

India and the Quadrilateral Forum as a Means of US Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

In the Indo-Pacific, China is waging a well-orchestrated campaign to displace US hegemony and secure a favorable balance of power. Driven by ardent nationalistic goals, the Chinese Communist Party is silencing political outliers and challenging the boundaries of international sovereignty. The first half of this article outlines Chinese political ambitions and domestic civil rights violations levied in pursuit of the government's agenda. It then addresses how Chinese territorialism in the South China Sea has undermined the utility of bilateral US strategic partnerships. The second half of the article describes the threat China poses to India's national security and why the Indian Air Force is particularly unprepared to meet this challenge. The article concludes by suggesting a quadrilateral treaty alliance between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia is needed to prevent further Chinese adventurism and preserve regional stability.

China's Two Centenaries

In 2012, Pres. Xi Jinping assumed control of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and began a series of initiatives to improve his country's welfare. His "China Dream" program stresses nationalism, individual ethics, and two landmark goals known as the Two Centenaries. The First Centenary Goal is to double the 2010 per capita income figures by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Second Centenary Goal is more ambiguous. It describes a "strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country" by 2049, marking the 100-year anniversary of the PRC.¹

The national unification strategy girding this ambition has translated into attacks on ethnic minorities and oppression of political dissenters. In June 2020, the Associated Press reported on China's draconian measures to curb its Uighur population in the northwest autonomous region of Xinjiang. From 2015 to 2018, childbirths in the Muslim-dominated prefectures of Hotan and Kashgar declined 60 percent following state-mandated sterilizations and abortions backed by the threat of mass incarceration.² A 2017 CCP memo leaked to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists contained detailed descriptions of the

harsh practices inside “reeducation camps,” where millions of Uighurs are being held without trial.³ However, despite the damning evidence of cultural genocide, the international community has remained markedly silent.⁴

Two thousand miles to the east, in Hong Kong, the CCP has summarily put an end to antigovernment demonstrations, which have plagued the party since mid-2019. The protests emerged after Beijing announced plans to enforce criminal extradition to mainland China, where the courts are widely viewed as corrupt. On 30 June 2020, Beijing passed a new national security law, effectively ending Hong Kong’s legal autonomy under the One Country, Two Systems provision of the British handover in 1997.⁵ The bill criminalizes secession, subversion of state power, terrorism and collusion with foreign entities, each carrying up to a life sentence. It also establishes a national security committee with extraterritorial authority, allowing the CCP to prosecute foreign nationals and media correspondents.⁶

Plight of Taiwan

The sweeping language and jurisdiction of the national security law heightened concerns in Taiwan, where the CCP has accused Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-Wen of leading a separatist plot and threatened military action.⁷ During the week of 9–16 June, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force violated Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) three separate times. The ostensible reminders of Beijing’s ability to act with impunity immediately preceded President Tsai’s video speech to the Copenhagen Democracy Summit on 19 June, less than two weeks before the law took effect.⁸

Although the immediate risk of military escalation with Taiwan remains low, Chinese general Li Zuocheng, Chief of the Joint Staff Department, considers it a viable option. In May 2020, Li told Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, “if the possibility for peaceful reunification is lost, the people’s armed forces will, with the whole nation, including the people of Taiwan, take all necessary steps to resolutely smash any separatist plots or actions.” The general’s comments were underscored by Li Zhanshu, head of China’s Parliament, who added, “we warn Taiwan’s pro-independence and separatist forces sternly, the path of Taiwan independence leads to a dead end; any challenge to this law will be severely punished.”⁹

The plight of Taiwan is problematic because its status as an independent state is ambiguous according to the international law of statehood.¹⁰ Only 15 countries, mostly from South America and the Caribbean, have formal diplomatic ties with Taipei, which consequently isolates those countries from Beijing.¹¹ Taiwan has been self-governing since Japan relinquished control in 1952, but the United Nations and even the United States, whose credibility in the Indo-Pacific is strongly connected to Taiwan’s democratic status, have not officially recognized its govern-

ment. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess how far Washington would go to protect the small island nation from annexation. Taiwan's tangible value to the United States is relatively low. In 2018, trade between the two countries amounted to 94.5 billion USD, compared to 737.1 billion USD with mainland China.¹² Taiwan is strategically significant amid other disputes with China in the South China Sea, but the cost of US military intervention would be exorbitant in both dollars and lives. Victory would depend on dubious support from US allies and the rapid consolidation of disjointed treaties.

Current US Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

The NATO alliance kept the Soviet Union at bay during the Cold War largely because Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states, "an attack on one is an attack on all."¹³ NATO's framers perceived that the only way to contain Soviet expansion was by bringing the full weight of the enterprise to bear through unambiguous mutual defense. Like Europe, Asia is mainly composed of small, vulnerable countries and a few main power brokers. However, there is no overarching pact between US partners. Instead, there exists a complex network of bilateral agreements with narrow preconditions. The applicability of these arrangements to third parties is largely open to interpretation.¹⁴

The United States has five major strategic partners and seven subsidiary partners in the Indo-Pacific. Treaties bind the United States to Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand.¹⁵ Various other strategic partnerships exist with India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and most recently Mongolia.¹⁶ While the details of each agreement are beyond the scope of this article, the overlapping, albeit incongruent challenges each country faces with respect to China suggest a more comprehensive security plan is needed.

Australia

Australia has sided with the United States in every major conflict since World War I. As a member of the Five Eyes intelligence network, composed of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, Australia contributes heavily to the US intelligence network and is strategically located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, along key maritime routes leading to the South China Sea. Most importantly, Australia's military capability continues to grow. Since Pres. Barack Obama reaffirmed America's commitment in a 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament, the Aussies have responded in kind by raising defense spending to two percent of gross domestic product.¹⁷ This includes the purchase of F-35s and plans to acquire 12 new submarines with US combat systems.¹⁸

Alternatively, the 1951 Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) constitutes a political trap. Aside from the obvious military danger, China has been Australia's premier trading partner for the past decade and accounts for more than 32 percent of its exports.¹⁹ Deep political and military ties with the United States make it a belligerent in almost every case, extending throughout the Indo-Pacific and thousands of miles above the earth. In the opening salvo of a Taiwan war game in 2010, simulated Chinese actors took down the Australia-US joint satellite architecture. The indirect attack incapacitated radar and communications networks, enabling China to take Taiwan virtually unopposed. The hypothetical outcome was a fait accompli sealed by a lack of commitment from other US partners. Despite the historic animosity with mainland China that has made Taiwan a classic case study, other territorial disputes with China have emerged that raise similar concerns and reinforce the vainness of a bilateral response.²⁰

Japan and South Korea

In 1947, Chinese cartographers drew a dash-line map, which self-ascribed ownership of the South China Sea and its islands based on historic fishing territory. Though the map has undergone several revisions, it remains highly contentious as a legal justification for Chinese sovereignty.²¹ Japan has administered the Senkaku Islands between Okinawa and Taiwan since 1972. However, in 2013, China extended its ADIZ over the Senkaku Islands, demanding control of the islands by virtue of inherent right.²² In August 2016, China dispatched 230 fishing vessels escorted by seven coast guard ships to the islands, where it had already deployed paramilitary forces to substantiate its propriety.²³ Chinese government ships continue to antagonize the Japanese Coast Guard. In 2020, encounters near the Senkaku Islands occurred for 67 straight days beginning in mid-April, fueling concerns that the United States may be forced to fulfill its mutual defense treaty. The 1960 agreement provides explicit protection in exchange for military basing rights.²⁴

Maritime encounters are not the only risk. Emboldened by rapid advances in aircraft and cruise missile technology, China is also increasing air patrols over the Sea of Japan, exploiting political gaps between Japan and other US allies. On 23 June 2019, two Chinese H-6 bombers, accompanied by two Russian Tu-95 bombers and a Russian A-50 surveillance aircraft, conducted a combined operation through the overlapping ADIZ between Japan and South Korea. South Korean fighters responded by firing 360 warning shots at the Russian A-50, while tactfully avoiding the Chinese bombers.²⁵

This unilateral decision highlighted the difficult relationship between the two US allies, which dates back to the seventh century and involves multiple Japanese

invasions, Korean annexation, and the use of Korean forced labor in World War II. The Korean Supreme Court's 2018 demand for reparations, combined with the A-50 incident, almost caused Japan and Korea to terminate their intelligence-sharing agreement in late 2019, abandoning the decision only after US intervention.²⁶ The problem goes deeper for the United States. Like most Asian countries, South Korea is bound to China by hundreds of billions of dollars in economic investment. Seoul also relies on Beijing to curb North Korean attacks like the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the artillery barrage on Yeonpyeong in 2010. Invariably caught between US and Chinese agendas, South Korea has been mostly ambivalent about Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea.²⁷

Philippines

The South China Sea contains an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, along with rich fisheries. It is also a major economic thoroughfare for approximately 3.3 trillion USD in annual commerce. The South China Sea's importance as a trade conduit and its bounty of natural resources have caused international competition for centuries, but the contest has gained increasing attention since the 1970s.²⁸ One of the most frequently disputed areas is a sparse chain of small rocks and reef structure known as the Spratly Islands. The Spratlys are scattered across 158,000 square miles of open ocean and account for just two square miles of total land mass, situated equally between China, Vietnam, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines.²⁹

China's reliance on fisheries near the Spratly Islands as an alternative to its own heavily polluted coastal waters is especially concerning for the Philippines. There are 100–150 fishing boats working every reef China controls, permanently destroying large swaths of coral and fish habitat. By comparison, the Great Barrier Reef averages less than half a boat per reef.³⁰ Chinese fishermen and warships also routinely disregard Philippine sovereignty. In 2011, a vessel self-identified as "Chinese Warship 560" fired warning shots at three Philippine fishing boats operating 60 miles inside their own exclusive economic zone, forcing one to cut its anchor to flee.³¹ Then, after a tense naval standoff spanning most of 2012, China seized de facto control of the Philippines' Scarborough Shoal, 200 miles northwest of Manila.³² As a result, the Philippines appealed to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013, arguing that China's actions had violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.³³

The PCA tribunal ruled in the Philippines' favor in 2016. Five judges determined that because the Spratly Islands cannot independently support human communities or economic activity, they cannot have their own exclusive economic zones.³⁴ They also invalidated China's dash-line map and admonished China for

harvesting endangered sea life and destroying fragile marine ecosystems inside of Philippine maritime boundaries. China vehemently denied the court's legitimacy and used the three years preceding the injunction to expand its artificial island campaign, fortifying its military foothold.³⁵

China has dredged and deposited enough sand in the Spratly Islands for thousands of acres of manmade territory. One of their most alarming accomplishments was the Fiery Cross Reef project, where Chinese engineers constructed a 10,000-foot runway on an island previously consisting of shallow coral. The robust substructure can support mobile missile launchers and almost any type of military aircraft.³⁶ It also conveniently extends China's radio coverage and combat radius to the contested Scarborough Shoal.³⁷ Though China maintains the runway was built to support search-and-rescue operations, most military strategists are unconvinced.³⁸ The addition of naval ports to Fiery Cross will enable surface vessels and submarines to exert total control over the South China Sea.³⁹ As China's military strength grows, Beijing is also compelling other countries to rethink their relationships with the United States as a source of protection, including US treaty partners.⁴⁰

Thailand

The US treaty with Thailand dates back to 1833. During the Cold War, Thailand served as an important democratic hedge against the communist wave in Southeast Asia, prompting the United States to extensively train and equip the Thai military. This bond continued into 1982, when the United States and Thailand began cosponsoring one of the longest-running international military exercises: Cobra Gold.⁴¹ Today the exercise includes 27 other countries and focuses on military cooperation during disaster relief operations.⁴² Thailand's longstanding relationship with the United States led to its designation as a "major non-NATO ally" in 2003 and the creation of a Thai-US Defense Alliance in 2012.⁴³ Despite these seemingly impressive accolades, political turmoil and growing Chinese influence cast doubt on the alliance's ultimate dependability.

Military coups in 2006 and 2014 deposed elected officials and dissolved the Thai constitution.⁴⁴ The ensuing junta's systemic corruption drove away foreign investment, resulting in a 57-percent drop between 2010 and 2019.⁴⁵ Despite the 8.4 billion USD loss in revenue, including 4.7 million USD in suspended US assistance, the Royal Thai Military's budget surged eight percent year after year.⁴⁶ As the United States withdrew support, citing concerns over human rights, China stepped into the void.⁴⁷ A 1 billion USD contract for three Yuan-class submarines granted China access to Thailand's Sattahip Naval Yard, where US Navy ships now contend with Chinese intelligence gathering.⁴⁸ The Sino-Thai partnership

has continued to expand, and today Thailand conducts more bilateral military exercises with China than any other country.⁴⁹ Despite general elections in 2019 that officially restored civilian rule and a new Joint Vision Statement with the United States in 2020, Thailand's reliance on China is undoubtedly growing at the United States' expense.⁵⁰

India's Need for the United States

The United States' present security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific require deep US commitments that are increasingly difficult to fulfill against the rise of China. Forcing China to heed basic international boundaries, much less address internal civil rights abuses, will require a more robust military and economic alliance. Owing to this need and its standing as the world's largest democracy, India is central to any plans for restructuring US security strategy in the Indo-Pacific. With 1.2 billion people and a 67 billion USD defense budget, India must play a prominent role if unsanctioned Chinese expansion is to be stopped. New Delhi remains averse to such political entanglements, but India is in an equally difficult position with China and is unlikely to succeed on its own. One of India's problems is its lack of a modern air force to defend airspace along its contested borders with China and Pakistan. US defense contractors are uniquely suited to provide this capability but require cooperation from the Indian government, which has resisted thus far. However, as India's complex border situation evolves, it could provide impetus for a treaty partnership with the United States and other like-minded partners.

New Delhi came to the forefront of US diplomacy in 1998 following India's successful nuclear tests. By refusing to sign the Non-Proliferation and Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaties, New Delhi solidified its position of strategic non-alignment, which had successfully kept it out of the Cold War.⁵¹ Since then, four US presidents have worked to change India's stance with overtures from Washington, beginning in earnest under President Obama.⁵² As part of his rebalancing effort to shift US strategic focus away from the Middle East and toward East Asia, Obama met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi several times, beginning in 2014. Before leaving office, Obama officially recognized India as a "major defense partner," a title the Trump administration has repeatedly upheld.⁵³ Then, in 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis notably changed the name of US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command amid deteriorating Sino-Indian relations.⁵⁴

Disputed Borders

The disputed India-China border made news on 15 June 2020, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a firefight with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the

Union Territory of Ladakh. A spokesman for India's foreign ministry cited China's failure to abide by government agreements, while Beijing blamed the killings on illegal incursions by Indian troops. Chinese and Indian border patrols have faced off in the past, even engaging in fistfights, but this confrontation marked the first case of fatalities since 1967, five years after the Sino-Indian War. While this seemed like an isolated tragedy, India's contested borders are part of a much larger contextual issue that involves both China and India's historic rival, Pakistan.⁵⁵

Four hundred miles southwest of Ladakh, the Indian military is still heavily engaged in Kashmir. This ethnically diverse Himalayan region has been divided along a cease-fire line called the Line of Control (LOC) since the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947-1948. Kashmir is a persistent hotbed of terrorist activity, as Islamic militants continue fighting for unification of the Muslim-dominated region, seeking to have it under Pakistani rule.⁵⁶ India says it killed 127 terrorists in the first half of 2020 alone, and despite calls for cooperation, relations between New Delhi and Islamabad are decidedly strained.⁵⁷ On the same day as the fire in Ladakh, Indian forces fought a 15-hour gun battle in Kashmir, killing two terrorists and seizing weapons and explosives stockpiles. The increased tension is partially attributable to India's recent decision to revoke Article 370 of its constitution and deploy thousands of additional troops to the LOC. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government, which ascribes to a pro-Hindu and nationalist agenda, issued the pronouncement in August 2019, withdrawing Kashmir's autonomous status following a deadly series of cross-border attacks earlier that year.⁵⁸

Indian Air Force Setbacks

On 14 February 2019, the Islamic militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) car bombed an Indian police convoy, killing 40. India responded on 26 February by launching Mirage 2000s to strike what Indian media sources described as terrorist training camps. India claimed the mission killed 350 militants, but Pakistani officials stated that four bombs had landed in an empty field. When reporters arrived on scene, local villagers also denied any casualties but pointed to several empty bomb craters one mile east of a JeM-run madrassa. The presumed target, which had long since been abandoned, remained perfectly intact.⁵⁹

The IAF suffered another embarrassment the following day when Pakistani F-16s conducting retaliatory strikes shot down Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman's outdated MiG-21. Varthaman ejected safely but was captured and used for propaganda prior to his release 60 hours later.⁶⁰ These back-to-back tactical failures reflect the IAF's ongoing struggle to modernize and expand beyond its traditional army support role.⁶¹ The Ministry of Defense's unsuccessful bid to acquire 126 French Rafales in 2012 has hampered progress. The 30 billion USD

contract, five years in the making, fell through in mid-2015 over disputes with manufacturer Dassault about local production liability.⁶² A new deal was inked in September 2016 for 36 prebuilt Rafales, which will not finish arriving until 2022. This leaves the IAF still waiting for what amounts to a 70-percent reduction in advanced fighter capability as it contends with formidable opponents in both Pakistan and China.⁶³

China–Pakistan Ties

China and Pakistan have maintained strong diplomatic relations since Pakistan became one of the first countries to recognize the PRC in 1950.⁶⁴ Although the two never entered into a formal military alliance, they have benefited greatly from mutual assistance in acquiring military technology. China fast-tracked Pakistan's nuclear program during the 1990s, then provided ballistic missiles that directly threatened India. As Pakistan's leading defense supplier, China accounts for 39 percent of purchases, followed by the United States with 24 percent. The latter arrangement allows Pakistan to funnel US military equipment to China for reverse-engineering.⁶⁵

Diplomatically, Pakistan serves as ambassador between China and the Muslim world. This has proven especially beneficial with regard to the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Despite China's oppression of this Muslim population, none of the major terrorist organizations have retaliated. Their muted response is likely because the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence directorate tacitly oversees terrorist operations through proxies like the Taliban and the Haqqani Network.⁶⁶ In exchange, China offers political assistance by defending Pakistan's claim to Kashmir through its permanent seat on the UN Security Council.⁶⁷

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

Since 2011, China's ulterior motive in Kashmir has been the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 62 billion USD energy and transportation project.⁶⁸ China's CPEC investment increased by 46 billion USD in 2015, with 12 billion USD earmarked for constructing a railroad through Kashmir between the Pakistani port of Gwadar and Xinjiang Province. Once completed, it will connect Chinese exports bound for Africa directly to the Indian Ocean and lay the groundwork for future projects such as a Gwadar–Xinjiang oil pipeline.⁶⁹

In 2017, China surpassed the United States as the world's largest oil importer. Eighty percent of this oil comes from the Middle East or East Africa via tanker ship and travels circuitously across the Indian Ocean, through the Malacca Strait, and into the South China Sea.⁷⁰ The convergence of oil, Xinjiang, and the South

China Sea is uncoincidental. China's dependence on maritime commerce is a strategic vulnerability that Beijing is diligently working to mitigate. In 2013, President Xi announced the landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompasses the CPEC and quietly extends China's span of control under the pretext of trade development between Asia, Europe, and Africa. The BRI will produce many positive outcomes such as greater connectivity, financial integration, and better opportunities for emerging markets.⁷¹ It will also join China with other authoritarian governments that share common interests and mutual rivals.⁷²

Lines of communication through Pakistan will connect China and Iran. The two governments are already negotiating a 25-year strategic partnership valued at 400 billion USD that gives Iran much-needed relief from US sanctions. Additionally, Tehran will receive more Chinese intelligence to support Iranian operations in Iraq and Syria.⁷³ China will in turn be able to use Iranian ports, railroads, and telecommunications systems. Beijing will also be the beneficiary of heavily discounted Iranian oil sales that will soon no longer depend on sea lanes through natural chokepoints like the Malacca Strait. The long-term value of the BRI, and the CPEC in particular, make thwarting Indian control of Kashmir an important objective for China.⁷⁴

Airpower in Tibet

To distract India from Pakistan, China is leveraging flashpoints along its own shared border. In 2017, India deployed troops to Doklam, a contested tri-border junction with China and Bhutan. Their mission was to halt Chinese construction of a road near the Doka La pass. After a tense standoff, China suspended construction, but the PLA remained in place. Although India declared victory and withdrew, the temporary return to the status quo may be short-lived.⁷⁵ In April 2020, China completed airfield improvements to militarize the Ngari Gunsar Airport in nearby Tibet and immediately deployed multirole J-11 and J-16 fighter jets.⁷⁶

The types of fighters at Ngari Gunsar are significant.⁷⁷ On the surface, these models provide parity with India's top fighter, the Su-30MKI, without appearing overly aggressive. China has far superior stealth platforms such as the J-20 stationed near Taiwan, but repositioning such assets in Tibet could signal an intent to escalate, detracting from China's careful political calculations.⁷⁸ Instead, China will rely on superior missile technology in the PL-15 air-to-air missile, which uses active radar detection and can strike targets beyond 185 miles. The aircraft themselves may be less menacing, but China maintains a tremendous edge over the R-77 medium-range, active radar homing air-to-air missile used by India.⁷⁹ As it stands, the IAF is at an extreme disadvantage with China and would likely struggle to protect Indian ground elements if a conflict were to arise. Overcoming

this issue will require more sophisticated aircraft and missile technology currently hampered by India's cumbersome defense acquisition process.

India's Need for Advanced Fighters

In 2012, the IAF overhauled its doctrine to focus on local power projection. It also developed a new defense plan that called for expanding the IAF from 28 to 40 fighter squadrons specifically to address fighting a two-front war with China and Pakistan.⁸⁰ The plan incorporated lessons learned from the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan, which proved the IAF's effectiveness as a means of nonnuclear deterrence and highlighted its importance in achieving limited strategic objectives.⁸¹ Recognized for its role in recapturing lost territory, the IAF was rewarded in 2001 with over 30 percent of India's 15-year defense spending plan, including money for the ill-fated 30 billion USD Dassault contract.⁸² The bungled Rafale purchase and the addition of several more Su-30MKIs to the fleet is indicative of another IAF problem. Between India's two most capable fighters, the Su-30MKI is a Russian model and the Rafale is French. Each platform requires different training and has its own foreign parts provider, making them expensive and difficult to maintain. The IAF logistics tail is further complicated by British-made Jaguars and the Tejas, an indigenous light combat aircraft.⁸³

Instead of rectifying this issue, India doubled down on the IAF's unorthodox order of battle and spare parts with its most recent acquisitions. In 2019, the Ministry of Defense said it would spend 15 billion USD purchasing 114 new multirole fighters, sparking intense competition among leading defense manufacturers.⁸⁴ However, in June 2020, a 780 million USD order was finalized instead for 21 refurbished Russian MiG-29s and 12 Su-30s, which are too heavy to launch from high-altitude bases near the contested borders.⁸⁵ The Ministry of Defense said it would devote an additional 6 billion USD toward purchasing 83 more Indian-made Tejas but failed to account for the roughly 8 billion USD discrepancy.

The preponderance of the investment into Tejas is of little value to the IAF. The delta-wing body style limits maneuverability and its payload is half that of the Su-30MKI. Furthermore, the Tejas actually costs more than the Su-30MKI, because despite being touted as an indigenous platform, it uses American engines, Israeli sensors, and Russian missiles. These components must be purchased at highly inflated export prices for a total cost of 62.7 million USD per airframe.⁸⁶ As a point of reference, the highly advanced F-35 costs the United States 77.9 million USD per unit, despite its infamous budget overruns during research and development.⁸⁷

Made in India and the F-21

A difficult military procurement process, specifically Prime Minister Modi's "Made in India" policy, further frustrates the IAF's capability to address its acquisition needs. Until 2001, India was completely closed off from foreign direct investment (FDI). It initially opened the defense industry to FDI capped at 26-percent equity to encourage collaboration with Indian manufacturers on indigenous weapons platforms. Failing to attract sufficient interest, the Modi government raised the foreign equity cap to 49 percent in 2014 and all the way to 100 percent in 2016, subject to strict government oversight.⁸⁸ Due to the bureaucratic complexity of the FDI process, the only firm to submit a 100-percent offer was the Naval Group, a French contractor, whose proposal was rejected.⁸⁹ Between 2001 and 2018, India attracted a mere 5.13 million USD in FDI, with no meaningful technological advancements.⁹⁰

One of the rejected proposals from the 2019 multirole fighter competition was from Lockheed Martin, which offered the Indian company Tata Advanced Systems exclusive rights to build a highly upgraded version of the F-16.⁹¹ The new prototype, dubbed the F-21, included an advanced weapons package and was available in 138 mission configurations for maximum versatility. Lockheed agreed to work with other Indian corporations as well. It signed a memorandum of understanding with Bharat Electronics to explore future industrial opportunities and even offered to help Hindustan Aeronautics upgrade the Tejas into a more capable air-to-air platform.⁹² These joint ventures were designed to support Modi's vision and would have allowed the IAF to begin phasing out its multinational procurement system. In addition, the deal was projected to save India 30–40 percent in lifecycle and operational costs compared to other offers.⁹³

The F-21 retains another distinct benefit that New Delhi might yet reconsider as the reality of Chinese aggression unfolds. Incorporation of the F-21 would grant India access to the world's largest fighter ecosystem and increase interoperability with Lockheed's F-16s, F-22s, and F-35s. This could be an important bargaining chip as US and Indian security interests steadily align. Like Japan's FS-X, the F-21 is based on the F-16, which is widely disseminated and has an established logistics system. It is flown by NATO and key regional partners in the Indo-Pacific such as Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea.⁹⁴ The F-21 would also use many of the same components as the F-35, resulting in better integration with fifth-generation fighter technology flown by the United States and Australia. Synchronizing these capabilities could provide a much stronger deterrence to China and discourage escalation as part of a venerated military coalition. Increasing India's military edge and integrating the IAF with other US partners

is critical for establishing a regional security framework that can preserve peace. It is also an important next step in replacing fractured bilateral agreements and the current federated defense model with a more powerful alliance.

From Federated Defense to Quadrilateral Forum

Simply stated, federated defense brings allies and regional partners together to achieve shared security objectives.⁹⁵ As it stands, each US security partner in the Indo-Pacific determines which objectives it will support and must individually weigh the repercussions of upsetting their status quo with China. China's strong economic influence all but ensures there will be no amalgamated response to indirect Chinese aggression. This allows China to tacitly ignore international boundaries while consolidating even greater economic power and surreptitiously growing its 178 billion USD defense budget.⁹⁶ Competing with China's singularly overwhelming regional power projection cannot be achieved bilaterally. To protect individual sovereignty, the United States needs a formal alliance with collectively greater strength vis-à-vis China and the promise of mutual support. One such possibility is a Quadrilateral Security Forum (Quad) between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia.

The Quad concept began with the combined humanitarian response to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Navies from all four countries came together to support rescue and recovery missions, leading to conjecture that future cooperation could be leveraged to support freedom of navigation operations. Japan in particular was eager to capitalize on this opportunity. In spring 2005, amid anti-Japanese protests in China, leaders made an unprecedented decision to include India in the East Asian Summit (EAS).⁹⁷ The EAS consists of 18 member countries and is the premier forum for strategic dialogue in the Indo-Pacific. Topics often include counterterrorism, maritime cooperation, and the South China Sea. Combined, EAS countries represent 58 percent of the world's population and 54 percent of global GDP, making India's participation a significant milestone in international affairs.⁹⁸

During his first term as Japanese prime minister, Shinzō Abe strongly advocated for the Quad, first in his book *Toward a Beautiful Country* and again during a trip to New Delhi in 2007. Speaking to the Indian Parliament, Abe described “an arc of freedom and prosperity” across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, backed by a “dynamic coupling” of Quad members. With China as the obvious point of concern, the idea almost reached fruition following the 2007 ASEAN Summit in Manila. Afterward, diplomats from the Quad countries met briefly, enraging Beijing, which levied complaints against each respective government. Concerned about further antagonizing China, Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd with-

drew from the India–US Malabar naval exercise in 2008 and discontinued future quadrilateral talks.⁹⁹

Until recently, the Quad had effectively dissolved. However, recognition that appeasement in the South China Sea has failed and concerns over the BRI have given the concept new life. Encouraged by India’s “Act East” policy, Japan became a permanent participant in Malabar in 2015, the same year it signed agreements for sharing defense technology and other classified information with India. In 2016, Prime Minister Modi visited Japan, declaring a “new era in Japan–India relations,” followed by a vision statement in 2018 reiterating Japan and India’s commitment to freedom in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰⁰

India’s military relations with Australia have warmed as well. Since 2015, the two have conducted their own biannual exercise called AUSINDEX.¹⁰¹ More recently, in June 2020, India and Australia signed a mutual logistics support agreement allowing them to use each other’s military bases, a significant good faith gesture. The two also elevated their bilateral strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership, promising to enhance the scope of future military exercises. Most telling is that for the first time since 2007, Australia will once again participate in Malabar in 2020, despite already being threatened with sanctions by China for demanding an investigation into the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁰²

While a Quadrilateral Alliance would inherently be built around military capabilities, its capacity for reciprocal economic sanctions should not be understated. Quad countries account for over 34 percent of the world’s GDP.¹⁰³ They also represent roughly 21 percent of China’s annual imports and exports. If the Quad were expanded to include South Korea and the Philippines, the latter figure rises to 32 percent.¹⁰⁴ As China earnestly seeks to grow its middle class, collective economic strength is a negotiating tool that could be used to influence Chinese foreign policy as well as domestic politics. While the 2020 National Security Law and China’s inhumane treatment of Uighurs may not constitute acts of war, the international community’s complicity should be rectified.

By remaining disorganized, the United States and its allies play directly into China’s long-term strategic plan. To this end, Washington’s ability to elevate India’s role while forming a determined Indo-Pacific treaty organization will likely signal Asia’s fate. With the world’s largest economy and one of the fastest growing, most sophisticated militaries, China is increasingly capable of imperialistic power projection and extortion. Through military and economic cooperation, the United States and its allies must seek to avoid the precipice of appeasement and protect the bounds of international sovereignty. Failure to impart a clear determination to uphold international laws will breed an unstoppable menace and exact an ever-higher price for peace.

Summary

The rise of China has dramatically altered the global balance of power. China's aggressive stance on domestic politics and territorial disputes leave little evidence to suggest that it will settle for being a benign hegemon. Instead, China will continue to pursue its nationalistic agenda by probing the international community's resolve to stand up to its antagonistic behavior while exploiting weaknesses in US security strategy in the Indo-Pacific. As China manifests its regional military and economic dominance, bilateral US defense partnerships are insufficient for safeguarding the sovereignty of other countries in China's path. A modern IAF and Indian participation in a quadrilateral alliance with the United States, Australia, and Japan provides a key opportunity to deter Chinese aggression and help restore peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. 🌐

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