

5-4-3-2-1: THE DRAGON TALES

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Taming the Dragon

A dragon soaring through the sky with ambitious flames, her wings slicing through the air in a fiery dance of determined fervour, her victory remains immortal and inevitable for no single warrior can bring her to a point of capture. But there is one way out, which is to wait for the dragon to get down to the ground, all by herself. Patience is required, after which the dragon could be attacked from various points in different ways. Patience will ensure that the dragon does not leave the ground; various points of attack with well-reasoned different approaches will ensure that the dragon gets distracted on different fronts. Thus, this remains the only plausible way of capturing a strong and ambitious dragon.

Imaginary creatures, animals, and birds often assume the role of a high metaphorical significance. Dragon has long been associated with Zhōngguó and the People's Republic of China takes over the successive role in the region. The symbol of the dragon was associated with a group of seven constellations in the Chinese sky. Due to their presence in the east in the season of spring, people started associating the symbol with dawn, good harvest, and the ability to fly and rise high like the sun (Wilson, 1990).

Playing with the Dragon

Two years ago, on March 22nd, 2022, in a press conference, the Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China was asked several relevant questions pertaining to his domain, which was the external relations of the People's Republic of China. Lianhe Zaobao, the only Chinese daily in Singapore, raised a question about the implications of the recent developments by the United States in the Indo-Pacific and the meetings of Quad. The Minister replied, "The US (United States) is staging a "five-four-three-two" formation in the Asia-Pacific. This is by no means some kind of blessing for the region, but a sinister move to disrupt regional peace and stability. The real goal of the US Indo-Pacific strategy is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO."

The answer could not be ignored. Dr C. Raja Mohan, the former Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, the National University of Singapore at a recent conference on Indo-Pacific, hosted by the Council for Strategic Defense and Research added another part to the outermost concentric circle of this formation, which was a "one", and made it the "five-four-three-two-one" formation; which brings us to another question - what precisely is the "five-four-three-two-one" formation? The intelligence of the Five Eyes (FVEY), the strategic alliance of the Quad, the trilateral security partnership of AUKUS, the modern strategic relationship of US-Japan, and the one, the outermost concentric circle, being the US herself. The allegations were not something new, but what made me write this essay is to examine

the claims. Bringing in the code-breaking team of the Five Eyes was something peculiar. Is the intelligence data still shared between those five countries? If they do, what does it pertain? What is the scope of it? Is the United States intentionally forming this formation for a future purpose? How is China planning to combat this 'Chakravuyuh'? Will this formation be formalised under a single umbrella in the upcoming years? But before answering these pertinent questions, it becomes necessary for us to briefly study the US-China relations.

Understanding the Dragon: US-China Relations over a period of time

It becomes pertinent to note that there is a remarkable imbalance in the US-China trade relations right now. In 2022, the value of the exports made by the People's Republic of China to the United States is thrice the exports made by the US to the PRC. 6.5 per cent of the total US exports were made to China, whereas 14.2 per cent of the total US imports were contributed by China. The US flags certain issues concerning the trade relations, which include the human rights violations in the Chinese firms, and the practices that "unfairly force and incentivise" the transfer of US data and technology to their country (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Trade is only one of the major components of the relationship, and it must be noted that this was not even a basic analysis of the complex trade relationship between the countries, where the US finds the independent policies of the PRC as a necessary evil.

Until Deng Xiaoping opened the Chinese economy in the late 1970s, there was a severed tie between the US and the PRC due to the long-standing dispute, concerning the recognition of the People's Republic of China, given that the US had rendered her explicit support to General Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China during the turbulent periods of 1940s. During the period from 1949 to 1970, the basic feature of the Sino-US relationship was confrontation (Chang, 2000). The "Ping-Pong" Diplomacy and President Nixon's eight days in China during which he met Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, and Chairman Mao, and signed the Shanghai Communique helped soothe the severed ties, but the real relief came after the historic economic policies taken by Deng Xiaoping.

The June Fourth Incident or the Tiananmen Square Massacre, where we do not have precise data about the number of deaths and wounded, but it ranged from the protestors to the soldiers was a blow to the ongoing rebranding of the PRC. The Government of the US suspended the military relations with the country and the PRC could not become a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) until 2001. In 1999, during one of the killing sprees of the US, there was an "accidental", as claimed by NATO and the US, bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The then-Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) had termed the bombing, which left three journalists dead and more than twenty people working there injured, "barbaric".

In October 2000, with the signing of the "US-China Relations Act of 2000", the trade relations saw a new high, and the PRC was granted entry into the WTO. With an exponential rise during the first decade, China left behind Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. China saved the world economy and pulled the US out of the Great Recession of 2008 (Jingjing, 2019). The ongoing trade

war, multiple allegations of human rights violations, and COVID-19 is leading to a steep rise in the tension between the two countries.

Waiting for the Dragon?

Five Eyes (FVEY), denoting the Anglo-Saxon countries of the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand (NZ), the US, Australia, and Canada is an integral feature of this formation. I had the honour of asking about the veracity of Chinese claims about the FVEY to the former Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor of India, and he said that if China is making a claim about the Five Eyes through its official channels, it must have some proper shreds of evidence and we cannot ignore it. FVEY is informal in nature, and there is not much known about it, except the conspiracy theories and leak-outs. It brings us to the question - what precisely is the FVEY? Why is the membership limited only to these five states? How do they operate? If they have been a secret organisation, how did they come into play?

After the BRUSA Agreement of 1943, which was an official agreement between the Governments of the US and the UK to cooperate when it came to sharing cryptic data, the Sinkov Mission, led by Captain Sinkov went to meet Professor Alan Turing in the Bletchley Park, the place where the German Enigma codes used to be cracked led by Professor's team. The purpose of this visit was to obtain necessary intelligence data about the Enigma and collaborate on the workings of 'Ultra', the British codename of which was 'Boniface', and the US used 'Magic', to convey that German Enigma codes and the Japanese Purple codes were being cracked through human intelligentsia. Considered to be the most secret agreement ever entered into by the English-speaking world, the UKUSA Agreement was born out of the "British-US Communication Intelligence Agreement", which was concluded on March 5th, 1946 (Williams, 2023). The UKUSA Agreement was made public for the first time in June 2010, surrounded by several controversies brought by the former employee of the US National Security Agency, Edward Snowden in 2013. The members had to be staunchly anti-communist, which would make them appear politically trustworthy, in order to become full members of this exclusive community (Williams, 2023), apart from being an Anglo-Saxon member of the Allies. The magnitude of secrecy could be inferred by noting that even the Australian Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, remained uninformed of its existence until 1973 (Vingoe, 2013).

All of these points leave one important thing for us - why is China worried about an alliance which was formed during the 1940s and has its details all out in the public? If this question had been raised right on that fine day of March, 2022, we could not have answered this; but as the former NSA of India rightly said, if China makes any serious claim, there has to be some background to it, a few months ago, in October 2023, we saw the intelligence chiefs of the Five Eyes coming together to make a joint statement. The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States, Christopher Wray said that the "unprecedented" joint call was meant to confront the terrible threat China poses to innovation across the world. Companies like Microsoft made official statements alleging state-sponsored spying, hacking, and intellectual property theft from China. The FBI had busted a Chinese plot through which they had been trying to infiltrate a renowned Australian research institute. The Chinese called it a "collective disinformation campaign", but could not reply to the allegations factually.

We credit the origination of the term "Indo-Pacific" to the work of German scholar Karl Haushofer, 'Indopazifischen Raum'. This term started doing rounds around the corridors of geopolitical discourses after Former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe's speech in the Parliament of India, where he had talked about the confluence of the "Two Seas". It must be noted, as the experts call it, an attempt to add India as a counterweight to China. Subsequently, we saw a new Indo-Pacific Division in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India, and the US renamed its USPACOM (US Pacific Command) to USINDOPACOM (US Indo-Pacific Command). Such developments were an explicit signal to the PRC about the upcoming strategic encirclement of the country. Although China should not have given up on the 'rhetoric' of the Indo-Pacific, we saw her succumbing to the war of words. It should be highlighted that in his very address about the strategic isolation and encirclement of China, Minister Wang Yi refers to the area as Indo-Pacific, and blamed the US for calling out her hypocrisy of forming "exclusive blocs" while talking of multilateralism.

Irrespective, the Indo-Pacific remains a conceptual framework, which highlights economic and security interdependence; while Quad is a minilateral framework of leading democracies in the region (Pulipaka & Musaddi, 2021). Quad owes its origin to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean. India, Australia, the US, and Japan had run a joint military campaign to provide relief, together they contributed over forty thousand troops. As the Former Foreign Secretary of India, Mr Shyam Saran was quoted by the Lowy Institute, the "frantic phone calls" between the four states to coordinate the reliefs led to this idea. The other three states except India had a common understanding of it to be a de facto military alliance (Flitton, 2020). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue started in 2007 through the Malabar Exercise in the Bay of Bengal, where Singapore had joined the countries too, as a reaction to the growing animosity of China to its neighbouring states, but it ceased to exist in 2008, when the Quad was "killed" before its subsequent revival in 2017.

What, or rather, who killed Quad? Often, in the geopolitical discourses, the blame goes to the Australian Government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, but Shyam Saran points out an interesting feature about how Australia was not the first to show reluctance about upsetting China, and he puts forth how upsetting China was not in favour of the broader interests of the US. It is important to understand the context behind Mr Saran's statement to the Lowy Institute, the US required the support of China in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to condemn Iran's nuclear ambitions and put strong sanctions. Thus, blaming only Australia for the death of Quad remains an unfair feature of the geopolitical discourses.

Quad was revived in 2017, and to put it in lighter terms, we missed an opportunity to include Singapore, which would have made it, in the words of Professor Ian Hall, Squad. Quad has been accused of being an "Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)" by several Chinese commentators, but the member states have always emphasized how it is only meant to strengthen the economic, military, and diplomatic understanding between the four nations, and to promote the idea of "free, open, and democratic ideas in the Indo-Pacific". There is, of course, a subtext of standing against a common 'enemy', but owing to the individual interests of each state, this distinction cannot be made

explicit. Although the Quad has not done anything as explicit as the FVEY so far, the minilateralism in Quad is a signal to convey to the PRC, that if the need arises, the four states can come together on a single stage.

Similarly, AUKUS is another minilateral, or rather a trilateral organisation, the difference being, that it is a security partnership. The tripartite alliance formed in 2021 has its major focus on sharing strategic technologies, weapons, and allied subjects. In 2023, it was announced that the US would be sharing its much-adorned jewel, three used Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines, to Australia and would be putting in efforts to train the Australian sailors to operate the nuclear-powered submarines. In addition to this, the US and the UK will be undertaking a joint ship construction initiative. With this decision, the policymakers of the US are trusting their strategic partner, Australia, while they are unable to make up for a shortage of nuclear-powered submarines for their use is something that would go down in the pages of the history books (Singh, 2023). While Quad was a signal, AUKUS looks like the strongest of this strategic encirclement of the PRC.

The 'two' of the formation is the US-Japan relationship. Japan's alarm is the most acute given its territorial and maritime boundary disputes with the PRC over a set of islands in the East China Sea, known as the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyutai in China (Chanlett-Avery, 2018). Although Japan and the US have had their relations since the 19th Century, the two world wars had changed the entire matrix. Japan and the US have one of if not the most important partnerships in the world post-1945, which does not have both parties from the Anglosphere. After the Allied occupation of Japan had come to an end through the Treaty of San Francisco, the US came out to be an important strategic partner of Japan. Out of all the treaties signed in the Indo-Pacific, something that can hold a prominent significance is the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, which was signed on January 19th, 1960, where the US agreed to assist the Japanese military in case of any attack on any of the Japanese territories. It must also be noted that the United States has stationed its (roughly) fifty-six thousand army personnel in Japanese territories. This proximity to the American troops always keeps the tension up in the air.

How would the Dragon react?

The one, which was added by Prof Raja Mohan, is the conspirator, which is the United States of America. Almost every minilateral, no matter what its core objectives are, has an American presence, something, which could not be a matter of coincidence. The US has active military alliances with Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, and South Korea amongst several other states. It is not a surprise that a major global power like the PRC is keeping its guard on. It makes us wonder - what would an appropriate response from the PRC look like? Although this question crosses the current bandwidth of our conversation, we cannot be amused at how the PRC is building up its soft power and goodwill through the Belt and Road Initiative and investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Africa, ASEAN, and Latin America amongst several other countries. Closer ties with Russia are another feature of the Chinese response. While some Asian countries worry about China's ascent, they want China to balance out the US dominance. Some liberal

democracies, while ostensibly endorsing American values, actually want to see Beijing have ideas and values that are different from Washington's, so that they can avoid Washington's bullying and finger-pointing. While liberal democratic values are more attractive, many countries feel they are more comfortable dealing with the Chinese than with the Americans (Hu & Meng, 2020).

Stepping onto the Dragon's Tail

Stepping onto a dragon's tail is a delicate dance between a much-expected danger and a much-awaited victory. While the Dragon has been surrounded from all sides, what if it is not alone? While there are commentators who argue that the US is a diminishing power, the External Affairs Minister of India was quite clear in his view that the country is in the process of reinventing itself. The doubts about the capabilities of the US could be put to the trash through one question - is there any country that could stage a similar formation against a powerful country like PRC? There could never be a better way to capture a dragon than shooting arrows from different points, while the dragon lies down exhausted on the ground, but what if, all of a sudden, she starts her ambitious flight again?

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