

## BALANCING AGAINST CHINA WITH THE ASIA-AFRICA GROWTH CORRIDOR: AN INDIAN-JAPANESE INITIATIVE TOWARDS THE INDO-PACIFIC

*O balanceamento contra a China com o corredor de crescimento Ásia-África: uma iniciativa indiana-japonesa para o Indo-Pacífico*

João Paulo Nicolini Gabriel<sup>1</sup>

Carlos Eduardo Carvalho<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

The launch of a vision document for Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) at the African Development Bank meeting in Gujarat in 2017 reveals an important aspect to grasp the awakening of a strategy to face China's rise. This conference of the African Development Bank (AfDB) is a landmark for this initiative. This bank is a mechanism for economic and social development with the participation of non-African members (e.g. China, India, Brazil, the United States, and Japan). The main contributors to the African Development Fund - linked to this bank - are the United Kingdom, the USA and Japan. Beijing does not figure among the most influent members of this organization. Thus, it was an opportunity for think tanks, supported by India and Japan, to introduce the idea of a corridor aimed to link Asia to Africa in order to increase co-operation in agriculture, social development and technology sharing.

Strengthening ties between India and Japan demonstrates that regional dynamics are redefining irrespective of the disputes between the two major global powers: the United States and China. Besides the idea of balancing power, both New Delhi and Tokyo aim to balance the threats arising from what they see as a Chinese expansionism. However, they strategically avoid unnecessary diplomatic odds and attempt to build new partnerships, intending to distance themselves from a possible dependence on the U.S. (PANT; JOSHI,

<sup>1</sup>Graduado em Relações Internacionais pela PUC-SP. Mestrando em Relações Internacionais pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Relações Internacionais San Tiago Dantas (UNESP, UNICAMP, PUC-SP). Bolsista CAPES. Pesquisador vinculado ao Núcleo de Estudos sobre a Política Externa dos Estados Unidos, ao Núcleo de Estudos e Análises de Assuntos Internacionais da UNESP, e ao Research Committee 14 Politics and Ethnicity da International Political Science Association (IPSA). Email: joao\_paulo\_apd@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Graduado em Ciências Econômicas pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (1983) e doutor em Economia pela Universidade Estadual de Campinas (1996). Atualmente é Professor Associado da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Departamento de Economia e Programa de Pós-Graduação em Relações Internacionais, São Tiago Dantas (Unesp, Unicamp, PUC / SP). É professor contribuinte do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Economia da Universidade Federal do ABC - UFABC. Email: cecarv@uol.com.br

2016, p.87). Therefore, the ongoing international order leads to a closer relationship between New Delhi and Tokyo. This affirmation is observed in official documents as such: "Japan-India relations are rooted in their similar perceptions of the evolving environment in the region and the world at large" (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF JAPAN (MOFA), 2008).

China is a rising power. Material capabilities and rapid economic growth spark new possibilities to this country within the international system. The current Chinese position reverberates in its own international insertion's strategy through an increase in the assertiveness including in the military scope, as emphasized the president of China Xi Jinping in 2017: "[W]e have reached a historical starting point in strengthening national defense and the armed forces". (COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA (CPC), 2017, p.47). Similarly, Stuenkel (2016, p.10) argues that China has already become an international provider of public goods.

Gilpin (1981, p.7) emphasizes: "[I]nternational relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy"; that is, China's strategy on economics and military power can be seen as Beijing's geopolitical intentions to move to a superpower status. According to the definition of Bremmer (2015), a "superpower" is a country that congregates military, commercial, cultural and economic clout and consequently is able to influence others around the world.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the best example to summarize this affirmation. Revealed in 2013 by the Chinese authorities, this proposal has ambitious intentions that can reconfigure global dynamics. China's economic and political influences are a reality that countries are required to cope with. As international politics is a competition for power and wealth, it is understandable why other states seek to strategically deal with the issue.

Although Japan and India have shown an interest in maintaining good relations with the United States, these countries seek to diversify their partnerships with a view to securing assistance since Washington is historically reluctant to interfere in cases that are not directly related to its own interests. According to Walt (1997, p.160) this situation usually happens because in situations where there is a considerable geographical distance between the partners, the chance of a threat to one member directly affect the national interests of another is smaller, which leads to uncertainties and the need to broaden the range of partnerships.

According to the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, "the destiny of the world will be deeply influenced by the course of developments in the Indo-Pacific region" (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OF INDIA (MEA), 2018). This paper seeks to grasp the partnership between India and Japan and identify elements of a strategy to balance against China. However, such as Amorim and Silva (2014) remarked, the strategy of New Delhi and Tokyo towards China is not necessarily based on military precepts - although both countries have a troubled history and still dispute territories with Beijing.

This paper emphasizes the case of the AAGC which is officially an Indian-Japanese initiative to improve their commercial, diplomatic and political ties with countries from Asia and Africa, but many

scholars believed that it is an action aimed to compete against Beijing's projects - mainly the Maritime Silk Road. According to Stuenkel (2016, p.154), Asian powers tend to play, in the upcoming future, important roles in the provision of public goods and infrastructure facilities around the world. Instead of military disputes, this paper aims to demonstrate the dispute over megaproject settlements amid geopolitical reordering to highlight the concerted partnership between India and Japan beyond the US support.

Chinese sectors assume this diplomatic movement as an action aimed to target China. "The two countries put forward the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor with the intention of containing Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy is, to a large extent, confrontational against China". (DEKAI, 2018).

The paper is organized as follows. First, a descriptive section of the theoretical approach. Subsequently, a description about the diplomatic ties between India and Japan and their actions within the Indo-Pacific in a moment marked by the China's rise. Following, an analysis of the AAGC and its characteristics at a time when BRI is formulated as an important instrument for Beijing in terms of global insertion. Finally, there is a conclusion exposing the main findings of the paper.

## Theoretical Approach

Tensions in Asia are currently noticeable. The increase on the international role developed by the Asian powers rearranges not only regional dynamics, but also the global order. In this regard, Walt's (1985) theory proves relevant to analyse how perceptions of threat reorganize foreign policies' strategy. Walt (1985) advocates that countries, during the increase of tension, act strategically in order to curb what seems to be a menace; that is, countries would react to the perception of threat. It does not lead States to invariably fear a superpower because the regional dynamics are delimited by their own logics. Strategic restructuring is elaborated envisaging the containment of a specific State that develops material and military power faster and begin to assume some positions considered controversial by the others. (PAUL, 2004, p.7). Walt (1985) attempts to explain the motivations for the adoption of a certain behaviour of States when facing situations of threat based on a perceptible imbalance of power. According to this theory, there are two sorts of expected activities: *balancing* and *bandwagoning*. While the former is an attempt by states to gather together in response to threats, the latter is configured when a State aligns itself with its greatest threat to avoid being seen as an opponent and receiving benefits for this connivance (WALT, 1985, p.4-8).

Walt's contribution to international policy studies is to realise that threats induce State's behaviour, not just discrepancies in power. His theory helps to explain the recent geopolitical rearrangements in Indo-Pacific. Walt (1985) outlines four aspects that shape the perception of threat: (a) aggregate power (similar to Mearsheimer's (2001) conception over territorial relevance, technological advances, material resources and industrial development for the maintenance of a country's capabilities in the International System); (b) proximity, as such Walt (1985, p.10) points out: "[B]ecause the ability to project power declines with distance, states that are nearby pose a greater threat than those that are far away"); (c) offensive capability; and (d)

offensive intentions (perceptions that a State is motivated to pursue aggressively interests going against the others).

However, it is worth emphasizing the further considerations made by Paul (2004) on the concept of balancing by listing diverse ways in which States use this manoeuvre. According to the author, the balancing strategy could be followed in three ways: (a) Hard Balancing: at a time of great conflict possibilities, some States formally unite through the deliberate acquisition of armaments; (b) Soft Balancing: a more restrained strategy that aims to deterring the threat through limited arms production, cautious approach developed by some countries that triggered the organization of forums and informal *ad hoc* alliances in a preventive manner; and (c) Asymmetric Balancing: when a State starts to sponsor non-state organizations – e.g., terrorists – to cause disturbances in another country that threatens them. (PAUL, 2004, p.13).

This paper highlights the idea of “soft balancing” as a manner to describe the reasons for establishing the AAGC. According to Paul (2004), soft balancing occurs when countries develop security understandings and attempt to manage the situation without establishing aggressive action that could be considered a menace according to the major power’s awareness; in other words, “soft balancing focuses more on diplomatic and political responses” (MCDUGALL, 2012, p.3). Although there is a military element, the focus of this strategy is based on the consolidation of diplomatic ties aiming at the establishment of hedge policies; that is, it is a matter related to diplomatic strategies insofar as there is a defensive perception of the States in the “soft-balancing” in not to provoke abrupt movements capable of directly disturbing the threatening State.

Paul (2018) claims that soft-balancing strategy is a pragmatic choice did by countries such as India in order to preserve some diplomatic freedom to hedge and bargain with the great powers and avoid security competition mainly with China. The increasement of tensions leads naturally to the idea that India and Japan have been attempting to manage the dynamics inside Indo-Pacific by tilting to Washington’s side. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), inaugurated in 2007, can be considered the “hard balancing” option in this context because Washington attempts to boost this initiative with New Delhi, Tokyo and Canberra envisaging to consolidate a mechanism of strategic coordination. The 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States emphasized that “[W]e will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India.” (WHITE HOUSE, 2017, p.46).

This paper aims to describe the importance of AAGC because Quad has not been able to set a formal structure due to the fact that India is concerned to engage assertively in a strategy that China sees as a menace in terms of security. India and Japan plan to cope with the geopolitical disputes within Indo-Pacific by organizing different manners to approach regional partners and avoid diplomatic quarrels with Beijing – the AAGC is an example for this context.

### India and Japan: the consolidation of a partnership

The world order is a constantly changing structure. Cohen (2003) presents the concept of geopolitics as something that goes eternally through adaption due to the dispute for power and territory. Geopolitics is

always on the move insofar as the actors in the international system constantly interact. States envisage the increase of their power through economic, diplomatic and military means so that consecutive changes in the global balance of power rearrange previously existing strategies and conceptions about international relations (MEARSHEIMER, 2001, p.34). Due to the accumulation of economic, technological, and military capacities, States begin to seek changes in the international order in favour of their national interests (GILPIN, 1981, p.9).

Conceptions about a region are based more on political interests than on geography (KATZENSTEIN, 2000, p.354). Regions are redrawn by geopolitical concepts that fit into the strategies of the international powers (PAN, 2014, p.456). Kaplan (2009, p.16) claims: “[T]he right map can stimulate foresight by providing a spatial view of critical trends in world politics”.

Following the current changes in the global balance of power, the mental map of Asia has undergone through reorganizations that consequently reflect States’ understanding of the international context and the possibilities of managing the existing dynamics (MEDCALF, 2018, p.9). The consolidation of the geopolitical meaning inside ‘Indo-Pacific’ corresponds to the reorganizations of the national strategies amid transitions in the international scenario.

The Indo-Pacific geographically corresponds to “the region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States” (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT, 2017, p.1). The 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States complements: “[T]he region, which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States, represents the most populous and economically dynamic part of the world” (WHITE HOUSE, 2017, p.45-46).

Indo-Pacific has recently gained momentum due to blossoming geopolitical and geo-economical tensions involving countries such as China, the United States, India, Japan and Australia. According to Medcalf (2018, p.10-12), India is currently seeking to safeguard its influence in South Asia and expand its actions in Southeast Asia with the “Act East policy”. Concomitantly, Japan attempts to consolidate itself as an important economic partner of countries in the region and seeks to increase its relations through Indo-Pacific. While India’s “Act East policy”, launched by the Narendra Modi’s government, means a redefinition of its regional insertion by upgrading New Delhi’s focus on political, strategic and cultural issues; improving ties with countries such as Indonesia, Japan, Australia; and increasing its willingness to enhance Asian connectivity by “building transport infrastructure, encouraging airlines to enhance connectivity in the region, contacts between academic and cultural institutions are underway” (MEA, 2014), Tokyo has been advocating for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” which highlights a policy of international engagement based also in defensive purposes. Likewise, the Foreign Minister of Japan Taro Kono exposed that his foreign policy pillars are based on the ensuring of principles as the freedom of navigation and the rule of law and the willingness to pursue “economic prosperity by improving connectivity including through the development of quality infrastructure in accordance with international standards” (MOFA, 2018a).

India and Japan have approached diplomatically due to geopolitical issues. Economic and military reasons redefined their strategical thinking and triggered this ongoing unprecedented approximation. During the Cold War, both countries usually assumed many different positions regarding their projects of international insertion and defensive strategies, but this scenario was altered by changes in the international order; that is, "the end of the Cold War and the rise of China have led to the convergence of Japan's and India's strategic perspectives" (BREWSTER, 2010, p.97).

Beyond the ongoing geopolitical disputes between the United States and China, there are important Asian dynamics. It is not true claiming that Washington's lesser international engagement invariably means free way to China's global diplomatic advances. According to Walt (1985, p.16) regional countries naturally establish hedge strategies towards local threats. China gradually shows greater assertiveness in its foreign policy seeking to increase trade and economic relations while also modernizing its army and navy.

India and Japan, while trying to maintain good diplomatic relations with China, keep their reluctance because "Indian, Chinese and Japanese relations have been "uneasy" since the 19th Century" (AMORIM; SILVA, 2014, p.73). Brewster (2010, p.97) argues "[B]oth are concerned about the rising economic and military power of China and wish – at least in a generalized sense – to balance that power" due to the fact that Beijing has projected its power assertively on the region and reinvigorated its actions to strength their positions in some sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and to claim sovereignty over some island on the South China Sea. Chellaney (2018) complements: "[T]he relationship between Japan and India is growing fast, yet each of them feels a strategic imperative to try to improve strained ties with China". Yu (2016, p.12) summarized: "[W]ith the rise of China as a global power, these Asian countries are concerned that China will become more aggressive and eventually use or threaten to use force to solve its territorial disputes with neighboring countries".

The term "Indo-Pacific" has a considerable relationship with diplomacy between India and Japan. Speaking to members of the Indian parliament in 2007, Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister, described the needs of both countries to orchestrate joint actions as they supposedly hold similar interests to the region that spans the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In this regard, the Japanese leader pointed out that his country had "rediscovered India as a partner that shares the same values and interests and also as a friend that will work alongside us to enrich the seas of freedom and prosperity, which will be open and transparent to all" (MOFA, 2007). The idea of the "confluence of the two seas" is based on the Asian geopolitics and the strategic movements given by New Delhi and Tokyo aiming to protect their interests so that the approach between these two countries can be seen pragmatically by their strategists.

The need to balance against China has been especially important. Joshi (2017) exemplify: "[T]his extraordinary improvement in relations, sustained across three Indian premierships and ten Japanese, has been driven, above all, by what both sides view as China's aggressive, "expansionist" behaviour in Asia over the past decade".



China has approached commercially Japan and India, but they have engaged in various diplomatic skirmishes in matters of sovereignty. Since Beijing maintains its historical claims about the majority of the South China Sea implying conflicting situations to Japanese interests in the region and its sovereign claims on islands (e.g., Senkaku/Diaoyu), Abe began to advocate for a policy towards the Indo-Pacific aimed to expand the possibilities of safeguarding its defensive positions beyond the historic alliance with the United States initiated in the post-Second War with the 1960 security treaty (KIYOTA, 2014).

India, despite joining some international initiatives with China (e.g., BRICS), has kept some reticence due to regional issues as such territorial claims and dispute for influence on South Asia; that is, “[T]he Sino-Indian relationship is likely to see enduring elements of both rivalry and cooperation”. (MOHAN, 2008, p.52). New Delhi has pursued an active presence from the Strait of Aden to Malacca, but the China’s rise imposed new dynamics that Indians began to fear its neighbour’s action in this area. (BREWSTER, 2016; MOHAN, 2008, p.44).

Beijing is wary about the approach between India and Japan embedded in the geostrategic reallocation of their foreign policies, despite thinking that “no Asian country can substantially challenge China’s national security, nor can they by grouping together. China has been in the core of economic co-operation in Asia. Geopolitics is unlikely to go against the geo-economic situation”. (GLOBAL TIMES, 2017). China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out that Japan and India have integrated a containment strategy of BRI by supporting, jointly with Australia and the United States, regional mechanisms. (PEOPLE’S DAILY, 2018).

Japanese and Indian leaders officially avoid naming China as an enemy. For example, Modi said: ‘by no means do we consider it as directed against any country’ (MEA, 2018b) and, likewise, Abe exposed the issue just emphasizing: “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous” (MOFA, 2016).

The current international dynamics have triggered a competition for influence on Asia. Geopolitical disputes consolidate rivalries mainly because of the ambitions of BRI, which became the Chinese “grand strategy” in the Xi Jinping era; that is, an initiative that, in addition to the establishment of trade routes, encompasses long-term strategic planning intending to (i) internationalize companies and the renminbi; (ii) establishing new strategic partnerships; (iii) reorganizing technical standards and global governance mechanisms in order to consolidate the Chinese presence around the world. (PLOBERGER, 2017). Beijing refuses to officialise geopolitical interests in the BRI insofar as China claims that it ‘is a way for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road toward peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-around exchanges’. (THE STATE COUNCIL OF PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC CHINA, 2015).

Not only attempt Japan and India to manage the Chinese rise, but also they aim to project their foreign policy in Asia and Africa. In the Japanese case, for example, it could be assumed that this country has been acting in areas such as ‘regional connectivity and proactive contribution to peace, for well over a decade, and

that the latest developments are not mere geopolitical reactions to Chinese gameplays in the region'. (THANKACHAN, 2018, p.84). Likewise, Saint-Mézard (2016, p.177) claims that India developed a more engaged diplomacy towards its surroundings due to the new global dynamics triggered during the 1990s – the 'Look East' policy was launched in the early 1990s by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in order to 'strengthen the already existing good relations between India and the countries of Asia Pacific and South-East Asia'. (MEA, 1996).

Some Chinese pundits believe that the Indo-Pacific strategy is an 'US' move to divide Asia and to produce confrontations'. (XINGCHUN, 2017b). However, it should be noted that Japan and India have strengthened their relations based in national interests. The 2000s was a period marked by the normalization of India-Japanese ties after Tokyo phasing out the sanction against New Delhi once imposed due to the Indian nuclear tests in 1998. (KOJIMA, 2014).

Diplomatic documents of both countries have shown that their approximations occur concomitantly with the consolidating of China's assertive presence in Asia. India's decision to join the nuclear non-proliferation regimes and their rapprochement with the United States made the question of the supposed compatibility of democratic values between Japan and India stronger. (GARGE, 2016). The process of strengthening diplomatic ties between these countries developed in a manner that they decided to upgrade this to a 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' in 2014 means that possibilities for co-operation defensive issues (e.g., Japan's official inclusion in Exercise Malabar in 2015).

If the Diplomatic Bluebook of Japanese diplomacy during the 1990s paid little attention to the possibilities of co-operation with India, in 2017 this document highlighted: 'Geopolitically speaking India is an extremely important country as it faces the Indian Ocean connecting Asia and Africa and is positioned in the center of sea lanes'. (MOFA, 2017a, p.72). Not only did officials from both countries begin to see each other strategically, but also their societies passed to grasp their diplomatic ties friendly so that 80% of Indians considered the current state of Japan-India relations either as being 'very friendly' or 'friendly'. (MOFA, 2013). Just 31% of the same society holds a favourable opinion about China. (PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2016). The consolidation of the India-Japanese partnership could be defined in a pragmatic fashion due to the fact that the relationship between these countries has gained geopolitical tones that constantly collide with Chinese plans in the dispute for influence; that is, '[O]ur strategic partnership is not only for the good and security of our own societies, it also brings peace, stability and balance to the region. It is alive and responsive to emerging opportunities and challenges in Asia-Pacific' (MEA, 2016b).

### **The Asia-Africa growth corridor and the Japanese-Indian strategy of soft-balancing**

In 2016, Japan and India demonstrated their interests in combining their foreign policy actions with the Indo-Pacific. Modi and Abe decided to seek more complementarity between India's Act East Policy and Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure by closely coordinating, bilaterally and with other partners, for better regional integration and improved connectivity as well as industrial networks based on



the principles of mutual consultation and trust. (MEA, 2016a). The launch of the AAGC vision document on May 25, 2017 serves as a consolidator of this convergence because Modi and Abe showed interest in improving connectivity between Asia and Africa by using their economic and human resources to achieve what they called a free and open Indo-Pacific. (MEA, 2016a; THANKACHAN, 2018). However, it should be noted that this project was seen by some Chinese as a strategy to compete against Beijing's influence in Africa and, furthermore, India would have engaged supposedly in this action because it was misled by Tokyo. (LEI, 2017; XINGCHUN, 2017a).

The AAGC agrees with aspects of the India and Japan Vision 2025 document, which reflects a joint strategic planning of international engagement and reveals that, in the Indo-Pacific, they aim to 'advance industrial networks and regional value chains with open, fair and transparent business environment in the region'. (MEA, 2015). Likewise, it corresponds to the idea emphasized by the launching of the India-Japan Act East Forum in 2017 aimed to trigger the synergy between the 'Act East Policy' with the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'. (MEA, 2017a). Garge (2016, p.259) points out that there is an Indian-Japanese partnership being planned over common precepts that have been built on such issues as democracy, respect for national sovereignty, respect for international laws, and improvements in infrastructure and connectivity across the Indo-Pacific.

These points can be understood as a part of the Indian-Japanese soft-balancing strategy to Chinese strategies as they tacitly seek to engage in a scenario observed as a geopolitical dispute and mainly because India and Japan are building a partnership to manage the China's expansion throughout Asia. In addition, New Delhi and Tokyo hold some reticence that BRI could encircle them while consolidating the Chinese area of influence; in other words, the AAGC would be part of a strategy that "exhibits elements of soft balancing while involving a tactical, informal and *ad hoc* security understanding between India and Japan in the Indo-Pacific" (PANDA, 2018, p.10).

BRI's expansion demands caution from Indian and Japanese diplomats. Whereas Japan recently wavered at the possibility of working together with China on this issue due the fact that Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe recently engaged in conversations to debate "how to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region and the world, including the One Belt, One Road initiative" (MOFA, 2018b), New Delhi remains reluctant to the fact that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will traverse the disputed territories of Kashmir. India boycotted the Belt and Road Forum held in China on May 14-16, 2017 justifying that proposals for connectivity should be based on respect for international norms, sovereignty and planned transparently so that no country becomes indebted in an unsustainable way (MEA, 2017b; PANT; PASSI, 2017, p.90). In 2018, India reiterated this position by saying: "[T]he so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' violates India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity.". (MEA 2018a). In addition, New Delhi is reticent with the network of partnerships that China has established in the Indian Ocean through the BRI maritime corridor, the Maritime Silk Road, which revives the thought that Beijing would be organizing the strategy of containment of India

deemed as 'string of pearls', although the Chinese deny that such facilities have military purposes. (BREWSTER, 2014; MANN, 2018, p.6-7).

The AAGC comes at a time of redefinition of international relations so that India and Japan seek to safeguard their interests. (PANDA, 2018, p.5). The project's vision document was developed primarily by three think tanks - i.e., the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS); the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA); the Institute of Developing Economies Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO) - while being supported by MEA of India, Government of India and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan (METI).

The initiative still has vague guidelines and serves initially as an indication that these two countries seek to combine their capacities to boost their presence in Africa. The scarce information about the proposal that falls within the geopolitical disputes evidently attracts several questions about its potentialities and objectives. Visiting India in 2017, Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hiroshige Seko reinforced Modi on the importance of specifying the characteristics of AAGC. (METI, 2017). Some studies organized by the think tanks on this initiative and its potential will be probably released during the next years. (MEA, 2018c).

Based on attention paid by the two governments to the issues of increasing connectivity, exporting technologies and increasing people-to-people relations, the official document sought to highlight four primary guidelines of the AAGC: 'development and cooperation projects, quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity, capacity and skill enhancement and people-to-people partnerships'. (RIS; ERIA; IDE-JETRO; 2017, p.3).

India and Japan have established an important relationship not only with Asian countries, but also their presence in Africa has been remarkable. Chinese expansionism has not gone unscathed. There is growing criticism of BRI's Chinese investments being made through loans from the Silk Road Fund, Chinese banks and Beijing-sponsored initiatives to countries with a credit rating below BB, which theoretically could put them into massive debts because those countries are considered, by international credit rating agencies, vulnerable to speculation and have difficulties in making commitments to pay their debts. (PANDA, 2018). Hence, India and Japan attempt to create an awareness that AAGC could be a more transparent source of funds and commercial possibilities because these two countries are democracies. Modi and Abe described in 2018 that they have been developing programs for improving infrastructure throughout all the Indo-Pacific in a way compromised with some believes such as: all development cooperation must be carried out in an open, transparent and non-exclusive manner and based on international standards including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations [...]"(INDIA, 2018).

The Indian press emphasized this fact more than the Japanese's and consequently it is possible to observe Indian newspaper's articles calling the AAGC such as a 'freedom corridor' attempting to figure as an opposition to the Chinese political regime, something that sectors of Beijing disapproved: "the Tokyo-New Delhi strategy based on a motive to undermine Beijing's influence will widen the rift between the two sides"

(HONG, 2017). It should be noted that, from India's apparent greater rivalry with BRI, sectors of the Indian government have been more emphatic in conceptualizing the AAGC as a counterpoint to BRI in comparison with the Japanese's, which can be observed tacitly in the discourses of India's policymakers and journalists who tends to emphasises more the AAGC as a transparent and social-minded initiative, that is, "growth and connectivity are truly globally owned only when they emerge from a broad-based consultative process" (MEA, 2017c).

The AAGC's idea is part of the Indian and Japanese engagement in Africa. It aims to develop a value chain in this area in order to "enable these economies to further integrate and collectively emerge as a globally competitive economic bloc" (RIS, ERIA, IDE-JETRO; 2017, p.9); therefore, scholars and journalists believe that it would seek to connect the ports of Southeast Asia to the African coastal regions, including regions of Djibouti and the port of Mombasa, Kenya, which already has significant Japanese aid for its development. The economic objectives of this initiative reveal its intentions to serve the interests of African and Asian countries in harnessing the possibilities that Japan and India possess in terms of capital to invest in infrastructure works, investments in renewable energies and issues related to agriculture, technology and partnerships in the fight against disease.

Brewster (2018) points out that Japan has gradually increased its investments and assistance within Indo-Pacific's countries. Tokyo participates in projects being developed in Mozambique, Kenya, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The AAGC's vision document highlights that Tokyo has already organized some summits with African leaders since 1993 and this country: "enjoys a leading edge in research and development areas. It also has the capacity to transfer capabilities for managing and strengthening supply chains in manufacturing sector and infrastructure projects". (RIS, ERIA, IDE-JETRO; 2017, p.6). Similarly, India has been inserted in the Asian countries and Narendra Modi's government has sought to assertively approach its neighbourhood.

India and Japan have already cooperated in some projects that are inside the AAGC's scope. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Kenya have received some assistance from New Delhi and Tokyo to develop housing, education and electrification projects; to build bridges and roads; and to stablish collaborative projects in health service. (INDIA, 2018).

Although it is described as an action intended to strengthen ties between different Indo-Pacific countries and seeks to broaden their economic relations, being part of the convergence of Japan's and India's international insertion policies is a factor correlated to the global dispute over influence with China. BRI can be considered the most ambitious initiative adopted by a State in recent years around the international order. However, the AAGC is a way of deepening the engagement of Japan and India amid the challenges imposed by their competitor. The strategy is embedded in political and diplomatic dialogues with a view to balancing threat against Beijing, in a soft-balancing manner, and building joint initiatives to manage the effects emanated by Chinese expansionism as much as possible. One initiative does not exclude the other; that is, their complementarities can be beneficial to global economic development. However, geopolitical disputes happen behind the scenes.

## Final Considerations

Concepts are relevant in geopolitical strategies. A question that should be posed oftener in International Relations studies is: 'what is in a name? Therefore, the idea of Indo-Pacific has great repercussions on the future of the global order. This region has become the centre of geopolitical studies. While competition between the United States and China is relevant, it is important to highlight how regional interactions happen. India, Japan, Indonesia and Australia show interesting behaviour since their foreign policies had to be quickly allocated to a scenario in which their surroundings became extremely relevant. This article sought to identify the behaviour of soft balancing in the approach between India and Japan through the analysis of the interests and significance of AAGC.

The strategy of defending national interests is elaborated in a multifaceted way. Concerning the mechanisms elaborated by India and Japan, many authors prefer to observe the existence of the Quad as a strategy to curb China's economic and political clout through orchestration of joint practices - including militaries. Although Quad has reinvigorated itself in recent years with the rise of a more aggressive US foreign policy in the face of China during Donald Trump's government, this initiative is not institutionalized and does not even issue joint communiqués.

Amid the constraints imposed by the fact that signalling a military alliance could pose a direct threat to the Chinese, Japan and India seek different strategies to defend their national interests in the face of new geopolitical dynamics. The AAGC is consolidated as a pillar of the soft balancing strategy orchestrated by these two countries. Manage the effects of Chinese expansionism without this being perceived as a direct threat to Beijing's decision makers is the most important task for Japanese and Indian policymakers. This article demonstrates how the approach between India and Japan is built, *inter alia*, with the objective of balancing power with Beijing in a manner that does not involve unnecessary military skirmishes.

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## RESUMO

Este artigo pretende analisar se a iniciativa Indiana-Japonesa do Corredor de Crescimento Ásia-África (AAGC) pode ser considerada uma estratégia para conter a suposta capacidade da China de isolar diplomaticamente seus rivais regionais, enquanto tenta consolidar o Indo-Pacífico como uma área de influência. A hipótese é que, em um momento de incerteza sobre o compromisso dos Estados Unidos com seus parceiros tradicionais asiáticos e aliados, a Índia e o Japão são encorajados a desenvolver novos mecanismos para equilibrar a China. Segundo a escola realista de Relações Internacionais, a Índia e o Japão buscarão virtualmente maneiras de equilibrar-se contra a China a fim de defender seus interesses. Este artigo desenvolve o argumento usando os conceitos de "equilíbrio da ameaça" e "balanceamento suave" para descrever as estratégias desenvolvidas por esses países dentro do Indo-Pacífico.

**Palavras-chave:** Indo-Pacífico; Índia; Japão.

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse whether the Indian-Japanese initiative Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) can be considered a strategy to curb China's supposed capacity of diplomatically isolating its regional rivals while attempting to consolidate the Indo-Pacific as an area of influence. The hypothesis is that, in a moment of uncertainty over United States' commitment with their Asian traditional partners and allies, India and Japan are encouraged to develop new mechanisms to balance against China. According to the Realist school of International Relations, India and Japan will virtually seek manners to balance against China in order to defend their interests. This paper develops the argument using the concepts of 'balancing of threat' and 'soft balancing' to describe the strategies developed by these countries within the Indo-Pacific.

**Key-words:** Indo-Pacific; India; Japan.