

# The Indo-Pacific Strategy from the Perspective of Offensive Realism

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## Abstract

The Indo-Pacific strategy marks a shift in U.S. policy toward China from engagement to containment. The new goal of above policy is to comprehensively use various means to prevent China's further rise and continue to maintain U.S. comparative advantage. However, the U.S. has been in trouble in recent years in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, unable to focus on China's rise. Therefore, uniting Japan, India, and Australia to share the responsibility and obligation to balance China among the so-called G4 will not only meet the strategic needs of dealing with China's threat, but also reduce the pressure of U.S. global strategic contraction. For Japan, India and Australia, in the face of an increasingly aggressive China, all three countries feel the need to seek the support and help of the United States, a major power outside the region, to maintain regional balance of power and balance. From the theoretical perspective of offensive realism, the Indo-Pacific strategy embodies the policy preferences of the four countries for establishing a balance of power and shirking responsibility in the process of maintaining the balance of regional power structures. However, like the theoretical flaws of offensive realism, the Indo-Pacific strategy has limitations and potential risks that may have a negative impact on the effective development of the strategy.

**Keywords:** offensive realism, shirking responsibility, balance of power, Indo-Pacific strategy, G4

## 1. Theoretical Assumptions

The strategic goals of the US China policy are idealistic, and the strategic means are indeed realistic. In recent years, with the failure of the US engagement strategy with China, US foreign policy toward China has become more and more dominated by realist logic. The return to the Asia-Pacific and Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategies, as well as the Indo-Pacific strategy, are the policy

products of this logic. The return to the Asia-Pacific region and Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategies are considered to be more virtual and less real, and on the whole, they are defeated, and the Indo-Pacific strategy has received widespread attention from political and academic circles as its transformation and upgrading. (Zhao Qinghai, 2013) The author believes that the Indo-Pacific strategy continues the internal logic of balancing

China in the return to the Asia-Pacific region and Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategies, but it chooses a more flexible and indirect way. The important responsibility of balancing China has been entrusted to the Indo-Pacific allies and partners of the United States, reflecting the contradictory mentality of the United States not only hoping to maintain ties with China's interests, but also trying to continue to dominate the Indo-Pacific regional pattern. Therefore, looking at the Indo-Pacific strategy from the perspective of offensive realism is more helpful for us to peek into its essence. And before that, it is necessary to sort and summarize John Mearsheimer's theory, which is convenient for checking the number into the seat between theory and reality.

In the analytical framework of realism, there is a whole set of assumptions about the nature of the state and its motives, as well as the arrangement of action strategies. (Yu Jiantuo & Lu Mai, 2018) John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism argues that: First, the international architecture prompts great powers to pursue power to the maximum; Second, the power of a country consists of potential power and military power, of which the army, that is, the ground force, dominates the military power; Third, when great powers face threats, they usually choose to establish a balance of power and shirk their responsibilities. (John Mearsheimer, 2021)

Because the international system is anarchic and the great powers are not convinced of each other's intentions, the great powers are often afraid of the increase in relative power of other great powers. In order to ensure the survival and security of the country, the great powers, as rational actors, must adopt the principle of self-help, put their own survival above strength, and develop a strong offensive military force sufficient to deter their opponents in order to maximize their own power.

Mearsheimer believes that ground power is the dominant form of military power in today's world, and that huge bodies of water greatly affect the ability of ground power to be delivered. He particularly emphasized the barrier effect of huge water bodies, arguing that due to the existence of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the United States only controlled the Western Hemisphere but could not effectively occupy Eurasia, so the United States was the only country in the world to

achieve regional hegemony, not a global hegemony. As an offshore balancer, the United States participates in the game between countries in the Eurasian region as a distant regional hegemony.

Benefit-cost analysis, geopolitical factors, and the distribution of power are the keys to determining whether to form a balance of power alliance or shirk responsibility. Powers can prevent regional power imbalances through diplomacy, the creation of defensive alliances, or the mobilization of additional resources. And even defensive alliances tend to shirk their responsibilities. Rather than establishing a balance of power, Mearsheimer argues that great powers prefer to shirk their responsibilities. This is due to the fact that shirking responsibility is less costly, more profitable, and can win time to prepare. From a geopolitical perspective, common borders promote balance of power while buffer zones encourage shirking of responsibility. Finally, there is neither a balance of power alliance nor a shirking of responsibility in the two-level system, and unbalanced multi-level systems are more likely to have a balance of power, and a balanced multi-level system generally prefers to shirk responsibility.

From the theoretical perspective of offensive realism, the current United States, as the offshore balancer, may no longer be a pioneer, but will shift the responsibility of balancing China to regional powers such as Japan, India and Australia, to win time for itself to preserve and accumulate power, and ensure its solid dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. Japan, India, and Australia also see China as a major competitor in the region, demanding U.S. involvement in regional affairs to provide security for allies and partners in the region. From the point of view, the Indo-Pacific strategy constructed by the G4 is nominally a defensive alliance to maintain a balance of power, but within this alliance there is a tendency to shirk responsibility for each other. The following article will focus on the analysis of the behavioral drivers that lead to mutual blame.

## 2. Strategic Driving Factors

The United States, Japan, India, and Australia are trying to build the so-called Indo-Pacific group of four countries to focus on China, a potential

regional hegemon. Within the G4, however, there is a multi-directional act of shirking responsibility: The distant regional hegemonic power, the United States, balances the potential regional hegemon China, which feels powerless, shirking responsibility to regional powers such as Japan, India and Australia; Regional powers cannot balance the potential regional hegemon China alone, and shirk the responsibility to the offshore balancer of the United States; The far-flung regional hegemonic powers of the United States and regional powers Japan and Australia want to maintain exchanges with China, using the regional power India on its border to balance the potential regional hegemon China. (Wu Zhaoli, 2014)

First, changes in power structures and global strategic contractions have driven the United States to shirk its responsibilities. On the one hand, from the perspective of global power distribution, the current international political structure belongs to the unbalanced multi-level system of one superpower and many powers, the United States is the only superpower and the only country that has achieved regional hegemony, while China, as other powerful countries in the system, is regarded as a revisionist country. China, in particular, is seeking to replace the United States in the Asia-Pacific region and even in the Indo-Pacific region or even the world. In short, the trend toward Sino-American polarization in the US-dominated unipolar system at the global level has forced the United States to shift its attention more and more to China. However, from the perspective of geopolitics and regional power distribution, the United States is to establish its presence in the Indo-Pacific region in economic, trade, energy, and military ways, and all its major territory is outside the Indo-Pacific region, and the United States does not have any territory in this region. In fact, the United States cannot effectively control any territory in this area, as Mearsheimer believes that ground forces dominate military power, and the navy and air force alone cannot occupy the territory and cities of the opponent, let alone force the opponent to submit or win the war. At the regional level, the power structure of the Indo-Pacific region is still a relatively balanced multi-level system, and in order to prevent China from breaking the regional balance of power and

dominating the regional order, the United States participates as an offshore balancer Construct the Indo-Pacific Group of Powers targeting China and guide regional powers such as Japan, India and Australia to play a greater role.

On the other hand, the United States is still facing greater strategic pressure in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and it is unable to allocate more strategic resources to balance China. In his book *The Great Chess Game*, Brzezinski pointed out that if the United States wants to prevent the emergence of regional hegemony in Eurasia, it must focus its strategic attention on Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, and firmly control the periphery of Eurasia. The United States faces competitors on three fronts: Russia, Iran, and China. At present, the relationship between the United States and Russia continues to deteriorate, and domestic political factors in the United States have made it impossible for the Trump administration to reach a settlement with Russia. Especially on the issue of NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine, the contradictions between the United States and Russia continue to rise, and under such circumstances, it is difficult for the United States to reduce its power investment on the Eastern European front. At the same time, on the Middle East front, a Shiite Crescent Zone composed of Iran-Iraq-Syria is forming, and the (Qin Tian, 2017) Trump administration believes that the Obama administration mistakenly signed *The Iranian Nuclear Agreement*, thus giving Iran great room for activity and development, resulting in Iran's ability Constantly intervening in the war in Syria and Iraq in an attempt to regain its international influence in the Middle East. In addition, the relocation of the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem has also deepened the hostility and dissatisfaction of other Arab countries with the United States. Finally, Russia has gradually gained a foothold on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean by intervening in the Syrian civil war and easing relations with Turkey. Therefore, the confrontation between the United States and Russia and Iran in Eastern Europe and the Middle East has led to its lack of time to look east, and its own strategic resources are relatively limited, unable to concentrate on dealing with challenges from China. At this time, uniting with regional

powers such as Japan, India, and Australia to hedge China's influence, alienate the relations between these countries and China, deliberately provoke contradictions and create incidents, and buy time for the United States to ease its pressure on the Eastern European and Middle East fronts and return to the Indo-Pacific region, maintaining the dominance of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region has become a priority for the United States in strategic formulation.

Second, the disadvantages of the balance of power also drive Japan, India, and Australia to shirk their responsibilities. As China's overall strength grows, neither Japan, India, nor Australia can balance China alone. Japan, China's maritime neighbor, is concerned about China's growing maritime deterrence capability, and its inferiority relative to China is becoming increasingly apparent. Therefore, while strengthening the Japan-US alliance and actively cooperating with the United States to balance China, Japan uses value diplomacy to build a maritime democratic alliance that encircles China, and the fundamental purpose of Japan's alliance with the United States, India, and Australia to strengthen defense cooperation and connect the Indo-Pacific oceans is to use this to contain China.

India has a contradictory mindset about China's rise, on the one hand, it wants to use China's rise to balance the military pressure that the United States has placed on itself in the Indian Ocean, and on the other hand, it does not want to see its neighbors tilt to China. Although China claims that all its activities in the Indian Ocean are aimed at ensuring the security of maritime energy transportation, it has inadvertently formed a strategic squeeze on India's operating space. Because India's own limited strength is impossible to launch a simultaneous offensive against China and the United States, India believes that China is stepping up its infiltration into the Indian Ocean compared to the simple military pressure of the United States. India's implicit support from the United States in the Doklam incident also shows that India regards China as its main competitor in the Indo-Pacific region, and the help of the United States seems to give India the confidence to compete with China.

At present, the Indo-Pacific minimalist faction believes that under the long-term trend of the

relative weakening of US hegemony and the rise of China, the United States and its allies need to use India to balance China in order to maintain strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific region. (Xu Shaomin, 2018) While holding a pessimistic view of U.S. hegemony, this faction believes that the traditional system of bilateral alliances built by the United States is not enough to meet China's challenge and that a group of four Indo-Pacific countries, including the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, must be established. The reason for this is also that Australia also has a clear understanding of its own strength, at best, it is only a middle power, and in any case, Australia cannot completely become an adversary of China without the support of the United States.

Third, the common interests created by deepening interdependence and the common border between China and India are the common causes that drive the United States, Japan, and Australia to shirk their responsibilities. Mills is acquiescing that maintaining good relations with the target country can make the strategy of shirking responsibility more likely to succeed. The United States, Japan, and Australia have extensive interests with China at the low-level political level, of which close economic and trade ties are the ballast stone of Sino-US relations and an important reason for China to maintain decent relations with Japan and Australia. Although the increasing confrontation between China and the United States in the fields of security and economic trade has caused unprecedented setbacks in Sino-US relations, what the United States seeks is not to completely cut off economic and trade exchanges between the two sides, but to forcibly change the long-term asymmetrical trade structure between the two sides and tilt the trade sky in a direction favorable to the United States. During the G20 summit on December 1, 2018, Xi Jinping and Trump reached an important consensus on stopping mutual tariffs between China and the United States, which also showed that the United States is not willing to completely cut off trade ties with China. Under such circumstances, maintaining profitable economic and trade exchanges with China while balancing China under the guise of other countries is a choice that should be considered.

As far as Japan is concerned, although the situation of political cold and economic heat and



political cold and economic cold between China and Japan has alternately emerged, on the whole, Sino-Japanese economic and trade exchanges have shown a trend of gradual expansion. Especially in recent years, Japan has gradually changed its understanding of The Belt and Road Initiative and the AIIB, going through a process from resistance to ambiguity to acceptance, and China and Japan have also agreed to reach an agreement on third-party market cooperation, hoping to achieve benefit sharing. The economic interdependence between China and Japan has forced Japan to think carefully in the process of formulating its China policy, and the result is to ease relations with China while still retaining checks and balances.

The same is true for Australia. At present, China is still Australia's largest trading partner, Australia's largest energy export destination, China's huge consumer market is crucial to Australia's economic stability and people's livelihood security, so Australia is unlikely to implement a clear side-taking policy and suffer from China's trade sanctions. But at the same time, Australia does not want to see China dominate regional affairs, but still puts the US-Australia alliance at the core, follows the US China policy, and takes tough measures against China.

All in all, the United States, Japan, and Australia all have highly close economic and trade interests with China, and all three countries have a contradictory mentality of maintaining relations with China while balancing China. (Xia Liping, 2015) By contrast, India's interests with China seem less closely linked. In 2017, the total trade between China and India just exceeded \$80 billion, which is only equivalent to 13.7% of the total trade between China and the United States, and only roughly the same level of trade between China and the United States in 2001. <sup>1</sup>India happens to be the only major country bordering China and having territorial disputes, with Japan and Australia facing China across the sea, and the United States in a more distant position. Therefore, according to Mearsheimer's theory, the common border between India and China can enable India to assume the responsibility of balancing China and form a strategic containment of China's southwest direction, thereby alleviating the pressure of the United States, Japan, Australia,

and China to play a head-on game in the western Pacific and the South China Sea. As a result, all three countries have invariably introduced India into the newly constructed discursive framework of the Indo-Pacific to balance China's power, viewing India as a tool to balance China, while at the same time regulating India and China, two rising powers, in a US-led international system and regional order. Kill two birds with one stone effect.

### 3. Conclusion

From the theory of offensive realism, the driving factors of the United States, Japan, India and Australia to implement the Indo-Pacific strategy, power distribution, strategic priorities, power comparison, common interests and geopolitical factors have all affected the choice of China policy of the four countries to varying degrees. Each country wants to shift the responsibility of balancing China to others to the greatest extent possible and expects to achieve the same effect at the least cost. However, the Indo-Pacific strategy, which is essentially to shirk responsibility, also has limitations, which affect the effectiveness of the implementation of this strategy. From the theoretical perspective of offensive realism, it is possible for the bearer to realize the true purpose of the person who shirks the responsibility, and thus refuse to take the place of the person who shirks the responsibility to assume the obligation of checks and balances and prevent himself from being used by other countries. For example, the Doklam incident had a negative impact on Sino-Indian relations but given the impact of Sino-Indian relations on regional stability, Modi decided to visit China and put the relations between the two countries back on track. In addition, India also rejected Australia's participation in the Malabar military performance in the United States, Japan, and India in 2018, which is also intended to show goodwill to China. All this shows that India is unwilling to act as a pawn for the United States to balance China. Policy ambiguity of shirking those responsible can also affect the perception of the situation by those responsible. The uncertainty over the Trump administration's Asia policies has not only caused Japan, India, and Australia, as the bearers of responsibility, to worry about the reliability of U.S. commitments, but also could push countries such

as Japan into China's arms. In recent years, there has been a lot of debate in Japan about the formulation of China policy, and many politicians, scholars, and businesspeople have expressed their desire to improve relations with China, not only out of the needs of Japan's national interests, but also because of the narrow transactionalism and continuous wavering of the United States in handling regional issues. In short, the relationship and interaction between those responsible and those responsible will have an impact on the effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific strategy, and the strategy of shirking responsibility will not fully achieve its desired effect.

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