military capabilities in order to propel themselves into this same system.

Three structuring factors shape the interstate system and the action of great powers: a) the absence of a supranational central authority that limits state action – that is, an anarchic system; b) the military capacity acquired by great powers; and c) uncertainty in relation to the actions of other great powers in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 20).

Therefore, greater capacities for power accumulation become necessary to guarantee the security of a power against the possible action of adversaries, forming a competitive system of gains and losses relative to other actors. The formation of this competitive system, for the US geostrategy, justifies an offensive action against emerging powers, in this case, especially China.

The strategic perspective of the United States is essential to analyse the political developments in Eurasia, due to the mirroring of the Chinese rise in American strategic objectives. The Chinese economic rise in this century evokes in the US geostrategic debate the fear of a power that could diminish or relativise the power of Washington. Mearsheimer highlights

[i]f China continues its rapid economic rise in the coming decades, it is likely to act according to the logic of offensive realism, that is, to try to imitate the United States. Specifically, trying to dominate Asia as the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 357).

The “Chinese threat” is perceived in this way by the US strategic elaboration itself, not incorporated by China; which establishes the Indo-Pacific strategy as a concrete action for Chinese containment.

The geostrategy of the Indo-Pacific, as a counterpoint and response to the Sino-Russian Asia-Pacific, is based on Offensive Realism, that is, on the strategy of intervention in Eurasia in order to avoid an antagonistic coalition to the US – in this case, a Sino-Russian coalition.

Mearsheimer (2001) states there is no possibility of a peaceful Chinese rise, which demonstrates the US warlike position towards Chinese development, regardless of whether it is based on concrete Chinese actions. Similarly,

Simply put, time is on China's side, which means it must pursue a quiet foreign policy so as not to arouse suspicion among its neighbours. [...] Chinese leaders, according to this logic, should emphasize that it is for the common good China's economic development and growing economic interdependence, as such developments serve as a powerful force for peace. [...] While this position is intuitively attractive, it will not work in practice. [...] The problem is exacerbated by the “security dilemma”, that is, the measures that a state takes to increase its own security generally lead to a lower security of other States (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 369-370).

A great amount of the theoretical construction of Offensive Realism is revealed as a justification for the containment of the Chinese rise. From the perspective of accumulation of power as the primary objective of great powers in the interstate system, its limited character, in which one acquires power from the loss of others, and the Chinese success in propelling itself as a challenging “revisionist” power, as a whole, would justify a preventive offensive action by the United States, to contain the Chinese projection, especially in the Pacific. Thus, the Indo-Pacific is taken as the strategy capable of fulfilling this objective.

## **2. The Indo-Pacific and the *Quad* as a Geopolitical Strategy.**

In the 21st century, it is a US foreign policy priority to prevent other emerging powers – especially China and Russia – from being dominant in Eurasia. According to Lukin (2020, p. 175-176),

The main US imperative [...] would be to prevent the emergence of a single state or alliance of states capable of unifying non-European Eurasia against the United States. [...] Thus, it was recognized that the danger to the United States would not be a particular political regime, but simply all major independent and influential states [...] namely, Washington's loss of control over Eurasia resulting from the deepening and *rapprochement* between the two main powers of Eurasia: Russia and China.

In his writings on Eurasian geostrategic developments, as former United States National Security Advisor (1977-1981), Brzezinski emphasised the importance of Eurasian geopolitics to the Great Power Game in international relations. Since one of the main objectives of US foreign policy is the prevention of a rival Eurasian counter-hegemonic partnership, the identification and “guardianship” of pivotal powers in Eurasia is a constant strategy of this policy.

During the Cold War, specifically in the 1980s, the United States' strategy against USSR became the raising of insurgencies against the Heartland. In a post-Soviet context, there were several initiatives in Central Asia led by the US in an attempt to include their countries in the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence. These are attempts to control political developments in Eurasia (Bandeira, 2017, p. 6-27). Following the same strategy, Brzezinski (1998, p. 41-55) states that

Identifying the main geopolitical pivots of post-Cold War Eurasia, and protecting them, is therefore also a crucial aspect of America's global geostrategy. [...] In current global circumstances, at least five important geostrategic actors and five geopolitical axes [...] can be identified in the new geopolitical map of Eurasia. France, Germany, Russia, China, and India are important and active players. [...] Potentially, the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an “anti-hegemonic” coalition united not by ideology, but by complementary claims.

The intensification of commercial and technological disputes between the United States and China affected political-economic relations in Eurasia. Chinese advances in production, finance, and technology have changed the landscape of the dispute.

The Asian power has a great capacity for action, given its huge foreign exchange reserves, which reach around US\$3 trillion; a large import capacity that rivals US volumes; a strategy to support productive and infrastructure investments around the world through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and technological advances in the information technology sector, such as creating a competitive foundation for the 5G internet connection and artificial intelligence systems that also rival the US. All these factors make China a strong competitor and a preferred economic partner in Eurasia.

The so-called trade war, still ongoing, initiated by the US raising tariffs, and responded by Beijing, is part of the fierce technological dispute for the vanguard of the so-called Industry 4.0, especially the establishment of 5G as the new telecommunications standard worldwide. An attempt is underway by the US to isolate the Chinese 5G as a standard, reinforcing its ban on its closest allies in the European Union, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, in addition to strong pressure on Latin American countries (Pires & Nascimento, 2020, p. 11).

Containing China, and Russia as well, has become the centerpiece of Washington's long-term strategy. In 2011, former Secretary of State (2009-2013) Hilary Clinton (2011), on the eve of

an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, announced America's Pacific Century, the focus of US foreign policy for the 21st century, facing the Pacific.

Likewise, in an article of the same name, Clinton (2011) points out that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia”, by emphasizing the need for US intervention in the region to pursue its interests. Furthermore, Clinton points out

[t]oday, there is a need for a more dynamic and durable trans-Pacific system, a more mature economic and security architecture, that will promote security, prosperity, and universal values, resolve differences between nations, foster trust and accountability, and encourage effective cooperation on the scale that today's challenges demand. And just as the United States played a central role to forge that architecture in the Atlantic – to ensure that it worked, for us and for everyone – we are now doing the same in the Pacific. The 21st century will be America's century in the Pacific, a period of unprecedented reach and partnership in this dynamic, complex, and consequential region (Clinton, 2011).

The attempt to re-establish a complete US zone of influence – and, as a consequence, a Chinese isolation – comes at a time when China is the main market for goods from traditional US allies, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Hence, the US strategy is based on exploring regional rivalries (Pires & Mattos, 2016).

Just as the Pacific Century highlights the US turn towards the region, this strategy highlights the containment of great powers of Eurasia as an objective. As established in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS),

[t]he central challenge to US prosperity and security is the resurgence of long-term strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is becoming increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model - gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic and security decisions.

Likewise, the 2022 NDS, although partially confidential, continues to name China and Russia in its fact sheet as the main powers that threaten US security. According to the Department of Defense (DoD),

[d]efense priorities are: [...] 3. Contain aggression, while preparing to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing the challenge of the PRC [People's Republic of China] in the Indo-Pacific, and the challenge of Russia in Europe (Department of Defense, 2022).

The defensive position of the United States in Asia, therefore, is mainly represented by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – USA, Japan, Australia, and India – and by the geostrategic vision of containment of the Indo-Pacific.

The Quad first appeared in 2007, along with Exercise Malabar, which brings together the navies of the US, Japan, and India; and, in 2012, when highlighting the group as a “diamond of democratic security” and a challenge to Chinese “coercive behaviour”, especially in the South

China Sea. The former Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, declared how it is a formative element of the group the containment of China in the region.

From 2017 onwards, the group becomes more active in Asia-Pacific, starting from the summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of the same year; and successively publishes formative documents, mainly based on US State declarations. In this sense, the Quad claims to seek a “free and open Indo-Pacific, [...] inclusive, healthy, anchored in democratic values, and free of coercion” (The White House, 2021).

Likewise, the US State Department, in 2019, in a document called *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, openly cites the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an adversary and contrary to the values advocated by Quad. In mentions made in the document, the PRC is accused of brutally repressing ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, interfering in the province of Tibet, and preventing Hong Kong's autonomy.

Moreover, when defining criteria for maritime security, Washington urges Beijing to resolve disputes in the South China Sea “without coercion”, classifying Chinese claims as “provocations” that would be preventing ASEAN members from accessing revenues of US\$2,5 trillion in energy resources. Finally, the Quad would be responding to such aggressions through joint military exercises (Department of State, 2019, p. 21-23).

Therefore, the rhetoric aimed at the PRC focuses on military strategy, in addition to being antagonistic, and establishes Chinese initiatives and interests as a threat to the countries of the quadrilateral dialogue and ASEAN.

Similarly, in 2021, the first Quad summit takes place, which in its declaration highlights the need to “combat challenges to the legal maritime order in the South and East China Seas” (The White House, 2021), in order to not directly mentioning the PRC as an antagonist to the military grouping. This group, due to the emphasis on its military and security strategy, is even called “Asian NATO” (Heydarian, 2021), as a strategic correspondent in the Indo-Pacific for the containment of China, just as NATO would be for the containment of Russia in Europe.

Furthermore, like the US, NATO itself as an organisation declares concerns about the Chinese rise and its impacts on the world balance of power, highlighting the need for an extra-regional organisation (Times of India, 2020).

Quad Plus was organised for the first time, in 2020, through a meeting that expands the group to strategic allies of the original quadrangle. This meeting involved conferences with US extra-Quad partners in Asia-Pacific – South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam – and outside the region – Brazil and Israel (Panda, 2022).



Therefore, there is a very significant change in the US strategy on containing China. What previously included only the Asia-Pacific, including as a strategic nomenclature, has been extended to the Indian Ocean as Indo-Pacific, in a clear attempt to involve India, a neighbour with which China has border disputes.

The Pacific Command – renamed on May 30, 2018 as the Indo-Pacific Command (Usindopacom) as promoted this vision in relation to Eurasia since the Cold War, when Soviet influence became more active towards exits to the Indian Ocean. The update of this regional strategy follows security concerns of Australia, India, and Japan, which are antagonistic to the establishment of a Chinese preponderance in Asia-Pacific, placing the Indo-Pacific as a competing containment strategy (Serbin, 2019, p. 30).

The shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific, contradictorily, was mainly based on turning away from the notion of economic liberalisation brought with the Asia-Pacific strategy, when promoted by Washington in the 1990s. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, established with US support, in 1989, is an attempt to promote the Pacific Rim developments with American leadership, based on trade liberalisation and open regionalism (Santa-Cruz, 2022). However, along with the Chinese rise in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its establishment of economic leadership through trade blocs and active international trade policies, a shift towards a combative Indo-Pacific strategy was adopted, against the very Asia-Pacific previously liberal strategy.

Even though the Obama Administration (2009-2017) sought to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as the economic foundation for the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy, the purpose of enhancing trade liberalisation was abandoned, as technologic competition – such as the 5G commercial competition – became a zero-sum great game. At the same time, Washington's main concern is preventing allies from relying on Chinese technology instead of American alternatives, initiating a 'decoupling' tentative (Bisley, 2022), although unlikely.

There is a geo-economics repositioning process along the Asia-Pacific, as Beijing advances promoting new trade agreements and standards, while the alternatives backed by the US are mainly based on military geopolitical constructs (Lambert, 2022). Consequently, the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct, derived from the US geopolitical necessity to contain the rise of China in the Pacific Rim, is an attempt to create a common identity in Asia and explore regional rivalries, prolonging an order led by Washington (Kassab, 2023).

China-US strategic competition leads to repositioning of partnerships in Asia; China from its economic preponderance in the region, and the US using its greater military power, its technological

capabilities, and its privileged position in value chains. In these competing plans, the bargaining power of countries, such as India, Indonesia, and Australia, increases, as well as how they fit into the strategies of Beijing and Washington.

India's marginal position in the Asia-Pacific plan has reinforced its adherence to the US plan, since the country has territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, an ally of Beijing. Its geographic position becomes strategic and privileged in the configuration of the Indo-Pacific (Pires & Nascimento, 2020). Serbin (2019) points out that

[t]he most obvious winner is India, a regional power that has a growing worldwide impact and a greater role in the globalization process, both due to its rapid economic growth and its demographic weight. On the other hand, its privileged geographic location between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific – through which 90 percent of global trade passes – 'places India at the global geopolitical forefront'. The concept of Indo-Pacific gives it a central position in the face of the geographic marginalization that leaves it in the usual conception of Asia-Pacific, and, in turn, constitutes a stimulus to develop its Navy and become a naval power. Precisely the Maritime Security Strategy that the Indian Navy elaborated in 2015 already mentions the Indo-Pacific [...] among the zones of primary maritime interest includes the bottlenecks between the two oceans: the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. (Serbin, 2019, p. 33, authors' translation)

Similarly to Quad, there is the formation and consolidation of the AUKUS (an acronym for its members – Australia, United Kingdom (UK), and the United States), simultaneously. This grouping is formed as a trilateral security pact, a military alliance superimposed inside the Quad formation, in addition to the UK.

Furthermore, the main impacts of this group, regarding the Indo-Pacific strategy, is the renovation of traditional security pacts among the Anglosphere, which have been historically established since the Great Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as the ANZUS (a pact between Australia, New Zealand, and the US), the Five Eyes intelligence sharing pact, and the support for Australia to become a nuclear-powered armed force, acquiring nuclear submarines from the US, its main security ally (Prime Minister of Australia, 2021).

Regarding the US interests in promoting such a pact, there is an initiative to provide the AUKUS a “deterrence capability”, in face of what is called a “Chinese economic coercion” (Hurst, 2022). The grouping is one strategic element among a security structure in order to recall traditional US allies to maintain allegiances and adhesion to the Indo-Pacific, despite possible economic and diplomatic losses in the region.

However, reactions to the establishment of the pact and its consequences were far-reaching, as interests among US traditional allies were damaged, not only its main competitor – China. A previous submarine military contract established between Australia and France was cancelled due to

the establishment of AUKUS, which led to estrangements and distrust in the role of France among NATO and its greatest members, damaging European security alliances (Willsher, 2021).

Furthermore, negative reactions reached Indonesia and China, among security concerns in the strategic future of the Pacific. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry reacted as considering a continuous arms race being formed in the Pacific, as one more power in the region is in the process of acquiring nuclear-powered armaments (Sarkar, 2021); while China considers the pact “irresponsible”, an element of a Cold War-zero sum mentality (BBC, 2021). This strategic situation enhances and potentializes differences between an Asia-Pacific and an Indo-Pacific perspective for the region.

Finally, based on the previously presented formative processes, the Indo-Pacific is established as a geostrategy, that is, a strategy of power in space, led by the United States and its priorities for the Pacific, which are, in particular, to expand and maintain the its presence in the region, avoiding and/or impeding the emergence of great powers, especially China.

In order to situate this geostrategy in the territory, Quad is a security grouping that delimits the area of action in the Indo-Pacific - and therefore, an important deterrence grouping against China, from its vertices:

- The USA, from Hawaii and its projection to the Pacific;
- Japan, due to its proximity to Korea and the Chinese coast, being a traditional strategic ally of the Americans since the Post-War;
- Australia, in addition to being a traditional ally and member of other US-led security arrangements, such as the AUKUS (with the UK and US) and the intelligence cooperation programme, known as Five Eyes (US, Canada, UK, Australia, and New Zealand), is strategically located for operations in Southeast Asia and in the straits close to the South China Sea; and
- India, which has ambivalent relations with China, in successive *rapprochements* and estrangements, depending on the geopolitical situation and border tensions in the Himalayan region.

The formation of this quadrilateral security covers the entire coast of China as an area of activity, especially for the Indo-Pacific Command, which raises growing tensions in Asia-Pacific on sensitive issues, such as the delimitation of territorial seas and US support for the independence of Taiwan against the PRC.

### **3. China's Presence in Asia-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific strategy seeks alternatives to counterbalance China's strong presence in the trade of the United States' main allies in the region, such as Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan – all of which have China as their largest trading partner; and even among Quad members.

China's vast presence and importance to economies across Asia-Pacific is a cornerstone of the US strategic containment formation. Among the members of the security grouping, China is Japan's largest trading partner, Australia, India's largest supplier, and the United States' itself (Trading Economics, 2022; United Nations Comtrade, 2022), which reveals serious limits for its strategic objectives.

In this sense, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in November 2020, stands out as a substitute trade agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an initiative led by the United States and frustrated by the protectionist initiatives of the Trump administration (Pires & Nascimento, 2021, p. 9-10).

RCEP was consolidated in 2020, entering into force in 2022, as a trade agreement among 15 Asia-Pacific countries - 10 ASEAN members and 5 of its largest trading partners - namely: Australia; Brunei; Cambodia; China; South Korea; Philippines; Indonesia; Japan; Laos; Malaysia; Myanmar; New Zealand; Singapore; Thailand and Vietnam. Nine of these members of the frustrated TPP, which did not obtain enough ratifications to enter into force, and had to be reformulated without the United States – therefore losing most of its economic relevance.

This brings together in a single trade agreement - the largest in force - a third of the world's population and economy without the presence of the US (Wong, 2020; Zhou, 2020), which leaves the PRC at an economic advantage in the region. However, the absence of India, which participated in the negotiations and abandoned the agreement when it was signed, is a highlight.

China is in a privileged position in trade agreements for access to Asia-Pacific markets, especially Southeast Asia from ASEAN. India's failure to conclude the RCEP agreements is a reflection of mutual distrust in Sino-Indian relations. The “Holy Geoeconomic and Geopolitical Alliance of USA, India, Japan, and Australia” (El Horizonte, 2017 *apud* Serbin, 2019, p. 31) is a balancing position under construction to RCEP - despite the absence of an established trade agreement in the Indo-Pacific strategy.

In this context, concerns for India's regional security are expressed mainly by the construction of the Maritime Silk Road, in which the Indian Ocean is crucial for its development, but also of what India sees as a threat to its security considering the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

From the perspective of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, RCEP is perceived as a threat, since it is capable of bringing ASEAN even closer to China as the largest trading partner in the region, a great power competing in influence with the USA.

Furthermore, contrary to the defensive and antagonistic position of the US, China establishes a propositional position for the Asia-Pacific along the basic principles of its strategy for the region. In addition to rejecting the term Indo-Pacific as a strategy that establishes a competing power, using only “Asia-Pacific” throughout its China White Paper (2017), the PRC urges countries in the region not to accept a “Cold War mentality, zero-sum games, and an emphasis on the use of force”.

As the country is the main beneficiary in economic terms of greater production integration in Asia, its position is in favour of a greater development cooperation agreements in the region, in contrast to that of the United States, which lost a relative position of power in face of the Chinese rise. In order to establish its strategy and proposal for the Asia-Pacific, in general terms, the PRC emphasises its relations with four powers of strategic importance: the United States; Russia; India; and Japan, highlighted in its strategic document (China White Paper, 2017).

While this strategy highlights amicable relations with Russia, especially since the 2001 Amity Treaty and the security cooperation established in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – which reinforces the strategic partnership of both countries in their mutual interests in Eurasia -, the PRC recognises different challenges along with other countries, with greater emphasis in its strategy for the region.

Regarding the United States, the Chinese perspective is of great change since the Trump Administration (2017-2021), due to growing US antagonism and protectionist measures, with a view to preserving markets in face of the Chinese ascension. In an extensive document incorporated into the China White Paper (2018), called “The Facts and China's Position on China-US Trade Friction”, Beijing declares that the US abandoned mechanisms of mutual consultation and imposed unilateral, protectionist measures. It also declares that the USA search for economic hegemony with “extreme pressure” (China White Paper , 2018, p. 4), which the PRC considers extremely harmful to the world economy and a source of instability, as “[the crisis] has become the greatest source of uncertainty and risk for the recovery of the world economy” (China White Paper , 2018, p. 61).

The position of a Chinese economic advantage in Asia-Pacific, which tends to consolidate itself along the trajectory of Chinese development, leads to a situation favourable to its interests in the region, which places the burden of strategic containment on the United States and the ongoing trade war.

Over the last few years, the attempt to decouple the US economy from China, as well as that of its allies, has not shown practical results – on the contrary, China’s importance for regional economies and trade is crucial for the development trajectory of Asia-Pacific. However, the last document on these disputes attached to the China White Paper (2019), China's Position on the China-US Economic and Trade Consultations, summarises the situation of the disputes between the two powers: “China will not negotiate on the main principles [of cooperation and queries]. China does not want a trade war, but it does not fear one and will fight one if necessary. The Chinese position on this matter has never changed” (China White Paper, 2019, p. 3).

On relationship with India, the Chinese strategy has emphasised development in consultations since 2015, including summit meetings in the BRICS framework annually. However, defence issues, especially the border between the two countries, persist as a source of tension and disputes. Throughout 2020, border troops from both countries clashed at southern border points in the Indian province of Ladakh, which resulted in casualties in both forces.

Despite clashes between patrols along the Line of Control (LAC) on the Sino-Indian border and the establishment of distension pacts to restore normality are a common events (Chaudhury, 2020), the recent change in status of the province of Jammu and Kashmir, and Indian activities on the Quad, are sources of dispute between both powers, which renovate the possibility of escalation and distancing in relations (Tellis, 2020).

Finally, with regard to Japan, as with the United States, the Chinese strategy admits sensitive issues could be sources of tension and conflict between the two parties. Disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are a permanent source of conflict between both countries, as well as US support for the Japanese position – the US maintains that the territory of the archipelago is covered by its defence treaty with Japan - (Kyodo News, 2012), which reinforces the Japanese-American strategic alliance in the Indo-Pacific/Quad.

The Chinese commercial presence, as well as the Russian, in the region of the islands, with an intense maritime route, is a reason for protest by Japan and controversy between the parties (Khaliq, 2022), since the domain of the islands expands an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), two hundred nautical miles from the coast, destined as territory (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Therefore, despite the great commercial importance that both countries mutually preserve, conflicting strategic issues are problematic and sources of tension in Asia-Pacific vs. Indo-Pacific.

This emphasis results in the fact that, out of the great powers mentioned in the White Paper, Russia is the main ally of the PRC in Asia-Pacific, while Chinese relationship with other powers

cited has sensitive obstacles, which may be a source of accession for Japan and India to the Indo-Pacific and Quad in a greater vigour if relationships with China deteriorate significantly.

Despite not constituting the focus of this analysis, it is worth mentioning the concern of the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the Solomon Islands, whose economic assistance and security agreements are seen as a threat by the English-speaking powers in the Pacific (Kim, 2022).

#### Final considerations

China's containment in Asia-Pacific, since the beginning of the 21st century, has become the centrepiece of the United States' strategy for the region. The US strategic documents, in addition to promoting the shift in Washington's foreign policy towards the Pacific Century, mention China and Russia as revisionist powers, that is, whose objective is to expand their power projection from the diminishing presence of Washington. It is based on this strategic competition that China-US disputes take place along the different conceptions of Asia-Pacific vs. Indo-Pacific.

This competition, as well as the implementation of Indo-Pacific and Quad as containment strategies, is based on Offensive Realism as a strategic reference. This reference is known for the “tragedy of the great powers”, a term referred to John J. Mearsheimer, the strategist responsible for disseminating the theory that establishes that great powers will inevitably face each other for the greatest possible accumulation of power, as well as for its maintenance. Therefore, it will influence the balance of power in the international system in their favour.

This is the main argument supporting preventive action against China, before the PRC acquires sufficient capabilities to contest the leadership of the US and allies in Asia-Pacific. However, it is important to highlight that this strategic conception mirrors US actions. It means that this strategy, despite being based on US actions in the region, is much more based on Washington's own behaviour and priorities than on Chinese strategic concepts.

This dispute influences the positioning of countries in the region, divided between the blocs that Washington actively seeks to form to contain the emerging power of Beijing. However, while the US position mainly emphasises security issues as concerns for the formation of this contention, the PRC has a wider economic advantage over these same partners, which causes pendulum behaviours between the main powers in the region.

While India, Japan, and Australia actively participate in military exercises with US forces, which openly advocate an anti-China strategy for the Asia-Pacific, these same countries have the PRC as their main trading partner, which exposes the contradiction and tension present in the geopolitical and geoeconomic context in the region.

Consequently, the dispute over the prevailing strategy, the Chinese Asia-Pacific, of open cooperation and focused on economic and commercial gains; versus the Indo-Pacific, of containment, protectionism and security, is a crucial element for defining the international and geopolitical situation of the 21st century for Asia.

The pragmatism of maintaining trade relations with China, while the PRC traces its development and attraction of its markets, generates an interdict in the strategic objective of the United States, which seeks to distance the other powers of the region from China, so that they antagonize Beijing. However, there have been fewer advantages presented for favouring this strategy.

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