



Russia in the Indo-Pacific

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The rise of China shifted the epicenter of global geopolitical and economic competition to the Asian continent. The recently launched strategy of the “Indo-Pacific Region” (IPR) is a manifestation of these developments. Serbin (2021) provides an important historic overview of power competition in the Asia Pacific Region from the Cold War to current times. This comprehensive analysis of IPR is a reflection of current evolution in US strategy in the region. The report highlights the US withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership and revival of the QUAD alliance (US, India, Japan, Australia) as a testament to Washington’s attempt to balance the rise of China, similarly to its attempts to balance the influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The White House views balancing through US-led projects as the way to secure America’s centrality outside of currently existing regional institutions such as ASEAN, where QUAD was greeted with unease as a challenge to ASEAN’s role in the region. Such a shift could be seen as a reflection of bipartisan consensus among different poles of power in Washington on US strategy towards China. While former US President Donald Trump presented IPR as his vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” during his visit to the continent in November of 2017, the significance of the term as attempt to strengthen the United States position in the region had already become a conceptual cornerstone

of US policy in Asia during Obama Administration (Clinton 2011). Recently it has been embraced under current US President Joe Biden.

Insights on the other actors' (Japan, Australia and India) position on IPR is another important contribution of the report, as there are differences among these countries, their strategic priorities, perceptions of threat and links to China. These differences play an important role in the Kremlin's strategy towards QUAD. As some Russian analysts see Moscow's final response to IPR as contingent not only on US actions, but also upon the behavior of other QUAD members (Denisov, Paramanov, Arapova and Safranchuk 2021). The look back in history could be a helpful exercise. As some argue, the challenges of QUAD 1.0 were the result of the divergent views and interests of its members. The growing ties with China make the positions of these actors a challenging balancing act. The attitude of Japanese policymakers towards China has historically been a combination of engagement and hedging (Ryosuke Hanada 2018, Kei 2018). While taking an active approach in QUAD in balancing China, Tokyo maintains extensive commercial and financial links to Beijing. It could be argued that Japan's economic growth and stability in the region depend on Tokyo's cordial relations with Beijing (Nagy 2019, Matsuda 2012). Another QUAD member, Australia, is a longstanding ally of the United States. It shares similar values and identity with Washington. It was Australia, however, that has been blamed for sinking the first Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Though the history seems to be more complex than this account, there is no guarantee that it will not repeat itself with QUAD 2.0. Australia has been challenged in the past with growing economic ties to China. In 2019, China continues to be Australia's top trading partner providing a market for 39% of Australian exports and 25% of the country's imports (CIA 2021). Finally, India's desire to be a dominant force in the region is well-known. Historic rivalries reinforced by recent border-disputes between India and China make it a logical partner in the strategy of containing China. Being a part of QUAD's so-called Democratic Security Diamond provides Delhi with more geopolitical leverage. India's long-standing history of non-alignment, however, and its role in BRICS as part of that grouping that seeks to challenge Western dominance and advocates for multipolarity and pluralism in the international system, make its position more complex than might seem at first sight.

Beijing in its official discourse, framed the concept of Indo-Pacific as an “exclusive clique” characterized “by an outdated zero-sum mentality and a narrow-minded geopolitical perception” targeting its interests (Zhao Lijian 2021). Russia’s foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov supported China’s disdain with QUAD as an example of Western claims of normative superiority and the creation of a regime based on divisive lines. As China, Russia is concerned that the US conceptualization of an Indo-Pacific bloc might undermine the Kremlin’s plans for cooperation in the Eurasian region (Lukin & Torkunov 2020). Despite Lavrov’s steamy rhetoric, IPR could be beneficial for Russia for a number of reasons. First, it further supports the Kremlin’s discourse on the dangers of global unipolarity, the West’s exclusiveness and the creation of divisive lines through “deals concocted in a narrow circle” in the international system (Lavrov 2021). The manipulation of this rhetoric by the Kremlin has been proven to be a powerful tool for both domestic and international consumption. Domestically, the rivalry with the West in general and the United States in particular, has been the central narrative of Russia’s elites and the focus of its media coverage since President Putin’s Munich speech in 2007. The “Russia as a great power” narrative is crucial, for continuity of its identity has been the basis of power consolidation by current elites. This concept of Russia as a great power in the absence of the economic and ideological leverage present during Soviet times rests mostly on Russia’s projected ability to balance the West. This vocal criticism of IPR and the publicity it could raise would possibly further reaffirm the Kremlin’s image as a pole of global power capable of standing up to Western dominance. Second, the rivalry between Beijing and Washington could further antagonize and weaken both actors, enhancing Russia’s regional and global influence. The West’s encroachment on Russia’s spheres of influence, especially in its near abroad, has been a major source of insecurity for the Kremlin. Color revolutions in former Soviet Republics and the regime changes that followed soured the Kremlin’s relations with some of its historic partners such as Ukraine. The current shift of the US focus on China’s near abroad could potentially weaken Washington’s interest in Russia’s backyard and allow Moscow to re-establish its regional influence. While Moscow’s criticism of Western interference is well documented, the Russian leadership has been less vocal about China’s expanding influence in Russia’s Far East and the Central Asian Republics. China’s focus on balancing the US’s growing influence in the Asia-Pacific could

potentially create a power vacuum that Russia would be happy to fill. Third, the IPR could bring the Kremlin even closer to Beijing and enhance the latter's international clout. The Kremlin's relations with the Western powers deteriorated significantly after its annexation of Crimea. This deterioration catalyzed Moscow's so-called pivot to Asia, in what has been called by some analysts Moscow and Beijing's marriage of convenience (Lubina 2017). Despite converging on many global issues, such as recent verbal sparring with the US over views on global multilateralism in the UN Security Council, the relationship has been framed as largely asymmetrical. Since China's economy is more than eight times the size of Russia's. One might foresee the two countries' positions further aligned in opposition to the Indo-Pacific initiative. For the Kremlin the partnership with Beijing is a force multiplier for Russia's global status and influence (Bobo Lo 2019). Growing tensions between Beijing and Washington could create a space for the Kremlin to carve out its position as deal broker and peace maker in the region and in its relations with both the US and China.

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