

James M. Minnich, Editor



THE
INDO-PACIFIC MOSAIC
Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific



THE INDO-PACIFIC MOSAIC

COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

EDITED BY

James M. Minnich



Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

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The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS), a U.S. Department of Defense institute, opened its doors in Honolulu, Hawaii, on September 4, 1995. Founded upon the vision of Senator Daniel K. Inouye, the Center serves as a vital forum “where leaders—military, diplomatic, and others—could get together, sit around, chat...yes, argue...and discuss matters of common interest, common concerns, disaster, and come up with solutions and mutual understandings.” For thirty years, DKI APCSS has played a crucial role in fostering regional and global security by deepening understanding of the Indo-Pacific landscape. Through executive education programs, workshops, and engagements held both in Hawaii and across the region, the Center promotes cooperation and builds lasting relationships. The Center was renamed in 2015 to honor Senator Inouye’s enduring legacy and his commitment to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific.

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For Better Security

FORWARD

The Indo-Pacific is a crucible of global security, a dynamic region where the future will be forged. Amidst shifting geopolitical power and a complex web of challenges, cooperation across this diverse landscape is more crucial than ever.

The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific delves deep into this multifaceted security environment. It illuminates the critical need for collective action to navigate both enduring and emerging threats, from intensifying geopolitical rivalries to the urgent realities of environmental crises. This volume explores the interconnected nature of these challenges, emphasizing the need for adaptive, innovative, and cooperative strategies that foster peace, stability, and resilience.

Importantly, this book marks a milestone: the 30th anniversary of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS). It is a tribute to three decades of the Center's dedication to strengthening security cooperation, promoting open dialogue, and building bridges of understanding among Indo-Pacific nations. More than a celebration, this work is a testament to DKI APCSS's enduring mission and its vital role in fostering a more secure and collaborative future for the region.

My hope is that the ideas and analyses within these pages will inspire not just reflection but meaningful action toward a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. May this work honor the legacy of Senator Inouye and DKI APCSS and the Center's unwavering commitment to advancing security cooperation throughout the region.

Russell Bailey
Acting Director

Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

Honolulu, Hawaii, January 1, 2025

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ABBREVIATIONS

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3BHA	Three Brotherhood Alliance
4Ps	Protection, Perspective, Prevention, and Participation

A

A2AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
AADMER	Association of Southeast Asian Nations Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response
AAE-1	Asia-Africa-Europe-1
ACSA	Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
ACTION	Assign gender advisors, Create comprehensive training programs, Tailor operational integration, Implement feedback mechanisms, Optimize collaboration and partnerships, and Nurture a gender-inclusive culture
ACTIP	ASEAN Convention on the Trafficking in Persons
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AI/ML	Artificial Learning and Machine Learning
AIGF	ASEAN-India Green Fund
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ALP	Allied Logistics and Procurement
AMMTC	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime
AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
APCN	Asia Pacific Cable Network
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APSED	Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
AU	Air University
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States partnership

B

BBIN	Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Framework
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BGF	Border Guard Force
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BSNL	Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited

C

CANI	Chennai-Andaman and Nicobar Island Cable
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CAT	Civic Action Team
CAT-Palau	Civic Action Team-Palau
CCI	Communities of Common Interest
CCOE	Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCRC	Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CDC	Center for Disease Control and Prevention
CDRI	Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement
CII	Critical Information Infrastructure
CLCS	Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
CLS	Cable Landing Station
CLS-PoPs	Cable Landing Station Points of Presence
CMEC	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
COC	Code of Conduct
COFA	Compacts of Free Association
COP	Conference of the Parties
COPUOS	Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CT	Counterterrorism
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
CVF	Climate Vulnerable Forum

D

DIB	Defense Industrial Base
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DIME	Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic
DKI APCSS	Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
DOD	Department of Defense
E	
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ESA	European Space Agency
EU	European Union
F	
FAS	Freely Associated States
FET	Field Epidemiology Training
FOBS	Fractional Orbital Bombardment System
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FSM	Federated States of Micronesia
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighters
FY	Fiscal Year
G	
GA	Gender Analysis
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GENDER	Gender, Empowering, Needs, Dismantling, Engaging, and Relationships
GEOINT	Geospatial Intelligence
GSA	Gendered Security Analysis
GSAT	Gender Security Analysis Tool
H	
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
HARD	Historical Grievances, Alienation, Resistance to Multilaterlism, Dominanc of Great Powers
HMN	Huawei Marine Networks
I	
IAX	India-Asia-Express
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICET	Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology
ICPC	International Cable Protection Committee

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEX	India-Europe-Express
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMAC	Information Management and Analysis Centre
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISEA	ISIS East Asia
ISEAS	Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies)
ISK	Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISR	Information, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
IT	Information Technology
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (fishing)
IWRM	Integrated Water Resource Management
IWT	Indus Waters Treaty

J

JI	Jemaah Islamiyah
JeM	Jaish e-Mohammed
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency

K

KLI	Kochi-Lakshadweep Island (Cable)
KNA	Karen National Army

L

LEO	Low Earth Orbit
LeT	Lashkar e-Taiba
LoW	Launch on Warning

M

MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MERCI	Multilateralism, Economic Development, Resilience, Crisis Response, Influence Balancing
MER RAC	Marine Environmental Response Regional Activities Center
MIDFIELD	Military, Informational, Diplomatic, Financial, Intelligence, Economic, Law, and Development
MMCA	Military Maritime Consultative Agreement

N

NAP	National Action Plan
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCIIPC	National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre
NDF	Nordic Development Fund
NIDS	National Defense Industrial Strategy
NLD	National League for Democracy
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NPT	Nuclear Proliferation Treaty
NUG	National Unity Government

O

ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence

P

PBP	Partners in the Blue Pacific
PDF	People's Defense Force
PEACE	Partnerships, Engagement, Adaptability, Collaboration, Empowerment
PICT	Pacific Island Countries and Territories
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PIPIR	Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PMESII-PT	Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure, Physical Environment, and Time
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSIDS	Pacific Small Island Developing States

Q

QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
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R

RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific Exercise
RMI	Republic of Marshall Islands
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory

S

SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCOPE	Strategies, Challenges, Opportunities, Participation, and Environments
SCP	Space Capstone Publication
SHAPE	Situational awareness enhanced, Higher operational effectiveness, Adaptability strengthened, Prevention of conflict, and Equity in security
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SIMP	Social, Infrastructure, Military, Political
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SSO	Sun-Synchronous Orbit
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

T

TBps	Terabits per Second
TCA	Trilateral Cooperative Agreement
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
TRAI	Telecom Regulatory Authority of India
TTP	Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan

U

UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USAR	U.S. Army Reserve
USCG	United States Coast Guard
USSF	United States Space Force

V

VEO	Violent Extremist Organization
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W

WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

A decorative mosaic pattern of irregular, light-colored tiles in shades of blue, grey, and white, arranged in a circular shape at the top of the page.

CHAPTER ONE

FINDING SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC MOSAIC

James M. Minnich

*Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration,
wonderful things can be achieved*

— Mattie J.T. Stepanek, American Poet

Abstract

The Indo-Pacific faces unprecedented pressures from disruption, division, and competition, yet has tremendous potential for cooperation and shared security. This chapter explores the historical forces and contemporary drivers shaping the region's complex security landscape. It emphasizes the agency of all states, particularly smaller actors, in navigating great power rivalries and building a stable and prosperous future through comprehensive security cooperation.

Framing the Indo-Pacific Mosaic

The Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographical region; it is a vibrant and intricate mosaic of diverse cultures, economies, and strategic interests. This mosaic, however, is facing unprecedented pressures. Disruptive forces such as technological advancements, cyber threats, and climate change, alongside divisions stemming from sovereignty disputes, rising nationalism, and intense competition among great and regional powers, threaten to shatter the Indo-Pacific's delicate balance, jeopardizing the promise of a shared and secure future. Yet, amidst these challenges lies the potential to not only preserve this mosaic but to strengthen its intricate patterns through comprehensive security cooperation.

This book, *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, serves as a guide to navigating this

complex landscape, offering diverse perspectives and innovative approaches to understanding the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The Indo-Pacific is a global powerhouse, encompassing South Asia, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and Oceania. It holds 65% of the world's population,¹ generates over half the global GDP and 60% of world trade,² and boasts unparalleled connectivity with 18 of the top 25 shipping ports globally.³ This remarkable economic and demographic weight underscores its critical importance in shaping the global economy, security, and political order.

While the U.S.-China rivalry often dominates headlines, the Indo-Pacific is far more than a mere backdrop for their competition. This diverse region comprises over 40 nations,⁴ each contributing its unique perspective to the regional order. From the bustling economies of Southeast Asia to the vibrant islands of Oceania, these countries are not passive bystanders; they are active agents, shaping their own destinies and contributing to the evolving patterns of the mosaic.

In this era of uncertainty, the Indo-Pacific faces a choice: allow the forces of disruption, division, and competition to shatter its delicate balance or embrace cooperation, innovation, and a balance of competing interests to strengthen its intricate patterns. This volume argues that the future of the Indo-Pacific hinges on the ability of its nations to choose the latter path—to recognize their interconnectedness and work together to preserve and enhance the vibrant mosaic that is the Indo-Pacific. However, achieving this vision requires a new approach to security—one that recognizes the interconnectedness of challenges and embraces collaboration across all levels. This is where the concept of comprehensive security cooperation becomes essential.

*Comprehensive Security Cooperation:
A Framework for the Future*

Comprehensive security cooperation, as envisioned in this book, goes beyond traditional alliances and military partnerships.⁵ It encompasses a multifaceted approach to addressing the interconnected security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.⁶ This includes not only traditional security concerns such as territorial disputes and military competition but also non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, transnational crime, and pandemics.⁷

This framework is evident in the Indo-Pacific's collaborative efforts against climate-induced threats. For example, Pacific Island nations have spearheaded initiatives for climate resilience, with countries like Fiji advocating for international cooperation on climate adaptation strategies.⁸ Similarly, regional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic—such as ASEAN's joint health initiatives and information sharing—demonstrate how transnational threats can be managed through cooperative action.⁹

Comprehensive security cooperation also recognizes the agency of all states, regardless of size or power, in contributing to regional security. Countries like Singapore and Vietnam have shown how even smaller states can play significant roles in shaping maritime security protocols and engaging in dialogue platforms like the ASEAN Regional Forum.¹⁰

Inclusivity remains a cornerstone of this approach, ensuring that the security needs of all individuals and communities are considered.¹¹ This commitment to inclusivity is also evident in regional frameworks like the 2024 ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), which emphasizes the importance of gender-responsive approaches in peacebuilding and security efforts.¹²

Ultimately, comprehensive security cooperation promotes a collaborative approach to addressing shared challenges, recognizing that collective action is essential for achieving lasting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This approach, encompassing traditional alliances, non-traditional security concerns, and the agency and inclusivity of all states, forms the foundation for navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific security environment.

Organization of the Book

To guide the reader in mapping the complexities of disruption, division, and competition in the Indo-Pacific and the imperative for cooperation to build a more secure and stable region, this book is organized into four parts, each exploring a distinct aspect of the Indo-Pacific mosaic:

- *PART I, DISRUPTION AND UNCERTAINTY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC* – Establishes the foundation by examining forces reshaping the regional security environment, including globalization, China’s rise, and technological advancements.
- *PART II, NAVIGATING GREAT POWER COMPETITION* – Explores the complexities of great power dynamics, analyzing China’s actions in the South China Sea and the strategic implications of the Myanmar crisis.
- *PART III, THE IMPERATIVE FOR COOPERATION* – Highlights the crucial role of cooperation in addressing shared challenges, focusing on the potential for U.S.-China collaboration on environmental issues and the significance of regional institutions like ASEAN.
- *PART IV, BUILDING RESILIENCE AND SECURITY* – Provides concrete strategies for enhancing security and stability, addressing challenges like sea slavery, and empowering women in governance to strengthen regional resilience.

The Indo-Pacific mosaic is not a static entity; it is a dynamic and evolving composition shaped by historical forces that continue to influence its intricate patterns. To fully understand the complexities of the modern Indo-Pacific and the imperative for comprehensive security cooperation, it is essential to delve into these historical layers.

The Making of the Modern Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific's security landscape is intricately linked to its colonial past, which has profoundly influenced its security structures, political institutions, and patterns of cooperation. European powers—Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands—spent centuries carving up vast territories across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania, imposing colonial rule and disrupting indigenous political orders.¹³ The divisions they created continue to fuel modern territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, and underpin many of the region's current security dynamics.¹⁴

The post-colonial era ushered in newly independent states, but they emerged into an international order dominated by the Cold War.¹⁵ Great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union cast a long shadow over the Indo-Pacific, influencing everything from proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which solidified U.S. military presence in the region.¹⁶

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a turning point, allowing new actors, most notably China, to expand their influence.¹⁷ The region's security dynamics shifted from ideological struggles to a focus on economic growth and regional integration. Nations like India asserted greater independence on the world stage, and institutions like ASEAN emerged as vital frameworks for managing regional security and economic cooperation. This shift toward economic growth and regional integration laid the

groundwork for the modern Indo-Pacific, where globalization and interconnectedness have become defining features of the security landscape.

The Modern Indo-Pacific

Today, the Indo-Pacific security environment is a complex interplay of economic interdependence, military shifts, and the resurgence of regional organizations. Globalization has intensified interconnectedness,¹⁸ creating new dimensions of security and requiring a more comprehensive approach to cooperation, as Sebastian Kevany explores in Chapter 2. The rise of interconnected supply chains, for instance, has transformed the Indo-Pacific into a critical hub of global commerce.¹⁹ The region's economies have experienced remarkable growth, fostering an environment where geoeconomics and geopolitics are inextricably linked.

This economic dynamism is accompanied by shifts in military power, including China's nuclear expansion,²⁰ as analyzed by Bill Wieninger in Chapter 19. China's expanding military presence and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have fueled anxieties among its neighbors and rival powers.²¹ In response, the United States has sought to reaffirm its influence through its Indo-Pacific Strategy and partnerships like the Quad.²² Meanwhile, countries like Vietnam,²³ Indonesia,²⁴ and South Korea are bolstering their own military capabilities to hedge against uncertainties.²⁵

Amidst these shifts, regional organizations such as ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum have assumed renewed importance. Though hampered by internal divisions and external pressures,²⁶ these institutions provide crucial platforms for dialogue, helping to mediate tensions and foster cooperation.

In essence, the Indo-Pacific's journey—from its colonial past through the Cold War and into the modern era—has shaped the intricate security landscape we see today. Understanding these historical layers is essential for appreciating the region's

contemporary challenges and the potential for cooperation amidst intensifying competition. This historical context provides the foundation for understanding the complex dynamics at play in the Indo-Pacific today,²⁷ where states are navigating a dynamic environment characterized by disruption, division, and competition. These forces are reshaping the regional order and testing the limits of interdependence among nations.

Disruption, Division, and Competition: Defining Forces Shaping the Indo-Pacific

Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a framework for understanding how interdependence among states shapes regional security dynamics.²⁸ In the Indo-Pacific, this interdependence is tested by forces of disruption, division, and competition.²⁹ Technological advances, cyberattacks, and climate change disrupt stability; sovereignty disputes, nationalism, and civil conflicts like those in Myanmar create deep divisions; and great power competition, regional rivalries, and ideological clashes intensify pressures on security alignments. Navigating this complex landscape, many countries adopt a strategy of "pulling sideways" or multialignment, seeking diversified foreign policies to avoid exclusive alignment with either the United States or China.³⁰

This approach, seen in nations like India and Vietnam, allows them to balance relations with competing powers, maximizing their autonomy and minimizing dependence on any single influence.³¹ However, navigating this complex landscape requires addressing the diverse forces of disruption that are reshaping the Indo-Pacific security environment. These disruptive forces include the rapid advancement of technology, the growing impact of cyberattacks, and the escalating challenges of climate change.

Disruption

Beyond great power competition, technological disruption is a major force in the Indo-Pacific. Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming industries, increasing productivity, and enabling new military capabilities, such as autonomous weapons systems and enhanced surveillance.³² However, this increasing reliance on digital technologies also brings new vulnerabilities. The Indo-Pacific is now susceptible to cyberattacks, which pose risks to national security, economic stability, and privacy.

Moreover, the increasing convergence of the cyber and space domains presents new vulnerabilities and challenges for security cooperation. As China, India, and Japan rapidly expand their space exploration and satellite capabilities,³³ the risks of disruption to critical satellite systems—which underpin global communication, navigation, and financial transactions—are growing. China’s advancements in reusable rocket technology, in particular, have significant implications for the United States and its allies, as explored by Elliot Fox in Chapter 4. This convergence of cyber and space threats demands a more integrated and collaborative approach to security.

Adding to these technological disruptions, environmental challenges further complicate the Indo-Pacific security environment.³⁴ Climate change, rising sea levels, and resource competition, including the critical issue of water security explored by Ethan Allen in Chapter 5, are intensifying pressures on the region’s natural reserves. These challenges are particularly acute for island nations and coastal states, where competition for resources like fisheries, energy, and freshwater is increasing. Beyond these environmental and technological disruptions, political fragmentation further destabilizes the region, creating obstacles to cooperation and raising the specter of conflict.

Division

Political fragmentation is becoming increasingly pronounced across the Indo-Pacific.³⁵ Sovereignty disputes and rising nationalism are straining relationships and undermining previously cooperative arrangements.³⁶ The crisis in Myanmar following the 2021 coup further exemplifies this fragmentation and its potential consequences, as explored by Miemie Winn Byrd in Chapter 9. The South China Sea remains a volatile flashpoint, where China's expansive territorial claims and militarization of artificial islands have created friction with Southeast Asian nations, as Denny Roy analyzes in Chapter 8. Similarly, the ongoing border dispute between India and China over Aksai Chin continues to generate periodic military standoffs.³⁷

The rise of exclusive economic zones (EEZ) has further complicated regional politics.³⁸ These zones, which grant nations exclusive rights to resources within 200 nautical miles of their coastlines, have become arenas for competition over fisheries, oil, gas, and minerals. Overlapping claims within EEZs, particularly in the South China Sea, have led to frequent confrontations, exacerbating tensions between nations.³⁹

Adding to these divisions, the resurgence of nationalism across the Indo-Pacific is driving countries inward.⁴⁰ Governments are increasingly prioritizing domestic political considerations over regional cooperation. Nationalist policies and rhetoric, whether manifested in China's assertive foreign policy or India's economic protectionism,⁴¹ are straining diplomatic ties and hindering multilateral solutions to shared challenges.⁴² This inward focus and the pursuit of national interests contribute to the intensifying competition between states in the Indo-Pacific, particularly among the major powers vying for regional dominance.

Competition

Great power rivalry, particularly between Washington and Beijing, is intensifying, creating a tense environment across the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ China's rise as a global economic and military power has been dramatic, but as Ryan Agee analyzes in Chapter 3, there are questions about whether this ascent has reached its peak. Both powers are vying for influence through trade agreements, military alliances, and strategic infrastructure projects. The United States aims to maintain its regional leadership through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Strategy and security partnerships such as the Quad and AUKUS. China, meanwhile, is expanding its footprint through BRI and an increasingly assertive military presence.⁴⁴

This competition for influence is not confined to military posturing; it extends deeply into the economic realm, where a new era of industrial policy is unfolding. In Chapter 16, Srini Sitaraman explores the resurgence of industrial policy among major powers is driving alliances, fueling technological races, and influencing the region's landscape. This interplay between economic strategies and geopolitical objectives is characterized by efforts to secure critical supply chains, dominate key industries, and assert influence through trade and investment. For smaller Indo-Pacific nations, this economic rivalry presents both strategic opportunities and challenges, compelling them to navigate between competing economic models, address vulnerabilities, and leverage partnerships to bolster their resilience in an increasingly dynamic global economy.

North Korea, increasingly described as a “small great power”—a state with dubious conventional military strength but substantial strategic influence due to its nuclear capabilities—adds a significant and complex dimension to the Indo-Pacific security landscape.⁴⁵ Although often perceived as a secondary actor, Pyongyang exerts disproportionate regional influence through its nuclear arsenal and ballistic missile tests, regularly heightening tensions. North Korea's

relationships with China and Russia,⁴⁶ particularly reports that North Korean soldiers are supporting Russian operations in Ukraine, highlighting the expanding military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow.⁴⁷ These provocative actions, combined with missile launches and nuclear threats, require enhanced coordination among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. The 2023 Washington Declaration exemplifies this trilateral cooperation,⁴⁸ bolstering nuclear deterrence and reinforcing defense ties to counter Pyongyang's threats and maintain regional stability.

While this partnership addresses one aspect of regional security, the Indo-Pacific faces additional shared security threats beyond the competition between major powers. Transnational terrorism, for example, continues to challenge the region, necessitating collaborative counterterrorism strategies, as Sam Mullins explores in Chapter 7. Despite recent gains, this persistent threat requires continued vigilance and cooperation among nations.

In navigating these complex challenges, many Indo-Pacific nations are adopting diverse strategies to manage great power rivalry. Countries like Indonesia,⁴⁹ Vietnam,⁵⁰ and Singapore are pursuing strategic autonomy,⁵¹ balancing relationships with both the United States and China. Meanwhile, others, like South Korea, are shifting from ambiguity to more defined security approaches, as analyzed by Lami Kim in Chapter 13.

Competition in the Indo-Pacific extends beyond the U.S.-China dynamic. Smaller but still significant regional rivalries also shape the security environment. The enduring conflict between India and Pakistan remains a critical flashpoint in South Asia.⁵² Similarly, tensions between Japan and South Korea, rooted in historical grievances and territorial disputes, continue to hinder genuine cooperation despite recent reconciliation efforts.⁵³ These smaller rivalries, while often overshadowed by U.S.-China competition, nonetheless contribute to the Indo-Pacific's overall instability and complicate efforts to build a cohesive regional security framework.

In the broader context, disruption, division, and competition are the defining forces shaping the Indo-Pacific today.⁵⁴ As the region grapples with technological advancements, environmental challenges, and geopolitical rivalries, it must also contend with growing divisions that hinder cooperation. Navigating these challenges effectively demands a comprehensive approach to security cooperation, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of these forces and fosters collaboration among all actors in the region.

Yet, amidst this complex and competitive landscape, the need for cooperation has never been more urgent.⁵⁵ To fully grasp the imperative for cooperation, it is essential to understand the potential costs of inaction and the multifaceted benefits of collaborative security efforts.

The Imperative of Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is at a critical juncture. While competition between major powers, particularly the United States and China, is intensifying, the region also faces a multitude of shared challenges that demand collaborative solutions. Climate change, resource scarcity, and the risk of pandemics, among other threats, transcend national borders and require collective action. The consequences of inaction, of prioritizing narrow self-interest over cooperation, could be devastating, not only for regional stability but also for the global economy.⁵⁶

Cooperation Amidst Competition

Averting a future defined by conflict requires a nuanced and strategic approach. Indo-Pacific states must navigate the complexities of cooperating on shared challenges while maintaining competing interests. This delicate balancing act necessitates a willingness to compromise, build trust, and invest in multilateral institutions and regional dialogues that facilitate collective action, reduce tensions, and encourage innovative solutions. Such

cooperation may require setting aside past differences and focusing on shared interests, even nations with a history of conflict, as Peter Haymond illustrates in Chapter 17.

Cooperation on environmental issues, for instance, is essential for the region's survival.⁵⁷ Climate change, with its rising sea levels and extreme weather events, poses an existential threat to island nations and coastal states alike, as Joanna Siekiera highlights in Chapter 6. Addressing this challenge effectively requires setting aside territorial disputes and economic rivalries in the interest of regional stability.

Crisis management mechanisms offer another avenue for cooperation. As Andreea Mosila explores in Chapter 15, strategies employed during the pandemic, such as early action and community engagement, can be adapted to address the complex challenges of climate change. Natural disasters, pandemics, or major security incidents demand swift, coordinated responses that transcend borders. Countries with competing interests may find that collaboration in these areas serves their national security interests, even amidst disagreements on other geopolitical issues. However, while cooperation on crisis management and other shared challenges offers significant benefits, the costs of inaction are even greater, potentially jeopardizing regional and global stability.

The Cost of Inaction

The stakes of failing to cooperate are exceptionally high.⁵⁸ A great power conflict in the Indo-Pacific would have catastrophic consequences, potentially triggering economic devastation on a global scale.⁵⁹ Trade networks would crumble, investment would evaporate, and regional economies—especially those reliant on global supply chains—would face severe hardship.⁶⁰ The interconnectedness of today's globalized economy means that any major conflict in the Indo-Pacific, with its dominance in world trade and maritime traffic, would send shockwaves far beyond its shores.

Beyond the economic risks, a lack of cooperation could also lead to a security spiral, with increased military spending, arms races, and a heightened risk of miscalculation and conflict. The human cost of such a scenario would be immeasurable.⁶¹ These risks underscore the urgent need to overcome the obstacles that hinder cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and forge a path toward a more collaborative and secure future.

Overcoming Obstacles of Cooperation

Despite the undeniable need for cooperation, achieving it is becoming increasingly difficult. The challenge stems from the complex interplay of geoeconomics and geopolitics, where economic interests are intertwined with strategic calculations. Control over critical technologies, energy resources, and key infrastructure, including submarine cables, as Divya Rai explores in Chapter 24, is no longer just an economic advantage; it is a means to project power and influence.⁶² The competition between the United States and China over 6G technology, supply chain dominance, and energy corridors exemplifies this fusion of economic and geopolitical interests.⁶³

Trade disputes further complicate the pursuit of cooperation. The rise of protectionist policies and retaliatory tariffs has strained relationships, even among allies.⁶⁴ Competition for energy resources adds another layer of complexity. As energy security concerns intensify, nations are reluctant to rely on rivals for critical resources, hindering long-term cooperation.⁶⁵

The shift away from multilateralism toward bilateral or regional spheres of influence also poses a significant obstacle. Some countries are retreating from multilateral commitments, prioritizing narrowly defined national interests or bilateral alliances. This approach undermines broader regional cohesion. The United States, for instance, has focused on strengthening ties with allies like Japan and Australia, while China has cultivated its own network through

initiatives like BRI. This fragmentation of regional cooperation into competing spheres of influence erodes the prospects for collective action on shared challenges.⁶⁶

The cost of inaction in the Indo-Pacific is substantial. Failure to cooperate could lead to devastating economic consequences, heightened political tensions, and an increased risk of conflict. However, the path to cooperation is fraught with obstacles. Geoeconomic considerations blur the lines between economic competition and strategic rivalry, making multilateral collaboration more challenging.⁶⁷ To avert a future marred by conflict, regional actors must embrace difficult compromises, recognizing that cooperation, even between competitors, remains the only viable path to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Fortunately, the Indo-Pacific possesses a diverse network of institutions that can facilitate such cooperation and contribute to regional stability.

Regional and International Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is a region where regional and international cooperation is essential for navigating the complex security challenges of the 21st century. A diverse network of institutions plays a vital role in fostering this cooperation, providing platforms for dialogue, coordination, and collective action. These institutions facilitate cooperation between major powers and empower smaller ones, shaping the rules and norms that govern the Indo-Pacific. To better understand the mechanisms of cooperation in the region, it is essential to examine the key institutions and their unique contributions to the Indo-Pacific security landscape.

Key Institutions and Their Contributions

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a prime example of a regional institution promoting peace and cooperation. As Scott McDonald argues in Chapter 18, ASEAN has the potential to solidify its position as a leader of consequence in the Indo-Pacific.

Founded on consensus-building, ASEAN has played a crucial role in preventing conflicts and fostering dialogue, contributing to regional stability.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) has been instrumental in advancing economic cooperation across the Indo-Pacific. By fostering trade agreements and encouraging economic integration, APEC has benefited both developed and developing economies. Its focus on trade liberalization and economic development provides a counterbalance to rising geopolitical tensions, reminding states of the stabilizing power of economic interdependence.

The Quad, comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, has emerged as a key platform for strategic and security coordination. Its objective is to ensure a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific by coordinating security strategies and aligning interests in areas such as maritime security, disaster relief, and cyber defense.⁶⁸

The AUKUS partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, established in 2021, adds another dimension to the regional security architecture. Focused on military cooperation and the development of advanced technologies, AUKUS enhances the region's defense capabilities. While lacking the multilateral scope of ASEAN or APEC, AUKUS highlights the trend of great powers forming strategic alignments to address emerging security challenges.⁶⁹

Other forums, such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), empower smaller states. These platforms allow them to voice concerns, advocate for their interests, and collaborate on pressing issues like climate change, fisheries management, and disaster resilience. However, despite their vital contributions, these regional and international institutions are not without their challenges. They face mounting pressures that

threaten to undermine their effectiveness in promoting cooperation and stability. These challenges include internal divisions, uneven development among member states, and the disruptive influence of great power competition.

*Strengthening Regional Institutions:
The MERCI Approach*

The Indo-Pacific's regional institutions face significant challenges, including internal divisions, uneven development, and the influence of great powers that threaten to undermine their effectiveness in promoting cooperation and stability.⁷⁰ To address these, the *MERCI* approach offers a strategic focus on multilateralism, economic development, resilience, crisis response, and influence balancing to strengthen regional institutions.

- ***M – MULTILATERALISM:*** Deepening partnerships with global organizations, going beyond mere participation in dialogues to tackle shared challenges collectively.
- ***E – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:*** Bridging economic gaps to build balanced regional prosperity.
- ***R – RESILIENCE:*** Strengthening governance structures to adapt to shocks.
- ***C – CRISIS RESPONSE:*** Creating rapid-response mechanisms to leverage shared resources and coordinate logistics to minimize the impact of crises.
- ***I – INFLUENCE BALANCING:*** Empowering smaller states to navigate great power competition independently.

Implementing the MERCI approach, aligned with the principles of comprehensive security cooperation, aims to create a more resilient and cooperative regional order. Central to this vision is a robust understanding of what security cooperation entails and how it can be effectively implemented in the Indo-Pacific.

What Is Security Cooperation?

Security cooperation is the cornerstone of a stable and secure Indo-Pacific. It involves a collaborative effort among nations to enhance stability, prevent conflict, and manage crises through defense partnerships,⁷¹ diplomatic engagement, economic ties, and coordinated responses to traditional and non-traditional threats.⁷² As James Minnich articulates in Chapter 25, comprehensive security cooperation must be inclusive, addressing the diverse needs of all while promoting peace, economic development, and effective crisis management. This holistic approach is essential for fostering a cohesive and resilient regional environment. To further guide the development and implementation of effective security cooperation strategies, this section introduces the PEACE principles, which provide a framework for addressing the evolving security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

Shaping Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: The PEACE Principles

Shaping security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific requires a strategic and comprehensive approach. There is no single model for success, but core principles remain essential for effective application and adaptation to the region's unique challenges. The PEACE principles—partnerships, engagements, adaptability, collaboration, and empowerment—provide a framework for fostering stability and resilience in this dynamic region.

- ***P – PARTNERSHIPS:*** Building robust military alliances and defense pacts that enhance interoperability and enable cooperative regional threat responses.
- ***E – ENGAGEMENT:*** Facilitating diplomatic forums for dialogue, dispute resolution, and trust-building to reduce conflict risks and promote regional stability.

- *A – ADAPTABILITY*: Developing strategies to address evolving security challenges like cyberattacks, terrorism, and climate-induced threats, ensuring agile and effective responses.
- *C – COLLABORATION*: Strengthening maritime security to safeguard critical sea lanes, counter-piracy, and promote freedom of navigation.
- *E – EMPOWERMENT*: Encouraging inclusive economic partnerships that foster trade, investment, and development, laying a foundation for long-term peace and prosperity.

The PEACE principles demonstrate that security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific goes beyond traditional military concerns, encompassing diplomacy, economic empowerment, and adaptability to emerging threats. By adhering to these principles, nations can collectively foster a secure, stable, and inclusive regional environment, addressing complex security dynamics through collaboration. However, realizing this vision of cooperation requires overcoming significant obstacles that hinder collaborative efforts in the region. This section examines the HARD challenges—historical grievances, alienation, resistance to multilateralism, and the dominance of great powers—that impede the progress of security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

*Challenges to Security Cooperation:
HARD Challenges*

While Indo-Pacific security cooperation offers numerous advantages, it faces significant HARD challenges, including non-traditional security threats that demand greater regional alignment and response. Forced labor in the fishing industry, as detailed by Anny Barlow in Chapter 20, represents a significant barrier to effective regional cooperation. Such issues complicate collaborative efforts by highlighting human security and ethical concerns. In addition to these non-traditional security challenges, other obstacles

impede the progress of security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. These include:

- **H – HISTORICAL GRIEVANCES:** Longstanding tensions rooted in colonialism, territorial disputes, or past conflicts continue to shape relationships, hindering trust and cooperation.
- **A – ALIENATION:** Smaller nations often feel marginalized in discussions dominated by larger powers, leading to reluctance to fully engage with regional security initiatives.
- **R – RESISTANCE TO MULTILATERALISM:** Rising nationalism and inward-looking policies create friction, reducing the willingness to engage in cooperative security arrangements.
- **D – DOMINANCE OF GREAT POWERS:** Larger powers can impose their agendas, discouraging smaller states from contributing to collective solutions.

Security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific must overcome these HARD challenges to build a stable and inclusive regional security framework. Embracing principles that address these obstacles can empower countries to work collectively to foster peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. This includes strengthening partnerships with smaller states, as advocated by Kevin Stringer and Madison Urban in Chapter 23. However, while fostering cooperation among all states is crucial, the dynamics between the Indo-Pacific's major powers, particularly the United States and China, play an outsized role in shaping the region's security landscape.

The Indo-Pacific's Great Power Challenge

The Indo-Pacific's security landscape is dominated by the intricate maneuvers between great powers, particularly the relationships between the United States and China. Their interactions ripple through the region, shaping political, economic, and security dynamics. However, the Indo-Pacific is not solely defined by this

great power competition. It is a complex ecosystem where over 40 nations, each with its own agency and aspirations, contribute to the regional order. Navigating this intricate web of relationships requires a nuanced understanding of both the challenges and opportunities presented by great power dynamics, particularly the complex interplay of cooperation and competition between the United States and China.

*Cooperation and Competition Between
The United States and China*

The United States and China are indispensable actors in the Indo-Pacific. Their interactions, whether cooperative or competitive, set the tone for regional stability. While their rivalry has intensified in recent years, critical areas remain where cooperation is not only possible but essential, such as climate action, disaster response, and environmental security.⁷³ However, as explored in Chapter 14 by Scott Hauger, Chen Xue, and Jiahao Cao, this cooperation faces challenges due to the complex dynamics of their relationship. Realizing this potential requires deliberate engagement from both sides, including formal diplomacy, sustained dialogue, and confidence-building measures. However, while cooperation between the United States and China is essential, it is not sufficient to ensure regional stability. The active participation and leadership of smaller states are also crucial for navigating the complexities of great power competition and fostering a more inclusive and cooperative Indo-Pacific.

The Role of Smaller States

Crucially, averting great power conflict in the Indo-Pacific also demands the active participation and leadership of smaller states. Nations like Singapore,⁷⁴ Indonesia, and Vietnam have historically played a vital role in balancing U.S.-China competition, acting as intermediaries or maintaining non-aligned positions to foster cooperation.⁷⁵ The region's smaller and medium-sized powers must

continue to advocate for inclusive solutions that benefit the broader Indo-Pacific. Their role in mitigating tensions and fostering cooperation is crucial for averting the potentially devastating consequences of great power conflict. Should these efforts falter and tensions escalate between major powers, the risks of confrontation could have severe repercussions for the entire region.

The Risk of Great Power Conflict

While full-blown conflict between the United States and China is neither imminent nor inevitable,⁷⁶ the risks of confrontation remain a significant concern for the Indo-Pacific. In particular, territorial disputes in the South China Sea,⁷⁷ East China Sea,⁷⁸ and over Taiwan are particularly volatile flashpoints. Any miscalculation in these areas could escalate into a broader conflict with severe regional and global consequences.

Beyond the immediate risks of military confrontation, the growing trend of economic decoupling between the United States and China poses a significant threat to regional and global stability. As these two major powers disengage from shared trade and technology frameworks, tensions could further escalate, destabilizing global markets and jeopardizing decades of economic integration. This decoupling can manifest in two primary forms: trade fragmentation, where countries reduce their reliance on each other for goods and services, and technological decoupling, where they restrict the flow of technology and knowledge. Both forms pose significant risks to global economic stability. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns that trade fragmentation alone could result in a long-term loss of up to 7% of global GDP, with some countries facing declines as steep as 12% if technological decoupling is also factored in.⁷⁹ Amplifying these concerns, a study by McKinsey estimated that the full costs of decoupling could range between \$22 trillion and \$37 trillion in economic value, equivalent to about 15% to 26% of global GDP.⁸⁰ This fragmentation of capital flows, including foreign direct investment, could trigger a cascade

of negative economic consequences, hindering growth and development for years to come.

Should tensions escalate further and spiral into a great power conflict, the economic and human costs would be catastrophic. A large-scale confrontation, especially one involving Taiwan, could have a devastating global impact. Bloomberg Economics estimates that a potential conflict over Taiwan could inflict a loss of around \$10 trillion, or roughly 10% of global GDP, surpassing the economic shocks from the Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Global Financial Crisis.⁸¹ Such a conflict would disrupt global supply chains, triggering a global recession and resulting in significant civilian casualties and displacement. The long-term geopolitical effects would also be far-reaching, potentially fracturing the international order and hindering global cooperation on shared challenges.

The U.S.-China dynamic will remain central to the Indo-Pacific's future, but it is not the only determinant. The risks of great power conflict are real but avoidable. If both sides can find common ground on critical issues and smaller states continue to advocate for inclusive cooperation, a more positive future is possible. The fate of the Indo-Pacific rests on the ability of all actors, great and small, to navigate this complex environment, avert the catastrophic costs of conflict, and work toward a stable, prosperous, and peaceful region. This requires a commitment to comprehensive security cooperation, where all states, regardless of their size or power, contribute to shaping a regional order that prioritizes stability, inclusivity, and shared prosperity. While the actions of the United States and China are undeniably significant, it is crucial to recognize the agency of the many other nations that call the Indo-Pacific home. These smaller and medium-sized states play a vital role in comprehensive security cooperation, contributing their unique strengths and perspectives to shaping a more stable and inclusive regional order.

Agency Within the Indo-Pacific Mosaic

While the actions of great powers, undoubtedly shape the Indo-Pacific, the region's future is not solely determined by their decision. The Indo-Pacific is a dynamic composition formed from the contributions of nearly one-quarter of the world's nations, each contributing its unique strengths to the region. These nations are not passive bystanders; they are active agents, wielding considerable influence through diplomacy, economic strategies, and security partnerships.

Just as each tessera in a mosaic contributes to the overall beauty and complexity of the artwork, each Indo-Pacific nation plays a vital role in shaping the regional order. Their agency is not merely a matter of self-determination; it is an essential component of a diversified and resilient regional security architecture.

For example, the smaller nations of South Asia face the challenge of balancing their sovereignty and development goals while being caught between the competing ambitions of India and China. As Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath explore in Chapter 12, these states can leverage multilateral platforms to diversify their alliances, amplify their voices on the global stage, and reduce reliance on dominant powers.⁸² Their strategies exemplify how geopolitical vulnerabilities can be transformed into strengths through careful navigation of a multipolar world.⁸³

This agency is also evident in Vietnam's multialignment strategy,⁸⁴ balancing relationships with both the United States and China, Indonesia's role as a regional leader and its efforts to promote ASEAN centrality,⁸⁵ and Singapore's strategic autonomy and its focus on economic diplomacy.⁸⁶

As the region navigates an increasingly complex and competitive global landscape, these states are demonstrating remarkable agency in shaping both their own futures and the broader

Indo-Pacific order, contributing to a more diversified and resilient regional security architecture.

Active Agents, Not Bystanders

Indo-Pacific countries are actively shaping their trajectories, often by renegotiating existing agreements and advocating for greater autonomy, as exemplified by the Freely Associated States' efforts to reimagine their Compacts of Free Association with the United States, as explored by Rachele Rodriguez in Chapter 10. Regional organizations like ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum also demonstrate the influence that smaller nations can wield by working together. ASEAN, in particular, has been instrumental in providing a diplomatic platform that fosters cooperation and engagement with external powers.

These collective bodies amplify the voices of smaller states and serve as stabilizing forces in the region. By fostering dialogue and cooperation, they help prevent conflicts from escalating and ensure that smaller states are not relegated to the sidelines of great power politics. This agency, however, is constantly tested, which requires a delicate balancing act to preserve autonomy and avoid entanglement in larger rivalries.

Navigating Great Power Rivalries

Many Indo-Pacific countries are actively seeking to preserve their agency and avoid becoming entangled in the escalating tension between Washington and Beijing. To achieve this, these nations are often pursuing a strategy of pulling sideways or multialignment, engaging with both the United States and China without fully committing to either.⁸⁷ This approach allows them to maximize their economic and strategic benefits while maintaining autonomy in decision-making.

Countries like Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia have mastered the art of multialignment, engaging diplomatically with

both superpowers while avoiding deep entanglement in their rivalry.⁸⁸ This middle-ground approach offers greater flexibility in shaping their national policies. By eschewing binary alliances, these countries retain the ability to act in their own best interests and leverage the competitive dynamics between Washington and Beijing to their advantage.

India exemplifies a more prominent application of multialignment on the world stage. As Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath explore in Chapter 11, India adeptly balances its relationships with major powers like the United States, China, and Russia, employing “strategic autonomy” to protect its national interests while fostering diverse partnerships. This approach highlights India’s growing influence and its ability to shape the regional order in an increasingly multipolar Indo-Pacific.

This pragmatic approach reflects the desire of many Indo-Pacific nations to prioritize regional cooperation over global power struggles. By focusing on economic integration, sustainable development, and shared security challenges, they can pursue growth and stability without being drawn into geopolitical friction between great powers.⁸⁹ However, this pursuit of regional unity is not without its challenges. Despite their agency, Indo-Pacific nations must actively overcome significant obstacles to achieve a truly collaborative and secure regional order.

Challenges to Unity and the Path Forward

While Indo-Pacific countries have demonstrated significant agency in shaping their own destinies, they also face formidable challenges to regional unity. These challenges, stemming from national interests, economic disparities, and sovereignty disputes, often hinder collective action and impede the realization of a shared vision for the region.⁹⁰

The South China Sea dispute exemplifies the difficulty of finding common ground on territorial and sovereignty issues.

Economic disparities, historical grievances, and tendencies to “otherize” also pose significant barriers to cooperation. Countries must resist the temptation to “otherize,” recognizing that this tendency can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, fuel mistrust, and undermine collaborative efforts.⁹¹ For example, historical grievances between Japan and South Korea, rooted in past conflicts and differing interpretations of history, continue to impede cooperation on critical security issues. Similarly, the exclusion of certain ethnic or religious groups from decision-making processes can create internal divisions and hinder societal resilience. Embracing inclusivity and respectful engagement with all regional actors is essential for achieving collective security and economic prosperity.

Beyond these geopolitical challenges, the region must also cultivate societal resilience—a cornerstone of stability in an era defined by polycrisis. As Beth Kunce explores in Chapter 21, societal resilience hinges on fostering social cohesion, building trust in institutions, and cultivating the capacity to adapt to interconnected and evolving threats.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering societal resilience and overcoming these challenges. As Roxane Turner and James Minnich demonstrate in Chapter 22, transformative leadership can unite fragmented communities and build resilience against interconnected threats. They highlight the examples of former President Atifete Jahjaga’s focus on reconciliation in post-conflict Kosovo and former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s compassionate crisis management in New Zealand, illustrating the power of inclusion, empathy, and trust in inspiring collective strength. These examples highlight the necessity of leadership in uniting fragmented communities and building resilience against interconnected challenges.

To overcome these challenges and foster a more unified and resilient Indo-Pacific, a shared vision of comprehensive security

cooperation is essential. This vision, where all states contribute to maintaining the regional order, is crucial for navigating the complexities and uncertainties of the Indo-Pacific. It is also a crucial component of comprehensive security cooperation, which recognizes the agency of all actors, great and small, in building a more stable and prosperous future.

A Vision for Comprehensive Security Cooperation

The Indo-Pacific, with its diverse mosaic of cultures, economies, and security interests, stands at a critical juncture. While facing the challenges of disruption, division, and competition, the region also holds immense potential for cooperation and shared prosperity. To realize this potential and ensure a secure and stable future, embracing comprehensive security cooperation is essential. By embracing comprehensive security cooperation, the region's nations can choose to strengthen the bonds that hold this mosaic together, ensuring a future defined by peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

To achieve this vision, the region's countries must resist the temptation to be consumed by the shadows of today. A focus on short-term rivalries and anxieties about great power conflict can obscure the long-term benefits of cooperative security and shared prosperity. Instead of allowing tensions to escalate unchecked, regional actors must invest in diplomacy, multilateralism, and security cooperation.⁹² By doing so, they can cultivate an environment where peace and stability prevail and economic development flourishes without the threat of conflict.

Security cooperation, even among competitors, is not only possible but essential to avoid the devastating costs of war. History has repeatedly demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of great power conflict, both for those directly involved and for the global community. In the Indo-Pacific, a breakdown in relations between key actors would unleash economic turmoil, human suffering, and political instability.⁹³ Averting this outcome requires deliberate and

sustained engagement, not just between Washington and Beijing but among all nations in the region.

Ultimately, the future of the Indo-Pacific hinges on the ability of its countries to collaborate and compromise, recognizing that the region's prosperity depends on collective action, not division. In this complex and rapidly evolving landscape, cooperation is not merely an option; it is a necessity. The challenges of the 21st century—from security threats to economic instability—are too vast for any nation to confront alone. By embracing comprehensive security cooperation, the Indo-Pacific can better forge a future defined by peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

This book, *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, offers a vital contribution to understanding the complexities of security cooperation in this dynamic region. By bringing together diverse perspectives and insightful analyses, it illuminates the path toward a more cooperative and secure future for the Indo-Pacific. The future of the Indo-Pacific is not predetermined; it is a mosaic formed by the choices its nations and actors make today. This book serves as both a guide and an inspiration for that journey, encouraging all actors to choose cooperation, innovation, and a shared commitment to building a more secure and prosperous future for all.

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PART ONE

DISRUPTION AND UNCERTAINTY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC



CHAPTER TWO

GLOBALIZATION AND THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF GLOBAL SECURITY

Sebastian Kevany

What's bad for the hive is bad for the bee.

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 6.54

Abstract

In an era of unprecedented interconnectedness, traditional security threats are being eclipsed by transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and cyberattacks. This chapter explores the intricate interplay between globalization and security, highlighting the dual nature of globalization as both a catalyst for these emerging threats and a potential source of solutions. By fostering international cooperation, economic interdependence, and technological innovation, globalization presents opportunities to address these challenges. A critical examination of the evolving security landscape highlights the need for a paradigm shift in our approach to security. This shift requires moving beyond traditional military dominance toward a more collaborative and inclusive model that prioritizes global solidarity, equitable economic development, and environmental sustainability. The Indo-Pacific region, with its diverse vulnerabilities and geopolitical complexities, serves as a microcosm of these global challenges, offering valuable insights into potential pathways for achieving collective security.

Introduction:

The Unstoppable Wave of Globalization

Globalization, once thought of as a distinct historical era, has rapidly become an all-encompassing force, permeating every aspect of modern life.¹ It encompasses economic integration, the

intensification of human migration, rapid technological advancements, and the rise of supranational institutions. However, this rapid and pervasive change has also triggered reactionary waves of nationalism across the globe.²

Yet, despite these reactionary forces, “neo-globalization” has organically woven itself into the fabric of our world, contrasting with the structured, top-down initiatives of the past, such as the post-World War II Bretton Woods system. This organic growth is undeniable: the World Bank’s data reveals a fourfold increase in global internet usage over the past two decades, driving unprecedented levels of information exchange and economic interdependence.³ Moreover, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development reports a steady five percent annual growth in international trade, further underscoring the depth of global integration.⁴ This unplanned and ad hoc process has outpaced our ability to systematically manage its complex economic, social, and political consequences,⁵ leaving reactionary forces struggling to mount a highly coherent – even logical - response.⁶

To understand the implications of this evolving landscape, this chapter adopts the theoretical framework of globalization-driven “complex interdependence.”⁷ This concept posits that the world is interconnected through a web of mutual dependencies, making traditional approaches to security—focused on military power and national interests—increasingly inadequate. Instead, we must grapple with a new reality where economic, social, and environmental factors are intertwined with traditional security concerns.

The security implications of globalization are particularly stark in the Indo-Pacific region, a dynamic and diverse area that is home to both rising powers and vulnerable nations.⁸ The region’s interconnected economies, exemplified by integrated supply chains and the digital revolution, mean that conflict between nations now inevitably harms both sides. Despite their rivalry, the United States

and China are deeply economically intertwined, highlighting the paradoxical nature of interdependence in the modern world.

This interdependence also creates new vulnerabilities. Disruptions in supply chains, cyberattacks, or economic sanctions can have cascading effects, underscoring the need for robust risk mitigation strategies and diversified economic relationships. In this context, the concept of security must be broadened to encompass not only military threats but also economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and social stability.

This chapter will explore how globalization is reshaping the security landscape, drawing on the framework of complex interdependence to analyze the challenges and opportunities presented by this interconnected world. By understanding the dynamics of globalization and its impact on security, we can develop more effective strategies for building a safer, more equitable, and more sustainable future for all.

The Evolution of Security: From Local Conflicts to Global Challenges

The evolution of security concerns throughout history reflects the ever-expanding scale of human interaction and interconnectedness. Early communities primarily focused on protecting tangible assets like land and possessions, often engaging in localized conflicts. While these concerns persist today, the nature of threats has evolved, shifting toward less tangible issues, including cybercrime, terrorism, and economic instability.

Globalization, coupled with the broader passage of time, has dramatically transformed the security landscape. It has ushered in a new era of challenges that transcend national borders and require collective action. These challenges, ranging from climate change and pandemics to cyber threats and resource scarcity, demand a paradigm shift in our approach to security, moving beyond the

traditional focus on localized conflicts to a more global and interconnected perspective.

This shift reflects a broader historical trend. Localized tribal conflicts gradually evolved into nation-state conflicts driven by economies of scale and security considerations.⁹ Just as inter-island warfare became unthinkable in 20th century Hawaii, so too has large-scale conflict between major powers like Germany and France become increasingly improbable in the 21st century. The cost of war in an interconnected world has become prohibitively high to potential adversaries, and the potential benefits are increasingly uncertain.

Security threats have also evolved beyond national borders, encompassing common external threats posed by supranational terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, climate change, pandemics, and other existential threats have outgrown the traditional Westphalian framework of nation-states. This trajectory toward globalized conflict is fueled by economic interdependence, cultural exchange, technological advancements, and increased mobility.¹⁰

However, this does not negate the persistence of traditional security concerns in many regions, particularly those grappling with historical conflicts, territorial disputes, or resource scarcity. The complex interplay between traditional and transnational threats demands a nuanced and adaptive approach to security: one that recognizes the interconnectedness of global challenges while also addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of individual regions and communities.

The 21st Century Security Landscape: Transnational Threats and the Need for Cooperation

The rise of transnational and non-traditional threats defines the 21st-century security landscape. While globalization has diminished the likelihood of traditional interstate wars, it has amplified new

challenges that transcend national borders and require collective action. Climate change, pandemics like COVID-19, maritime insecurity, and cyber threats exemplify these emerging dangers.

Unlike past geopolitical or ideological conflicts, these threats are inherently global and affect nations indiscriminately. The COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have demonstrated their rapid and far-reaching impacts, disrupting societies and economies worldwide on a scale rivaling World War II.

The consequences of these threats are interconnected and multifaceted, including infectious disease outbreaks, altered migration patterns, food and water insecurity, resource depletion, population displacement, and economic instability. These challenges disproportionately affect developing nations with limited resources and adaptive capacity, highlighting the need for equitable solutions and global solidarity.

Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic also revealed the potential for global collaboration and innovation in the face of shared threats. The urgency of the crisis spurred rapid advancements in communication, scientific research, and vaccine development, showcasing humanity's ability to mobilize resources and knowledge on a global scale. Grassroots initiatives and international organizations played a crucial role in information sharing and resource mobilization, often outpacing national governments. This experience demonstrates the power of collective action and highlights the potential for harnessing global interconnectedness to address transnational challenges.

Given the interconnected and global nature of these threats, unified international efforts facilitated by empowered supranational institutions are equally essential. Regardless of its power or influence, no single nation can effectively combat climate change or pandemics alone. This necessitates a paradigm shift in our approach to security, prioritizing international cooperation, communication, and collaboration. We must explore new models of collective action,

strengthen existing institutions like the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO), and foster a shared sense of responsibility for the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants.

The Economic Engine of Globalization: Opportunities, Challenges, and Policy Implications

The economic engine of globalization, characterized by the unprecedented mobility of labor and goods, has fundamentally reshaped the world. Once confined to theoretical models, the principles of comparative and absolute advantage are now optimized on a global scale, making national self-sufficiency an antiquated notion. Regional and national specialization within intricate supply chains has become the new norm, fostering a level of international interdependence previously unimaginable.¹¹

This interdependence is most evident in the international mobility of labor—a defining feature of the modern world driven by economic incentives,¹² technological advancements, and ease of global travel. While this phenomenon has fueled economic growth in many countries by providing access to diverse skill sets and reducing labor costs, it has also raised concerns about wage stagnation, increased job competition, and social disruption. However, it is essential to acknowledge that labor mobility fosters cultural exchange, promotes diversity, and can enhance international cooperation.

Like other market dynamics, the complexities of these economic forces present challenges for governance and control. Attempts to restrict labor and capital flows often result in unintended consequences, such as the rise of informal economies or increased social unrest. The erosion of traditional borders and national autonomy further complicates matters, forcing governments to adapt to a more interconnected and interdependent global landscape.

This new reality necessitates a reevaluation of economic policies and governance structures. To fully harness the benefits of

globalization while mitigating its downsides, nations are increasingly engaging in robust international economic collaboration. This involves establishing fair labor standards across borders, strengthening social safety nets to protect vulnerable workers, and ensuring a more equitable distribution of economic gains.

Furthermore, governments must proactively adapt their policies to navigate the unique challenges and opportunities of an increasingly mobile and interconnected global workforce. Investing in education and skills training is paramount to enhancing workforce competitiveness while promoting inclusive labor market policies, ensuring that the benefits of globalization are shared widely. Additionally, fostering international cooperation on issues like taxation and regulation is essential to prevent a “race to the bottom” and create a level playing field for workers and businesses alike.

By addressing these challenges head-on and embracing a more cooperative and inclusive approach to economic globalization, the international community can create a more prosperous, equitable, and secure future for all.

Technology as an Accelerator and Disruptor of Global Security

Digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Amazon, and the internet itself have become powerful agents of globalization. They transcend national borders, empowering individuals to connect, communicate, and collaborate on a global scale, accelerating the pace of cultural exchange, economic integration, and social transformation.

However, this same interconnectedness also presents significant challenges to security. The ease with which information flows across borders can facilitate the spread of misinformation, enable cyberattacks, and undermine privacy and human rights. Balancing the benefits of technological progress with the need to safeguard security and human rights is a critical challenge of the 21st century.

These digital platforms operate as global entities, much like institutions such as the WHO, the UN, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. They transcend traditional national boundaries and regulations while shaping new economic, political, social, and cultural landscapes.¹³ The benefits of technological communication and interconnectedness are so deeply ingrained in our lives that sacrificing them to resist globalization seems inconceivable.

Attempts to restrict or control these digital platforms often prove futile. The cyber-globalization dynamic exemplifies a force that defies unilateral control. These platforms effortlessly bypass geographical and political borders, facilitating the exchange of ideas and fostering grassroots international collaboration, even in the face of opposition.¹⁴

This duality highlights the complex nature of technology in the context of globalization. It can be both an accelerator of progress and a disruptor of stability. Addressing this challenge requires a multifaceted approach that involves:

- *DEVELOPING ETHICAL GUIDELINES AND REGULATORY MECHANISMS:* Policymakers and civil society must collaborate to develop ethical guidelines and regulatory mechanisms that harness technology's positive potential while mitigating risks.
- *PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY:* Empowering individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information and navigate the digital landscape safely is essential for combating misinformation and protecting privacy.
- *FOSTERING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:* Addressing cyber threats and ensuring equitable access to technology requires collaboration between nations, international organizations, and the private sector.

- **BALANCE INNOVATION AND SECURITY:** Encouraging technological innovation while safeguarding security and human rights is a delicate balancing act that requires ongoing dialogue and adaptation.

By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that technology continues to be a force for good in the globalized world, fostering connection, collaboration, and progress while mitigating its potential harm.

Neo-Nationalism: A Countercurrent in the Age of Globalization

Globalization has paradoxically fueled a resurgence of nationalism, a phenomenon known as neo-nationalism. This movement is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including fears of lost cultural identity, economic insecurity exacerbated by rapid technological change and automation, and a perceived erosion of national sovereignty. While neo-nationalism may offer a sense of belonging and practical, tangible security dividends, as with globalization, it poses significant threats to global stability and cooperation.

The rise of neo-nationalism is rooted in anxieties about the rapid pace of change brought about by globalization. Some perceive the erosion of traditional borders, the interconnectedness of economies, and the rise of supranational institutions as threats to national identity and autonomy. This perception fuels an intuitive and instinctive desire to retreat from global engagement and reassert national control, often manifesting in protectionist economic policies, anti-immigration sentiments, and diminished international engagement.

However, the neo-nationalist project faces inherent contradictions in an increasingly interconnected world. While it may temporarily galvanize support by appealing to nationalist sentiments, its long-term viability is questionable. The interconnectedness of modern economies, the reliance on global

supply chains, and the free flow of information and ideas make complete isolationism an impractical and ultimately self-defeating strategy.

Moreover, neo-nationalist movements can fail to address the root causes of the anxieties they exploit. Economic insecurity, for instance, is often a result of structural factors like automation and technological change rather than globalization itself. By focusing on external causes, neo-nationalist movements risk distracting from the need for domestic policies that address inequality, create economic opportunities, and provide social safety nets.

The resurgence of neo-nationalism is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, periods of rapid change and uncertainty have often triggered nationalist backlashes. However, these movements have typically waned over time as societies adapt to new realities and recognize the benefits of international cooperation. The current wave of neo-nationalism is likely to follow a similar trajectory as the forces of globalization continue to reshape the world and render isolationist, if not neo-nationalist, policies increasingly untenable.

While neo-nationalism may pose short-term challenges to the global order, its long-term impact will likely be limited. The modern world's interconnectedness demands a collaborative approach to addressing shared challenges like climate change, pandemics, and economic instability. Building bridges between nations and unity within countries and communities, fostering cultural exchange, and promoting equitable economic development can create a more inclusive and resilient global community that benefits all its members.

Beyond Borders: A Paradigm Shift in Global Security

The modern world's interconnectedness necessitates a paradigm shift in our approach to security. Traditional notions of military power and narrow national interests are insufficient to address the

complex, transnational challenges of the 21st century. Instead, a more collaborative and inclusive approach is required, one that prioritizes multilateralism, diplomacy, and shared responsibility.

This paradigm shift involves redefining security to encompass not only military threats but also environmental sustainability, public health, economic stability, and human rights. It also requires empowering international institutions, fostering dialogue among diverse stakeholders, and investing in early warning systems and equitable resource sharing.

Globalization, while often cited as a source of conflict, may paradoxically hold the key to a more peaceful world. By reframing conflicts through the lens of their environmental and public health consequences, we can highlight the shared costs of war and the imperative of collective action. Conflicts in regions like Ukraine and Gaza, while rooted in complex historical and political grievances, also have devastating impacts on environmental and human well-being, affecting not only the warring parties but the entire planet.

Yet, while often blamed for exacerbating conflicts by enabling the rapid flow of weapons and resources, globalization's interconnectedness can also be a force for peace. The networks facilitating conflict can be leveraged to promote dialogue, build trust, and mobilize resources for humanitarian aid and conflict resolution. The protracted nature of modern conflicts, often fueled by external actors and globalized supply chains, highlights the need for collaborative solutions that address the root causes of conflict rather than simply containing the symptoms.

The communication channels, mobility, economic integration, and cultural exchange fostered by globalization can be powerful tools for building a more peaceful and resilient world. By promoting understanding, empathy, and shared interests, we can create a global community that values cooperation over conflict and recognizes that our collective security depends on our ability to address shared challenges.

Evolving Defense Forces: From Military Might to Global Guardians

The 21st century's complex challenges are reshaping the role and priorities of defense forces worldwide. While traditional military capabilities remain essential for deterrence and conflict resolution, their dominance in security agendas is waning. Investment in conventional weaponry offers limited solutions to transnational threats like climate change, pandemics, and cyberattacks.

Instead, a growing number of nations are recognizing the need to realign defense priorities. The post-war success of countries like Japan, Germany, and Costa Rica, which prioritized social and economic development over excessive military spending, underscores the potential benefits of this approach.

This realignment involves shifting military focus and resources toward climate change mitigation, disaster relief, and public health protection. Additionally, addressing globalization-induced challenges like mass migration and cyber threats necessitates transitioning from regional rivalry to collaborative international responses. This paradigm shift is challenging, as most security sectors remain structured around 20th-century threats. However, as the global economy becomes more integrated and attacks on other nations become economically self-defeating, defense departments must expand their focus to encompass non-military security dimensions, such as environmental sustainability, public health resilience, and economic stability. This evolution demands greater collaboration between military and civilian agencies and enhanced international cooperation to address shared challenges.

The Indo-Pacific Region: A Crucible for Global Security

The Indo-Pacific region, a dynamic and diverse landscape encompassing developed and developing nations, is a microcosm of the global security challenges and opportunities presented by

globalization. The region faces a unique set of interconnected risks, including climate change, economic disparities, and the rise of non-state actors, all necessitating a collaborative and multifaceted approach to security.

Climate change poses an existential threat to many island nations in the Indo-Pacific. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and resource scarcity threaten the livelihoods and survival of millions of people. These environmental pressures can also exacerbate social tensions, leading to displacement and migration and creating new flashpoints for conflict. Addressing climate change in the Indo-Pacific requires mitigation efforts and adaptation strategies that build resilience and protect vulnerable communities.

Economic disparities within and between nations in the region present another significant security challenge. Rapid economic growth has lifted millions out of poverty but also exacerbated inequality, creating pockets of social unrest and resentment. The growing influence of China and other emerging powers has further complicated the economic landscape, raising concerns about resource competition, debt traps, and unequal trade relationships. Addressing these economic disparities is crucial for ensuring stability and preventing conflict in the region.

The rise of non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, transnational criminal networks, and cyber hackers, adds another layer of complexity to the Indo-Pacific security environment. These actors operate across borders, exploiting vulnerabilities in governance and security infrastructure. Their activities range from terrorism and organized crime to cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, which can destabilize societies and undermine regional security.

The interconnectedness of these security challenges demands a holistic and collaborative approach. The Indo-Pacific region cannot rely solely on traditional military power to address these complex threats. Instead, a new security paradigm is required, one that

prioritizes multilateral cooperation, diplomacy, and a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between economic, environmental, and political factors.

This paradigm shift involves moving beyond state-centric security models to embrace the concept of “complex interdependence,”¹⁵ which recognizes that security is no longer solely a matter of military might. Instead, it encompasses economic stability, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and human rights. This requires fostering trust and cooperation among diverse actors, investing in regional institutions, and developing innovative solutions that address traditional and non-traditional security threats.

The Indo-Pacific’s future stability and prosperity depend on embracing this new paradigm. By prioritizing collective security, grounded in mutual interdependence and a shared understanding of interconnected risks, the region can harness the power of globalization to build a more resilient and equitable future for all its inhabitants. This journey toward collective security is essential for the Indo-Pacific and serves as a model for the rest of the world as we navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

The Globalization Solution: Navigating Challenges, Forging Solutions

Globalization, while offering unprecedented opportunities for progress, has also given rise to complex challenges that require coordinated and innovative solutions. The modern world’s interconnected nature amplifies the risks and potential rewards of global integration. A multifaceted approach is essential to harnessing the benefits of globalization while mitigating its downsides.

Key challenges that must be addressed include:

- *ECONOMIC DISPARITIES*: The uneven distribution of globalization's benefits has increased inequalities between and within nations. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few threatens social stability and undermines the legitimacy of global economic systems. This can manifest in social unrest, political instability, and increased susceptibility to extremist ideologies.
- *ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION*: The relentless pursuit of economic growth has exacerbated environmental degradation, including climate change, deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion. These environmental challenges pose existential threats to human societies and ecosystems, requiring urgent global action to mitigate their impacts and transition toward sustainable practices. Developing nations, often disproportionately affected by climate change, need financial and technological assistance to adapt and build resilience.
- *SECURITY THREATS*: Globalization has facilitated the rise of transnational threats such as pandemics, cyberattacks, and terrorism, which can quickly spread across borders and destabilize entire regions. Additionally, the illicit trade of weapons, drugs, and human trafficking thrives in the interconnected global landscape. Traditional security approaches focused on state actors and military power are ill-equipped to address these complex and interconnected challenges, which require new forms of cooperation, information sharing, and capacity building.
- *EROSION OF NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY*: The increasing power of supranational organizations and transnational corporations has raised concerns about the erosion of national sovereignty and the ability of governments to effectively regulate and control their economies and

societies. Balancing national interests with the need for global cooperation is a delicate task that requires careful negotiation, compromise, and mechanisms to ensure the accountability and transparency of international institutions.

- *CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION*: While globalization has facilitated cultural exchange and understanding, it has also raised concerns about the erosion of cultural diversity and the dominance of Western values and norms. Protecting cultural heritage and promoting intercultural dialogue are essential for maintaining a vibrant and inclusive global community.

Pathways to Collective Security

Addressing these challenges requires a paradigm shift toward collective security, recognizing that our interconnectedness necessitates a collaborative approach to global problem-solving.

1. *STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION*: Enhancing the authority, funding, and coordination mechanisms of international institutions like the UN, WHO, and World Trade Organization is crucial for addressing transnational threats and promoting global cooperation. This includes reforming decision-making processes to ensure greater transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, especially for developing nations.
2. *PROMOTING ECONOMIC EQUITY*: Implementing policies that promote equitable wealth distribution, fair labor standards, and social safety nets can help mitigate the negative impacts of globalization and foster social stability. This involves investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure and addressing issues like tax evasion and illicit financial flows perpetuating inequality.

3. *INVESTING IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION*: Transitioning to sustainable energy sources, promoting conservation efforts, and investing in climate change mitigation technologies are essential for protecting the planet and ensuring the well-being of future generations. This requires international collaboration on research and development and financial and technical assistance for developing nations to adopt green technologies and practices.
4. *ENHANCING CYBERSECURITY AND INFORMATION SHARING*: Developing robust cybersecurity frameworks, promoting digital literacy, and fostering international cooperation on cyber defense can help mitigate the risks of cyberattacks and disinformation. This involves establishing norms and protocols for responsible state behavior in cyberspace and investing in education and awareness campaigns to empower individuals to navigate the digital landscape safely.
5. *BALANCING NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE*: Finding a balance between national autonomy and the need for global cooperation is essential. This involves empowering national governments to address local challenges while strengthening international institutions and fostering dialogue among diverse stakeholders to address transnational issues. This includes developing new mechanisms for global governance that are more inclusive, transparent, and accountable to all nations.
6. *PRESERVING CULTURAL DIVERSITY*: Recognizing and valuing cultural diversity is essential for building a more inclusive and resilient global community. This involves promoting intercultural dialogue, supporting cultural preservation efforts, and fostering understanding and appreciation of different cultures and traditions. International organizations can play a vital role in facilitating cultural exchange

programs and supporting initiatives that protect indigenous cultures and languages.

Conclusion: A Path Toward Collective Security

Globalization presents the international community with unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. Its benefits are undeniable, but so are its risks. By acknowledging these challenges and embracing a collaborative approach to security, we can harness the power of globalization to build a more secure, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

The world is gradually but also inevitably and organically moving toward stronger, more inclusive global institutions, greater supranational authority over shared resources, and enhanced connections between local communities and international decision-making bodies. This shift toward greater “global security” is driven by the recognition that the challenges we face, such as climate change, pandemics, and economic instability, transcend national borders and require collective action.

The adage “united we stand, divided we fall” resonates more than ever in this interconnected world. The challenges we confront affect us all and can only be solved through cooperation. Resisting globalization is futile and detrimental to our collective well-being. History has shown that integration is a powerful force and our future security lies instead in embracing such forces and directing our collective resistance efforts toward combating the common external threats that endanger humanity. By recognizing our shared humanity and embracing the potential of globalization, we can build a more secure, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

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CHAPTER THREE

TURBULENCE AHEAD:

HAS CHINA'S ASCENT REACHED ITS PEAK?

Ryan C. Agee

*The rise of a great power often brings about its own set of challenges,
which can lead to its decline.*

— Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 2013

Abstract

China's trajectory has fueled intense debate in recent years. This analysis examines whether China has reached its peak and the geopolitical implications of its current path. By examining economic and military factors, the study highlights the forces behind China's rise, the potential headwinds hindering its progress, and the risks these pose for the United States. The findings suggest that China has peaked due to demographic and economic pressures, pushing the Chinese Communist Party to choose between internal reforms or rallying the populace around a real or perceived external threat. China's potential decline presents a critical challenge for U.S. strategic decision-making.¹

Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pilots a turbulent flight, its once-lofty destination of surpassing the U.S. economy now shrouded in doubt. Recent market downturns and the looming specter of unfulfilled promises have all aboard question the journey's outcome. This uncertainty has fueled a deeply polarized discourse about China's trajectory. Proponents tout the nation's formidable economic power, abundant resources, and centralized governance as indicators of continued ascent. Skeptics, however, point to mounting demographic hurdles, rapid urbanization

challenges, financial vulnerabilities, and simmering internal dissent as warning signs of a potential peak.

Amidst this contentious debate, this analysis seeks to determine if China has reached its zenith and uncover the geopolitical ramifications of its current trajectory. This investigation is grounded in power transition theory and the dynamics of great power rise and decline. This framework posits that economic and military power shifts can challenge the existing global order, leading to periods of conflict or cooperation. Through this lens, we can better understand China's rapid rise and its potential to reach a plateau due to inherent structural challenges.

By examining the economic and military instruments of power, we can trace China's ascent, identify potential headwinds, and assess the risks for the United States. Evidence suggests that China's climb may have stalled, constrained by significant demographic and economic challenges. The CCP now faces a critical choice: navigate these challenges through internal policy adjustments or rally the populace against a perceived external threat. Both options aim to safeguard the party's power, yet the path chosen will have profound global consequences.

The implications of China's potential peak present the United States with its most pressing geopolitical challenge of our time. Understanding the complexities of China's trajectory within the theoretical constructs of power transition and great power dynamics is paramount. Strategic decisions in response to China's future will shape the global landscape for years. This chapter integrates these theoretical insights to analyze China's current position and forecast its future paths. It offers a comprehensive view of the geopolitical implications for the United States and the broader international community.

Setting the Stage: Understanding China's Rise and the Rules of the Game

Before delving into the debate regarding whether China has reached its peak, it is imperative to establish a framework for analyzing its trajectory. This requires clarifying key terms such as “rising power” and “great power” and defining what it means for a nation to reach its peak. Moreover, it is essential to understand how nations generate and employ power to achieve their strategic objectives. This entails an examination of the national instruments of power.

Instruments of Power: The Engine of National Strength

The U.S. Joint Doctrine on Strategy identifies diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) levers as the traditional instruments of national power. It also recognizes a broader framework, “MIDFIELD,” which encompasses finance, intelligence, law, and development,² acknowledging the multifaceted nature of power in the modern world. While economic prosperity is often viewed as the cornerstone of national strength, a robust economy is essential for enabling and enhancing all other instruments of power, particularly the military.³

A nation's power is the sum of all available resources to pursue national objectives. A strong economy with free access to global markets and resources fuels general welfare and provides the foundation for a formidable national defense.⁴

China, as a rising power, exemplifies this interconnectedness of instruments. It pursues economic growth through a distinctive state-led model, leveraging its vast governmental apparatus to direct investment, control information, and project military power. The Ministry of Finance and People's Bank of China are central to this model, setting economic and financial policies to drive growth and stability. Simultaneously, the State Council Information Office and Central Propaganda Department meticulously manage the narrative

surrounding China's economic progress, both domestically and internationally. This information control maintains social stability and bolsters the legitimacy of the CCP's rule.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Defense oversees the ambitious expansion and modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This military buildup is a display of strength and a strategic investment to secure China's economic interests, protect trade routes, and assert its influence in the region and beyond.

Understanding this integrated approach to power is crucial for assessing China's trajectory. The following sections delve deeper into the economic and military dimensions of China's rise, examining the factors that have propelled its growth and the potential headwinds that could impede its progress.

*Rising Powers and Great Powers:
China's Ascent*

Manjari Chatterjee Miller, in her seminal work *Why Nations Rise*, explores how some countries ascend to great power while others falter.⁵ She highlights two critical assumptions in international relations theory:

1. *RELATIVE POWER*: Nations rise when their economic and military might, relative to the existing dominant power, grows enough to challenge the status quo. This relative power shift is the most significant indication of a rising power.
2. *REVISIONIST TENDENCIES*: Rising powers are often revisionists, meaning they seek to reshape the international order to better reflect their interests and values.

Miller defines a rising power as a state on the trajectory to become a great power that shapes the global landscape. She outlines three essential criteria for this transformation: increasing relative

economic and military power, expanding global interests, and gaining recognition as a future great power.⁶

China undeniably fits the profile of a rising power. Its burgeoning economy and rapidly modernizing military have propelled it to global prominence in both realms. China has demonstrated a clear ambition to extend its influence worldwide through vast exports, control over crucial commodities, the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) sprawling infrastructure projects, and substantial foreign investments. The BRI is a global development strategy launched by China in 2013, aiming to enhance trade, investment, and infrastructure connectivity between China and over 60 countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Some even argue that China's confidence in reclaiming its historical position as the Middle Kingdom borders on hubris.

The U.S. National Security Strategy echoes Miller's second assumption, labeling China a revisionist power intent on reshaping the international order.⁷ This assessment underscores the importance of critically evaluating China's trajectory and potential implications for the global balance of power.

Defining a Peak:

The Challenge of Assessing Trajectories

But how do we determine if a nation has reached its peak? Simply put, peaking signifies reaching the highest point, whether a plateau or a decline in relative power. In hindsight, it is easy to identify peaked civilizations—ancient empires like Greece, Rome, Persia, and Egypt no longer wield global influence. However, assessing the current landscape of rising and established powers is far more complex. Will they continue their ascent or follow a similar path to historical obscurity?

In his analysis "The Future of China's Rise," Alex Vuving suggests that gauging relative economic and military power gains is more informative than focusing on absolute gains. This approach

allows for a dynamic assessment of a nation's trajectory and its potential to maintain or lose its position relative to other global powers.

China's economic and military instruments are central to its status as a rising and revisionist state. Examining its evolution and potential constraints will determine whether China has reached its peak. The following sections delve into these instruments' specifics, analyzing the factors that have propelled China's rise and the challenges that could hinder its continued ascent.

The Wings of Flight: China's Economic Ascent and Potential Stall

The economy is the beating heart of national power, especially for a capitalist society engaged in global trade. However, even communist or socialist states, like China, rely on a flourishing economy to provide for its people, fund its military, and participate in global markets. China's remarkable modernization, often traced back to President Nixon's 1972 state visit and culminating in China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization, is intrinsically linked to its economic transformation.

In 2004, amidst the Global War on Terror, Frank Gaffney Jr. emphasized the growing importance of economic power in influencing global behavior.⁸ He highlighted how trade policies, financial decisions, and control over resources could be wielded as powerful tools on the international stage.⁹ The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, with its complex web of sanctions and economic coercion, serves as a stark reminder of the potency of economic warfare.

Unlike Russia, which has vast resources and relative insulation from Western sanctions, China is deeply integrated into the global economy, making it more susceptible to external pressures. The conflict in Ukraine has forced China to confront its vulnerabilities and consider strategies to mitigate risk, recognizing its greater exposure compared to Russia. However, Russia's efforts through the

BRICS framework—a coalition of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—aim to develop economic systems that are more resilient to Western sanctions and may offer valuable lessons for China.¹⁰

To understand China's trajectory, we must examine the four key economic power instruments that Harry LeBoeuf identified: macroeconomic policy, trade policy, economic sanctions, and foreign aid.¹¹ These instruments and the four economic power engines—land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship—provide a comprehensive framework for assessing China's economic strength. Analyzing economic power through gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and its components—investment, government spending, consumer spending, and exports—offers valuable insights into China's economic performance and future potential.

Land:

A Resource-Rich Landscape with Inherent Challenges

China's vast landmass, the third-largest globally, is a double-edged sword for economic development. While it boasts abundant resources like coal, hydroelectricity, rice, rare earth metals, and minerals, it also faces significant geographical constraints. Unlike the United States and Canada, which are protected by vast oceans and fewer neighbors, China's extensive land borders necessitate a large standing army for defense, diverting resources from other sectors.

Furthermore, China's land resources present challenges. Limited access to clean water threatens human consumption and agricultural productivity, raising concerns about food security.¹² Arable land is scarce and shrinking, exacerbating these concerns. Moreover, while China possesses certain valuable resources, it relies heavily on imports for critical industrial inputs like machinery, integrated circuits, crude oil, steel, and copper.¹³ This dependence on foreign suppliers leaves China's economy vulnerable to external

shocks and supply chain disruptions, as highlighted by the recent global chip shortage.

In contrast, as geopolitical analyst Peter Zeihan emphasizes, the United States enjoys a significant geographical advantage due to its abundant resources, fertile land, and protective oceans.¹⁴ This favorable geography has played a crucial role in America's economic development and global power projection.

China's land resources, while undoubtedly valuable, present a complex picture. The country's geographical constraints, water scarcity, and reliance on imports significantly challenge its continued economic growth and stability. These challenges will be explored further as we examine the interplay of land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship in shaping China's economic trajectory.

Labor:

A Shrinking Workforce and Looming Demographic Crisis

While China's population was once the largest globally, India has recently overtaken it. However, sheer numbers do not tell the whole story. While Indian citizens outnumber their Chinese counterparts, China's population enjoys a higher standard of living and greater economic opportunities.

Historically, a massive rural-to-urban labor migration fueled China's economic growth. This vast pool of inexpensive labor drove manufacturing and exports, propelling China's economic miracle. However, this model now faces significant challenges. High urban unemployment rates indicate a saturated labor market,¹⁵ and the flow of cheaper rural labor is dwindling.

Moreover, China is confronting a looming demographic crisis. Falling birth rates and increased life expectancy have led to an aging population; a trend mirrored in many developed nations. However, unlike countries like the United States, which offsets low fertility

rates with immigration, China's homogenous society and strict immigration policies offer little relief.

The "one-child policy," implemented for decades to control population growth, has exacerbated this demographic imbalance. While recent relaxations of this policy have led to a slight uptick in births, the long-term consequences are undeniable. China now faces a shrinking workforce and a growing elderly population, as highlighted by Akimov, Gemueva, and Semenova's analysis of the seventh population census.¹⁶

Some experts, including Akimov et al., remain optimistic, believing that technological advancements in automation and robotics can compensate for the declining labor force.¹⁷ However, even Chinese experts acknowledge the grim reality: "The next generation is smaller than the previous generation. The total population will inevitably decrease, consumption will inevitably decrease, the economy will inevitably shrink, and the national power will inevitably decrease."¹⁸

Until such technological solutions become widespread, China's demographic challenges are inextricably linked to its economic health. The shrinking workforce and aging population pose significant risks to China's future growth stability. The country's ability to adapt to this demographic shift will determine its economic trajectory in the coming decades.

*Capital:
Fueling Growth, Sowing Instability*

The adage "it takes money to make money" is a cornerstone of economic understanding. Access to capital, the financial lifeblood of any economy, directly impacts growth and development. However, capital flow dynamics are complex, with various factors influencing availability and distribution.

China's economic rise has been fueled by a unique blend of policies to generate and mobilize capital. These policies include fostering a national savings culture, suppressing wages to limit domestic consumption and boost exports, and creating a favorable environment for venture capitalism. While successfully driving unprecedented growth, these strategies have led to mounting economic imbalances and vulnerabilities.

One of the most pressing concerns is China's escalating debt burden. National, provincial, and even local governments have accumulated massive debts to fuel infrastructure projects and stimulate economic growth. This internal debt and extensive foreign lending through initiatives like BRI have exposed China to significant financial risks. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has raised alarms about the opacity of China's lending practices, with many loans hidden from public scrutiny, potentially understating the true extent of the country's financial exposure.

As economist Michael Pettis explains, the surge in Chinese debt is a symptom of deeper structural imbalances.¹⁹ The misallocation of investment into excess property, infrastructure, and manufacturing has led to cumulative but unrecognized losses masked by accounting practices that treat them as assets. These losses are a ticking time bomb threatening China's economic stability.

Moreover, China's reliance on suppressing wages to maintain a competitive advantage in global markets has created a growing wealth disparity and a stagnant domestic consumer market. This imbalance hinders sustainable economic growth and leaves China vulnerable to external shocks.

While China's capital-driven growth model has yielded impressive results in the past, its long-term sustainability is increasingly questionable. The mounting debt, unrecognized losses, and suppressed consumption pose significant risks to China's economic future. The challenge for China's leadership is to navigate

these complexities, address the underlying structural issues, and transition toward a more balanced and sustainable growth model. Failure to do so could have far-reaching consequences not only for China but also for the global economy.

*Entrepreneurship:
A Potential Engine of Growth, but Can it Soar?*

Entrepreneurship is a vital catalyst for economic growth and adaptability, fostering innovation and generating new industries. China, recognizing this, is actively seeking to transform its image from the “world’s factory” to a global hub for startups and innovation. While this remains an aspirational goal, there are signs of progress.

A 2021 World Economic Forum article suggests that Chinese society is gradually shifting away from traditional risk aversion, creating a fertile ground for entrepreneurial ventures.²⁰ Edward Tse, a business consultant and author, argues that entrepreneurship in China is essentially a bottom-up phenomenon driven by a young and dynamic generation more aligned with Silicon Valley’s culture of innovation than Beijing’s top-down directives.²¹ Furthermore, Chinese startups are increasingly succeeding in emerging markets across the Global South, indicating a growing international reach.²²

However, while entrepreneurship offers a glimmer of hope for China’s economic future, the economy still faces significant headwinds. The remaining challenge of the other three economic power engines—land, labor, and capital—cannot be ignored. The shrinking workforce, limited resources, and mounting debt burden greatly overshadow sustained growth prospects.

Examining these four factors reveals China’s complex and potentially precarious economic landscape. While entrepreneurship could provide a much-needed boost, it remains to be seen whether it can single-handedly offset the mounting challenges. The following sections will delve deeper into the specific economic headwinds

facing China, analyzing their potential impact on its future trajectory. It is crucial to remember that these issues, while potentially symptoms of flawed policies, could collectively culminate in a significant economic downturn, marking a peak for the Chinese economy.

Inflight Emergency:

Warning Signs of China's Economic Descent

The preceding analysis of China's economic engines reveals a complex picture. While impressive growth has been achieved, significant vulnerabilities and challenges loom, raising the specter of a "Japanification" scenario—a prolonged period of economic stagnation, deflation, and other headwinds. The parallels between China and Japan are striking: both face an aging population, a declining birth rate, and minimal immigration. These demographic factors can lead to a shrinking workforce, reduced consumption, and increased social welfare costs, significantly impeding economic growth.

Moreover, China's debt levels, particularly in the real estate sector, have reached alarming heights. This reliance on debt-fueled growth creates significant financial vulnerabilities and risks of economic imbalances. The bursting of China's property bubble, akin to Japan's experience in the 1990s, could trigger a cascade of negative consequences, including a credit crunch, reduced investment, and a sharp decline in economic activity.

Furthermore, China's highly centralized economic model, characterized by extensive government intervention and control, can exacerbate these risks. While central planning has played a role in China's rapid growth, it can also lead to resource misallocation, inefficient investments, and a lack of market-driven innovation. The opaque nature of decision-making and the potential for policy missteps increase uncertainty and risk for investors and businesses, potentially hindering future growth.

In essence, the warning signs of China's economic descent are flashing. Demographic challenges, soaring debt levels, a bursting property bubble, and rigid central planning contribute to a growing sense of unease about China's economic future. The question is not if China will face economic headwinds but *how severe* they will be and *how effectively* the Chinese government will respond. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into these challenges, examining their potential impact on China's trajectory and exploring the policy options available to mitigate these risks.

Economic Turbulence:

Warning Signs of an Impending Economic Descent

The dawn of 2024 revealed growing instability in the global economy, with China facing particularly notable challenges. The impending liquidation of Evergrande, a major Chinese property developer and debt holder, has sent shockwaves through the financial markets, exposing the fragility of China's debt-laden economy and the far-reaching consequence of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. The detention of Evergrande's founder, Hui Ka Yan,²³ highlights the growing risks business leaders and entrepreneurs face in China's increasingly controlled economic landscape.

The Evergrande crisis is symptomatic of deeper structural issues plaguing China's economy. The property sector, accounting for 30% of China's GDP,²⁴ is experiencing a widespread downturn, with many developers facing similar challenges.

Fueled by excessive real estate investments to meet ambitious GDP targets, this inflated growth has created a precarious situation. As economist Michael Pettis explains, such non-productive investments may temporarily achieve political objectives but ultimately lead to unsustainable debt levels and economic imbalance.²⁵

The fallout from Evergrande's collapse has intensified market uncertainty, fueling capital flight and exacerbating economic concerns. China's economy has experienced significant strains beyond the global pandemic, resulting in a sharp 50% decline in the stock market since its 2021 peak. This downturn, coupled with rising deflation and escalating labor strikes, paints a bleak picture of China's economic outlook.

Growing discontent among the population, particularly young people facing limited opportunities and rising inequality, poses a significant risk to the ruling party's stability.²⁶ The specter of social unrest looms large as economic grievances fester. China's GDP growth has slowed considerably since the double-digit figures of previous decades, suggesting that the era of unbridled economic expansion may be nearing its end.

Available data indicates that China may be reaching an inflection point.²⁷ The once-explosive growth appears to be leveling off, raising questions about the sustainability of China's economic model. The confluence of factors, including demographic challenges and mounting debt, social unrest, and slowing growth, suggests that China's economy faces significant headwinds.

While official estimates from the IMF report China's GDP growth at 5.4% and forecast "around 5%" for 2023,²⁸ a more critical analysis by the Rhodium Group suggests a significantly lower growth rate of 1.5% was achieved.²⁹ This discrepancy highlights the opacity of official data from the Chinese government and raises concerns about the underlying weaknesses in China's economy.³⁰ Regardless of which figures are accepted, China's growth has slowed to low single digits for the first time in decades, signaling a potential inflection point in its economic trajectory.

The slowdown in growth raises questions about the sustainability of China's current economic model and the potential for further deceleration in the coming years. The following sections will delve deeper into these challenges, examining their potential

impact on China's trajectory and exploring policy options to navigate this turbulent economic landscape.

The Heavy Weight of Military Modernization

In the late 1990s, inspired by the United States' swift victory in Desert Storm, the PLA embarked on an ambitious modernization effort. The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which saw the United States deploy two carrier groups to the region, further solidified China's determination to bolster its military capabilities. This modernization has been fueled by sustained growth in defense spending, with double-digit percentage increases in most years since the late 1990s.³¹

While the official military budget may not capture the full extent of China's defense expenditures, it is clear that the PLA has become a formidable force. China's investment in anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, which are designed to prevent or limit the ability of adversaries—particularly the United States—to project power into strategically important regions, has significantly hampered the United States' ability to intervene in the area, as evidenced by numerous war game simulations.³² Although this modernization has transformed the PLA into a more capable fighting force, it has also raised expectations for its performance, which are often undercut by issues of trust and corruption within the ranks.³³

Costly Balancing Act

The PLA faces the daunting task of deterring or defending against multiple regional rivals, including India and Russia, with large standing armies. Additionally, the PLA Navy (PLAN) must contend with a significant presence of other regional naval powers.³⁴ Ensuring food security is a top priority, requiring the PLAN to protect fishing fleets and trade routes, as China increasingly relies on imports to meet its growing food demands.

This heavy reliance on imports, particularly for soybeans and fish, highlights China's vulnerability to disruption in global supply chains. The PLAN's aggressive tactics in securing these resources, including using its coast guard and maritime militia, raises concerns about the sustainability of such practices and their potential to escalate tensions with other nations.

The PLAN's modernization efforts include developing the capacity to blockade Taiwan and support a potential cross-strait invasion. Such an undertaking would be monumental, replicating the scale and complexity of the Normandy landings in 1944. Given the inherent risks and uncertainties, the CCP's high expectations for its navy's performance in such a scenario may be overly optimistic.

Modernization at a Cost

The PLA's modernization extends beyond its navy, encompassing all branches of the armed forces. From cyber and information capabilities to advanced fighter jets and expanded nuclear arsenal, the PLA rapidly enhances its ability to project power and defend its interests.³⁵ However, this modernization comes at a steep price in terms of financial resources and human capital. The allocation of substantial resources to the military could strain China's economy, especially as it grapples with other challenges like demographic shifts and slowing growth.

In conclusion, while impressive in its scope and ambition, China's military modernization has challenges and limitations. The high cost of this endeavor, coupled with the complex geopolitical landscape and potential for internal weaknesses, could undermine China's ability to achieve its strategic objectives. As China's economic growth slows and its internal challenges mount, its military ambitions' sustainability will be tested.

The Human Factor: Challenges in Training and Retaining Talent

Educating and training skilled personnel is becoming increasingly challenging with the PLA's rapid modernization and growing reliance on high-tech equipment. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has adapted its recruitment, training, and retention strategies to address similar challenges in the digital age. Recognizing a shrinking pool of qualified volunteers, the DOD has shifted its focus from attrition-based models to emphasizing each recruit's successful training and development.

The PLA must evolve as its needs and the available talent pool change. The CCP has implemented various initiatives to incentivize military service, including offering financial incentives to college students for participating in military training and indoctrination programs.³⁶ It has also targeted technology schools and universities with information operations to attract tech-savvy individuals to the military. Additionally, the CCP has implemented policies to support military families, such as a three-child policy and enhanced benefits for childcare, healthcare, and housing.

PLA recruitment efforts will continue to face significant hurdles. The competition for talent between the military and the private sector is fierce, with many young Chinese opting for careers that offer greater financial rewards and personal freedoms. While recently modified to improve readiness, the conscription cycle still challenges maintaining a consistently trained and experienced force.

Despite the PLA's modernization efforts, questions remain about actual readiness in the event of conflict. As Aadil Brar of Newsweek points out, there are concerns about the PLA's ability to adequately staff its increasingly sophisticated equipment and systems.³⁷ The ongoing demand for skilled personnel, coupled with the high cost of training and retention, will continue to strain the PLA's resources and potentially hinder effectiveness.

The human factor, often overlooked in discussions of military power, is a critical determinant of a nation's ability to project force and achieve its strategic objectives. As China's demographic landscape shifts and its military ambitions grow, the PLA must adapt its recruitment, training, and retention strategies to ensure it has the skilled personnel necessary to operate its increasingly complex and technologically advanced arsenal. The success or failure of these efforts will have profound implications for China's military power and its role on the global stage.

China at a Crossroads: Implications of a Potential Peak

China's economic trajectory is showing signs of reaching a plateau or peak, evidenced by declining GDP growth, capital flight, plummeting birth rates, and a shrinking middle class over the past five years. The PLA's modernization and associated human capital and monetary costs will continue to strain the CCP. As China's ascent potentially levels off, the world watches to see if it can sustain its current position or manage a controlled decline. While there are numerous implications for China, this analysis will focus on a few key areas.

Three potential paths lie ahead for China:

1. *COLLAPSE OF THE CCP*: Mounting economic and social challenges could overwhelm the CCP's ability to control itself, leading to its downfall.
2. *SUCCESSFULLY INTERNAL REFORM*: The CCP could enact significant policy reform and governance changes to address underlying issues and successfully navigate these challenges.
3. *NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION*: The CCP could galvanize nationalist sentiment by focusing on an actual or manufactured existential threat, a strategy often employed

throughout history to consolidate power and deflect attention from internal problems.

The path China takes will have profound implications not only for the country itself but also for the global economic and geopolitical landscape. Understanding these potential scenarios is crucial for assessing the risks and opportunities that lie ahead.

*Navigating China's Economic Challenges:
Internal Solutions and Potential Outcomes*

The CCP has long promised its citizens an improved quality of life in exchange for enduring the party's demands. This promise has been upheld through consistent economic gains, but these gains are now faltering. The question looms: what happens if the current economic headwinds intensify?

One extreme, though unlikely, possibility is the collapse of the CCP. The widespread protests against Xi's zero-COVID policies in 2020, which breached the "Great Firewall" and saw citizens openly defying authorities,³⁸ demonstrate the potential for popular discontent to challenge the regime. While the CCP ultimately eased restrictions, the success of these protests could inspire further challenges.

However, the fall of the CCP remains an unlikely outcome. No internal institution is poised to fill the void by its absence. While mass revolts or internal factional conflict could theoretically lead to its downfall, the consequences would be catastrophic. Similar to the fall of the Soviet Union, the international community would need to grapple with securing China's nuclear arsenal.

A more plausible scenario is that the CCP addresses its challenges through internal policy reforms. However, this path is not without obstacles. Xi Jinping's consolidation of power, while aimed at rooting out corruption, has also fostered a climate of conformity

and stifled initiative. This lack of innovation and risk-taking could hinder the CCP's ability to adapt and implement effective solutions.

Despite these challenges, the CCP could surprise the world by reversing course and embracing a more classic form of communism or fostering a consumer-driven economy and a thriving middle class. The United States and the international community have a role in supporting such reforms. As Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stated, "China's economic growth need not be incompatible with U.S. economic leadership."³⁹

China could overcome its economic hurdles by focusing on innovation, transitioning toward a consumer-driven economy, and effectively managing its debt. Additionally, leveraging biotech and robotics could help address the productivity gap expected from an aging population. The most desirable outcome would be effective policy and economic reforms, leading to a "soft landing" for China. The United States should discreetly lead such reforms to facilitate changes and prevent more disruptive outcomes.

A third and potentially the most disastrous outcome is a hot war between the United States and China. Whether triggered by disputes in the South China Sea or a Chinese attempt to seize Taiwan, such a conflict would have devastating global consequences. The international community must employ integrated deterrence to avoid this scenario, preventing Beijing from believing it can violate international norms without repercussions. A coalition of allies and partners is essential for deterring Xi Jinping and maintaining regional peace.

Global Implications:

Navigating a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

The risk of conflict remains elevated as China grapples with its economic downturn. The international community and neighboring countries must remain vigilant for scenarios the CCP could exploit to unify the nation. These crises could arise from various

flashpoints, such as disputes over fishing rights, restricted access to critical goods, or escalating claims over disputed territories.

China's BRI and international debt management practices will significantly impact regional security as the Global South experiences economic strain. Countries like Sri Lanka have already faced financial collapse, and others like Laos may follow suit. The inability of nations to service their Chinese loans could trigger crises, leading to mass displacement of refugees fleeing poverty and famine or even increased conflict as neighboring countries compete for resources or attempt to quell internal unrest. These complex problems affect not only the countries facing financial ruin but also their neighbors and China itself, as unpaid loans burden its economy and underscore the need for reform.

These developments would necessitate reevaluating the U.S. military's structure as the global order shifts. The future may demand a military focusing more on securing resource extraction, manufacturing, and trade routes, addressing instability in failing nations, and relying on partner nations to take on more significant regional leadership roles. Demographics, technology, and innovation will also shape the future force, potentially reducing workforce requirements. Future military formations may resemble those used in the Global War on Terror, capable of conducting stability operations, peacekeeping missions, and foreign internal defense.

Critical to the United States will be its relationships with allies and partners. Increased interoperability, forward basing, and investment in logistics are crucial to counter China's efforts to impede U.S. intervention. While immediate investment in partners, integrated deterrence, and defense modernization should continue, the 2030s may see a return to smaller-scale conflicts as fragile countries become increasingly vulnerable due to their reliance on high-interest loans. As more nations face financial collapse, the

lessons learned from the Global War on Terror will be invaluable, as regional conflicts will likely surge after China's decline.

Charting a Course Amidst Uncertainty: A Policy Roadmap

The global community must proactively address emerging challenges and opportunities as China navigates its complex and uncertain trajectory. China's potential decline presents risks and strategic imperatives for the United States and its allies, requiring adaptive and forward-thinking policies that balance deterrence and engagement, ensuring stability while promoting mutual economic and security interests. Policymakers, analysts, and strategists would do well to prioritize these key actions:

1. *FORTIFY ALLIANCES*: Strengthen existing alliances and forge new partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, to build a unified coalition capable of effectively addressing China's influence.
2. *PRIORITIZE ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY*: Encourage economic reforms and collaborations that incentivize China to adopt a more sustainable and consumer-driven growth model, mitigating the risks associated with destabilizing economic policies.
3. *BOLSTER MILITARY READINESS*: Enhance military capabilities and modernization efforts to maintain a credible deterrence posture capable of swift and effective responses to regional contingencies.
4. *MAINTAIN STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT*: Pursue ongoing dialogue with China on areas of mutual interest, such as climate change, global health, and nonproliferation. While upholding a firm stance on sovereignty, human rights, and international law, engagement can help manage tensions and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to conflict.

5. *INVEST IN COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS:* Dedicate resources to comprehensive monitoring and analysis of China's internal dynamics, including economic trends, social stability, and military developments. This will require enhanced intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities and greater collaboration with academic institutions and think tanks to develop a nuanced understanding of China's complex and evolving landscape.

By implementing these proactive measures, the international community can effectively navigate the complexities of a potentially declining China, fostering a stable and secure global order that benefits all nations. This approach will require a combination of vigilance, adaptability, and cooperation to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for the worldwide community.

Conclusion:

Charting a Path Forward in an Era of Uncertainty

The world is not currently witnessing a transition of power from the United States to China. This scenario was once feared as a likely trigger for conflict between two superpowers. However, the risk of conflict remains high over the next decade, driven not by China's ascendancy but by the potential consequences of its economic and demographic challenges.

China stands at a crossroads, facing internal pressures that signal a potential peak in relative power. The implications of these challenges are far-reaching, with possible outcomes ranging from the collapse of the CCP to arduous policy reforms or even the fabrication of external threats to rally the nation for war.

Navigating this uncertain terrain requires a nuanced understanding of the sources of China's power, the reforms that could facilitate a "soft landing," and the strategies needed to prevent manufactured crises from escalating into conflict. While investing in integrated deterrence and preparing for potential near-peer

conflict remains prudent, the 2030s may see a return to smaller-scale conflicts and stability operations as the consequences of BRI debt, demographic shifts, food scarcity, and a weakened China trigger instability and conflict in vulnerable states.

As China grapples with its plateauing growth, policymakers, analysts, and strategists must remain vigilant, closely monitoring developments and crafting responses to the potential spillover effects. Integrated deterrence and tangible demonstrations of military strength will be essential, alongside discreet diplomatic efforts to encourage constructive reforms—to the extent that Chinese pride permits. The world watches with bated breath to see how and where China will ultimately land: safely on a runway or in a catastrophic crash.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER FOUR

CHINA'S REUSABLE ROCKET REVOLUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ARTEMIS ALLIES

Elliot Joseph Fox

Whoever controls space controls the world.

— Lyndon B. Johnson, 36th President of the United States,
often attributed but likely apocryphal

Abstract

China's rapid advancements in reusable rocket technology have triggered a seismic shift in the balance of power in space exploration. While SpaceX's pioneering achievements have positioned the United States at the forefront, China's relentless pursuit of technological parity challenges this dominance. This chapter examines the complexities of China's reusable rocket revolution, analyzing its implications for the United States and its Artemis allies. This analysis explores how this new space race could reshape international cooperation, exacerbate resource conflicts, and redefine the future of space power. As the United States grapples with the growing influence of China's space capabilities, the chapter offers insights into strategic responses necessary to maintain leadership in this critical domain while navigating the risks and opportunities presented by this unprecedented competition.

Introduction

The dawn of the 21st century has witnessed a dramatic transformation in space launch capabilities, with reusable rocketry emerging as a revolutionary force. SpaceX's pioneering achievements in this domain have propelled the United States to a position of prominence, granting it a significant edge in cost efficiency and launch frequency. This advantage, however, is not

uncontested. China, driven by ambitious space aspirations and a relentless pursuit of technological parity, is rapidly closing the gap, developing a suite of reusable rockets that threaten to erode the U.S.'s current dominance.

This burgeoning space race between two global powers has profound implications, extending far beyond mere technological competition. It challenges the geopolitical landscape of space, raising questions about the future of international cooperation, the potential for resource conflict, and the nature of space power itself. As China's reusable rockets take flight, the established norms and understandings that have governed space activities for decades are being tested.

This chapter examines the complexities of the evolving space landscape, focusing on the technical, political, and strategic dimensions of China's reusable rocket program. By employing theoretical frameworks that have shaped the U.S. approach to spacepower, such as Everett Dolman's realist perspective, David E. Lupton's typology of space force schools, and John J. Klein's maritime model, this analysis explores China's ambitions and achievements, assessing the challenges and opportunities this new era presents for the United States and its allies. Through this comprehensive analysis, the chapter aims to illuminate the stakes involved in this critical juncture of space exploration and provide insights into the potential trajectories of this high-stakes competition.

The Geopolitical Landscape of Space

To understand the implications of China's growing spacelift capabilities, it is essential to examine the theoretical foundations that have historically shaped the United States' approach to space and the evolving geopolitical landscape of this critical domain. The U.S. Air Force's doctrinal document, AU-18: The Space Primer, provides a framework for understanding space power through the works of

key theorists whose ideas continue to influence contemporary strategic thinking.¹

One such theorist is Everett Dolman, a proponent of a realist perspective on space power. Dolman argues that space, like other domains of human activity, cannot remain a peaceful sanctuary indefinitely. He envisions a future where competition and conflict in space become inevitable as nations seek to secure their interests and assert dominance. Dolman advocates for the United States to proactively establish a leadership role in space, not through aggressive conquest, but by establishing a “benign hegemony”—a framework of rules and norms that would guide the behavior of all actors in space, promoting stability and cooperation while safeguarding American interests.²

Another influential theorist, David E. Lupton, offers a typology of four schools of thought on space forces, each representing a distinct perspective on the role of military power in space. The Sanctuary School, driven by an idealistic vision, envisions space as a weapons-free zone reserved for peaceful purposes. The Survivability School, more pragmatic in its outlook, emphasizes the vulnerability of space systems and the need to protect them from attack.³ The High Ground School views space as a strategic vantage point, offering asymmetric advantages to those who control it. Finally, the Control School equates space control with air and sea control,⁴ arguing that it is essential for achieving and maintaining space power.

John J. Klein, a proponent of the maritime model of space power,⁵ draws parallels between the vast expanse of space and the Earth's oceans. He emphasizes that space, like the ocean, is a vital medium for commerce, communication, and exploration.⁶ Klein argues that understanding the non-military aspects of space is crucial for developing a comprehensive and effective space strategy that balances national security interests with the broader needs of human civilization.⁷

Building on these diverse theoretical perspectives, the newly established U.S. Space Force (USSF) has articulated a spacepower doctrine recognizing access to space as a national imperative.⁸ The Space Capstone Publication (SCP), a foundational document of this doctrine, highlights space's myriad benefits, from mass communication and navigation to economic growth and national security.⁹ According to the *AU-18 Space Primer*, spacelift—the ability to launch and deploy assets into space—is essential to accessing outer space and is the bedrock upon which all other space capabilities rest.¹⁰ Spacelift is not merely a means of transportation; it is the key to controlling and exploiting the space domain, enabling the projection of power, the protection of national interests, and the pursuit of scientific and commercial endeavors.¹¹

Reusable rocketry has revolutionized spacelift, dramatically expanding the United States' capacity to access and utilize space. This technological breakthrough has enabled a new era of space activity, marked by increased frequency and affordability of launches, opening up opportunities for scientific discovery, commercial ventures, and military applications. However, this technological leap forward also presents a strategic challenge. If reusable rockets can transform the United States' space capabilities, it stands to reason that other nations could reap similar benefits. China's rapid progress in developing its reusable rocket technology raises the specter of a new space race with far-reaching consequences for the geopolitical balance of power in the 21st century. As China's spacelift capabilities grow, the United States must grapple with the implications of this new reality, adapting its strategies and policies to ensure continued dominance in the space domain while managing the risks of escalating competition and potential conflict.

China's Multifaceted Challenge in Reusable Rocketry

China's aggressive pursuit of reusable rocket technology presents a dual political and technical challenge to the United States and its

allies, with potential ramifications extending beyond the purely technical realm. While the rapid advancements in reusable rockets offer the promise of increased access to space and economic benefits, they also raise significant concerns regarding the geopolitical landscape, the future of international cooperation, and the potential for conflict. This challenge can be analyzed from two key dimensions: political and technical.

*Political Implications:
Disrupting the Artemis Accords*

China's expanding space capabilities, fueled by reusable rockets, pose significant challenges to the Artemis Accords, a multilateral agreement to foster a peaceful and cooperative exploration of the Moon. Several key provisions of the Accords are directly affected:¹²

- *PEACEFUL USE OF SPACE (SECTION 3)*: The Artemis Accords emphasize the peaceful use of outer space. However, China's close ties between its military and space program raise concerns about its commitment to this principle. Increased Chinese activity in space, facilitated by reusable rockets, could make it more challenging to ensure that space remains a domain for scientific exploration and cooperation rather than military competition.
- *INTEROPERABILITY (SECTION 5)*: The Accords call for interoperability among space systems to enable emergency assistance and collaboration. However, China's independent development of spacecraft and launch vehicles hinders interoperability with Artemis partners, making potential cooperation in critical situations difficult.
- *SPACE RESOURCES AND DECONFLICTION (SECTIONS 10 & 11)*: The increased launch cadence enabled by reusable rockets has implications for managing space resources and deconflicting space activities. With more frequent launches and a higher volume of spacecraft in orbit, the risk of

interference and resource competition increases, potentially leading to conflict.

- *ORBITAL DEBRIS (SECTION 12)*: While the proliferation of reusable rockets is beneficial in many ways, it also raises concerns about orbital debris. The increased frequency of launches and the potential for rapid deployment of multiple satellites could exacerbate the existing problem of space debris, posing a threat to the long-term sustainability of space activities.

Technical Implications:

Launch Cadence and Technological Parity

The technical challenge posed by China's reusable rocket program centers on achieving a high launch cadence, a critical factor in spaceflight dominance. SpaceX, the undisputed leader in reusable spaceflight, has set a formidable benchmark with its Falcon 9 rocket. In 2023 alone, SpaceX conducted over 90 launches of the Falcon 9 and five launches of the Falcon Heavy, a testament to the efficiency, reliability, and cost-effectiveness of its reusable technology.¹³ This unprecedented launch frequency, far surpassing any other nation, underscores the significant gap China must overcome to achieve parity in this domain.¹⁴

SpaceX's success in reusable spaceflight was not achieved overnight. It resulted from a decade-long development process that began in the 2010s. SpaceX initially focused on the Falcon 1, a smaller rocket with a lower payload capacity, while simultaneously developing the larger Falcon 9. The company also invested in a vertical launch and landing demonstrator called Grasshopper, which played a crucial role in validating and refining the technology for reusable rockets.¹⁵

In pursuit of reusable launch capabilities, China is actively emulating a similar development path as SpaceX, with multiple space startups working on their own versions of reusable rockets.

Several of these startups are already at a stage comparable to SpaceX's Grasshopper program, indicating that China is actively investing in the necessary research and development to catch up with the United States in reusable spaceflight.

China's Ambitious Space Program and Rapid Technological Development

China's bold ambitions in space exploration and rapid technological progress are evident in its long-term strategic planning. The "2017-2045 Space Transportation System Development Roadmap" outlines the country's ambitious goals, including the full reusability of all Chinese rockets by 2035,¹⁶ and the development of nuclear space propulsion by 2040. These advancements would enable China to conduct large-scale space resource exploration and development, potentially leading to ambitious projects like asteroid mining and space-based solar power plants.¹⁷

While these goals may seem far-fetched, it is crucial to remember that many of these concepts were initially explored by the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. However, with renewed interest and investment in space exploration globally,¹⁸ both the United States and China are revisiting these ideas. In fact, the United States is currently developing a flight-capable nuclear rocket with a target launch date of 2027.¹⁹

China's Thriving Reusable Rocket Industry: A Competitive Landscape

China's push for reusable launch capabilities is not solely a government endeavor. Multiple private companies, often in partnership with the government, drive this effort. These companies are actively developing and testing reusable rocket prototypes, signaling a vibrant and competitive landscape in China's space industry. The sheer number of startups, each with the potential to

replicate SpaceX's success, significantly increases the likelihood of China achieving a dominant position in space launch capabilities.

Some notable examples include:

- *LANDSPACE*: This company made headlines in January 2024 with the successful test flight of a suborbital prototype of their Zhuque-3 methalox (methane-liquid oxygen) rocket.²⁰ Targeting an orbital launch by 2025, the Zhuque-3 boasts an impressive projected payload capacity of 21 metric tons for expendable launches and 12.5 metric tons with launch site recovery.²¹ Landspace's innovative approach to vertical takeoff and vertical landing (VTVL) technology highlights its commitment to reusable launch capabilities.
- *iSPACE*: Beijing Interstellar Glory Space Technology Ltd., also known as iSpace, demonstrated significant progress in reusable rocket technology through two successful test flights of its Hyperbola-2Y methalox-powered vehicle in late 2023. These suborbital flights paved the way for their ambitious Hyperbola-3 project, a reusable rocket designed to deliver payloads of up to 8.5 metric tons to low Earth orbit (LEO) with a remarkable target launch cadence of 25 launches per year.²²
- *CAS SPACE*: As a spinoff of the state-owned Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), CAS Space has emerged as a major player in China's reusable rocket development. Their current focus is on the Kinetica-2, a multi-stage, liquid-fueled rocket with a payload capacity of 12 metric tons to LEO and 7.8 metric tons to sun-synchronous orbit (SSO). They aim to achieve full reusability by 2028,²³ a feat that could significantly reduce launch costs and increase access to space.
- *GALACTIC ENERGY*: This startup is making waves with its Pallas-1 rocket, a kerosene-liquid oxygen-powered launch

vehicle that completed a hop test in August 2023.²⁴ With a planned first orbital flight in the third quarter of 2024, Galactic Energy is on track to introduce a reusable version of the Pallas-1 by 2025, followed by a more powerful three-core variant capable of delivering 14 metric tons to LEO after 2026.²⁵

Growing Concerns: Beyond Commercial Implications

China's burgeoning commercial space sector and rapid advancements in reusable rocket technology offer potential benefits for space access but also raise significant geopolitical and national security concerns. These concerns are not solely rooted in speculation. Still, they are grounded in China's recent achievements and its stated future ambitions, which warrants a closer examination to fully understand the potential risks and challenges they pose for the United States and the international community.

China's Recent Achievements and Future Ambitions

China's recent space achievements, such as the rapid assembly of the Tiangong-3 space station and successful lunar missions, including the first robotic landing on the far side of the moon and a lunar sample return mission, demonstrate a high degree of sophistication and efficiency. This, combined with investments in dual-use technologies like on-orbit satellite servicing—which has both maintenance and potential counterspace applications—raises concerns about China's ability to leverage its space capabilities for military purposes.

In addition to these achievements, China's ambitious long-term space program, outlined in its "2017-2045 Space Transportation System Development Roadmap," further underscores its determination to become a leading space power. The roadmap envisions developing a fully reusable space transportation system by

2035, followed by nuclear space propulsion and large-scale space resource exploration and development by 2040. While ambitious, these goals are plausible given China's track record of rapid technological progress and significant investments in space research and development.

China's Strategic Interests in Lunar Resources

One of the most concerning aspects of China's space ambitions is its explicit interest in lunar resource exploration. The moon, particularly the lunar South Pole with its potential deposits of water ice, is a crucial target for future space exploration and resource utilization. Water ice, if accessible, could be a game-changer, providing resources for life support, fuel production, and industrial processes. China's Chang'e missions, a series of robotic lunar exploration missions, have demonstrated its commitment to lunar exploration and its interest in securing access to potential lunar resources.

Shackleton Crater, a permanently shadowed region at the lunar South Pole, is believed to harbor significant amounts of water ice. It is a prime target for the U.S.-led Artemis program and China's Chang'e 7 lander.²⁶ While the scientific value of exploring this region is undeniable, the overlapping interests of the two nations raise concerns about resource competition and potential conflict. The Outer Space Treaty, while promoting the peaceful and shared use of space resources,²⁷ lacks robust enforcement mechanisms and has not been tested in scenarios involving direct competition for valuable resources.

Furthermore, China's choice of Shackleton Crater, a site of interest to both countries, underscores the potential for competition and conflict over lunar resources. This, coupled with China's history of territorial disputes on Earth, raises questions about its commitment to adhering to international law in the space domain, particularly when valuable resources are at stake.²⁸ The convergence

of strategic interests at Shackleton Crater underscores the potential for a new era of resource-driven competition in space, with implications for international relations, economic development, and national security.

U.S. Strategies to Counter China's Reusable Rocket Challenge

The United States has several strategies to address the multifaceted challenge posed by China's rapid advancements in reusable rocket technology. These strategies encompass technical, commercial, and diplomatic approaches to maintain U.S. leadership in space while fostering international cooperation and mitigating potential conflict.

Fostering Competition in the Commercial Space Sector

To maintain its competitive edge in space launch capabilities, the United States must continue to foster innovation and competition within its commercial space sector. This includes providing sustained support for developing super heavy-lift rockets like SpaceX's Starship and Blue Origin's New Glenn, which promise to significantly increase payload capacity and reduce launch costs. While China also plans to test heavy reusable rockets, the United States can leverage its technological lead and entrepreneurial spirit to remain at the forefront.

Equally important is nurturing smaller, agile space startups like Rocket Lab and Relativity Space, which are pioneering innovative reusable launch technologies.²⁹ These companies often bring fresh perspectives and disruptive solutions to the table, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in spaceflight. By supporting a diverse range of large and small companies, the United States can ensure a continuous flow of new ideas and technologies to drive progress in space exploration and utilization.³⁰

*Strengthening International Cooperation:
The Artemis Accords*

In an era of increasing geopolitical competition, strengthening international cooperation in space exploration and utilization is more crucial than ever. The Artemis Accords, a U.S.-led initiative introduced in 2020, offer a potential framework for such collaboration. Grounded in the principles of the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, the Accords outline a shared vision for responsible, transparent, and sustainable space activities.³¹

Key Principles of the Artemis Accords:

- *PEACEFUL PURPOSES*: Reaffirms the commitment to using space for peaceful purposes, as the Outer Space Treaty mandates.
- *TRANSPARENCY*: Encourages openness and information sharing about space activities to foster trust and predictability.
- *INTEROPERABILITY*: Promotes compatibility between space systems to enable collaboration and assistance in emergencies.
- *SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES*: Establishes guidelines for the responsible extraction and utilization of space resources, ensuring their availability for future generations.
- *REGISTRATION OF SPACE OBJECTS*: Commits signatories to register space objects to enhance safety and accountability.
- *RELEASE OF SCIENTIFIC DATA*: Encourages the open sharing of scientific data obtained during space missions to advance knowledge and understanding.
- *PRESERVING HERITAGE*: Advances the protection of historical sites and artifacts in space for future generations.

- *DECONFLICTION OF ACTIVITIES*: Establishes procedures to prevent harmful interference between space missions and activities.
- *ORBITAL DEBRIS MITIGATION*: Promotes measures to minimize the creation of space debris and mitigate its impact on space operations.

While China is not a signatory to the Artemis Accords, the United States can leverage this framework to build a coalition of like-minded nations committed to upholding these principles. By expanding the membership of the Artemis Accord and deepening cooperation among signatories, the United States can foster a more stable and predictable space environment, deter potential conflict, and establish norms of behavior that benefit all nations.

The Accords can serve as a platform for coordinating space activities, sharing information, developing joint capabilities, and peacefully resolving disputes. By strengthening this framework and promoting its principles, the United States can mitigate the risks associated with China's rise in space and foster a global community of spacefaring nations committed to peaceful exploration and the responsible use of space resources.

Navigating the "Astropolitical" Landscape

Much like the international political arena, the space domain can be viewed through international relations theory. It is characterized by a degree of anarchy due to the limitations of existing space law and the challenges of enforcing it in a vast and complex environment. However, it is also a domain where liberal institutionalism, emphasizing cooperation, adherence to international law, and the role of international organizations, can play a significant role.

The Artemis Accords represent a prime example of this approach. They embody a "decidedly American" form of astropolitics that seeks to build liberal institutions and relationships

within the existing rules-based international order. By promoting transparency, cooperation, and adherence to international law, the Artemis Accords offer an alternative to the potentially destabilizing effects of unrestrained competition in space.

The Way Forward:

A Balanced Approach to Competition and Cooperation

The rise of China's reusable rocket industry presents a complex challenge that demands a nuanced and multifaceted response from the United States and its allies. To maintain leadership in space while mitigating the risk of conflict, a balanced approach is essential, one that skillfully combines technological innovation, diplomatic engagement, and international cooperation.

1. **INVEST IN INNOVATION:** The United States must prioritize investment in research and development to preserve its technological edge in space. This includes continued support for developing advanced launch vehicles, such as SpaceX's Starship and Blue Origin's New Glenn, but also targeted investment in emerging technologies like reusable upper stages, space refueling, and autonomous rendezvous and docking capabilities. By fostering a thriving environment for innovation, the United States can ensure its continued dominance in space capabilities and maintain a competitive advantage.
2. **STRENGTHEN ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS:** Collaboration with like-minded nations is crucial for promoting a stable and secure space environment. The Artemis Accords is a valuable framework for international cooperation, and the United States should actively engage with key partners like Japan, Canada, the European Space Agency, and Australia to fortify these agreements and expand their scope. This includes establishing joint research, conducting joint

missions, and developing common standards for space operations.

3. **ENGAGE WITH CHINA:** While competition with China in the space domain is inevitable, establishing a constructive dialogue is equally important to promote transparency, build trust, and establish norms of behavior in space. This could involve bilateral discussions on space traffic management, debris mitigation, and the responsible use of space resources, as well as multilateral forums like the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS). While engaging with China presents challenges due to geopolitical tensions, the United States should prioritize open communication and identify areas for potential collaboration, such as scientific research and planetary defense.
4. **PREPARE FOR A MULTIPOLAR SPACE ENVIRONMENT:** The era of unchallenged U.S. dominance in space is evolving as more nations develop their space capabilities. The United States must adapt to this new reality by preparing for a multipolar space environment where multiple actors, both state and non-state, wield significant influence. This requires a shift in strategic thinking toward a more flexible and adaptive approach that can effectively respond to a wide array of challenges and opportunities. This includes developing a robust and resilient infrastructure, enhancing space situational awareness capabilities, and establishing clear rules of engagement for potential conflicts in space.

The pursuit of these strategies presents both opportunities and challenges. Increased investment in space technology could drive economic growth and create new jobs, but it also requires substantial funding and political will. Strengthening international partnerships can enhance collective capabilities but requires navigating complex geopolitical dynamics and competing national interests. Engaging

with China could foster cooperation and reduce the risk of conflict, but it also necessitates balancing cooperation with competition and protecting sensitive technologies. Finally, preparing for a multipolar space environment requires a long-term vision and strategic foresight as the space domain becomes increasingly crowded and contested.

By embracing this balanced approach and prioritizing these key strategies, the United States and its allies can navigate the challenges posed by China's rise in space and ensure a future where space remains a domain for peaceful exploration, scientific discovery, and the betterment of humanity. The stakes are high, but the rewards of a collaborative and responsible approach to space exploration are even greater.

Conclusion

China's advancements in reusable rocket technology mark a pivotal moment in space exploration. The proliferation of affordable and reliable space access has the potential to democratize space, ushering in an era of unprecedented scientific discovery, commercial innovation, and economic growth. However, this technological revolution also carries inherent risks, particularly when viewed through the escalating geopolitical competition between the United States and China.

China's ambitious space program, bolstered by its rapidly maturing reusable rocket capabilities, signals a paradigm shift in the global space landscape. The implications of this shift are profound, reaching far beyond technical achievements and extending into the realms of international relations, economic competition, and national security.

While still holding a leading position in space technology, the United States must act decisively to maintain its edge and adapt to a new era of multipolar space activity. This requires a multifaceted approach that balances competition with cooperation, innovation

with diplomacy, and ambition with responsibility. Delaying action or underestimating the significance of China's advancements could have far-reaching consequences, potentially ceding a critical domain to a strategic competitor and jeopardizing the long-term interests of the United States and its allies.

The United States must prioritize investments in cutting-edge space technologies, strengthen alliances and partnerships with like-minded nations, and engage in open and constructive dialogue with China to establish norms of behavior and reduce the risk of conflict. These actions, while not without their challenges, are essential for ensuring a future where space remains a domain for peaceful exploration, scientific discovery, and the betterment of humanity.

The path forward is not one of unyielding competition but rather a delicate maneuver of cooperation and competition. While undoubtedly rivals in space, the United States and China also share common interests in space debris mitigation, planetary defense, and scientific research. By recognizing these shared interests and working collaboratively, both nations can contribute to a more stable and sustainable space environment while also pursuing their own national objectives.

The stakes are high, and the decisions made today will have a lasting impact on the future of space exploration and humanity's place in the cosmos. By embracing a balanced approach that combines technological innovation, diplomatic engagement, and international cooperation, the United States can navigate the challenges posed by China's rise in space and seize the opportunities presented by this new era of exploration. This path, while demanding, offers the promise of a future where space serves as a catalyst for human progress, innovation, and cooperation, rather than a theater of conflict and division.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SHARED WATERS, SHARED FUTURES: COOPERATIVE APPROACHES TO WATER SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Ethan Allen

Water is the driving force of all nature.

— Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519

Abstract

The Indo-Pacific region is grappling with escalating water security challenges driven by climate change, rapid population growth, and increasing pollution, all of which threaten fundamental human needs and regional stability. This chapter explores the interconnectedness of water resources in the region, emphasizing the need for collaborative and adaptive approaches to address these challenges. Through the analysis of key transboundary river systems, including the Indus, Mekong, Helmand, and Brahmaputra, this chapter critically evaluates the strengths and limitations of current water-sharing agreements. Additionally, it explores the transformative role of technological innovations, such as artificial intelligence, satellite monitoring, and sensor networks, in improving water resource management and forecasting. The chapter concludes by advocating for comprehensive and integrated water management solutions that prioritize equity, active community engagement, robust governance structures, and international cooperation. It offers a set of best practices and policy recommendations aimed at ensuring long-term water security and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific.¹

Introduction

Access to clean, fresh water is essential for individual survival and community resilience, yet over 500 million people in the Indo-Pacific lack access to even a basic water supply.² A staggering 2.5

billion regional residents, roughly two-thirds of the population, do not have safely managed drinking water services, primarily due to contamination by fecal coliform bacteria.³ Water security is not just a matter of daily survival; it is a critical component of national security, impacting everything from subsistence farming to high-tech manufacturing, from remote villages to urban megacities. Water is fundamental to every aspect of our lives, from the food we eat to the energy we use to the stability of our societies.

Today, the Indo-Pacific faces unprecedented water challenges driven by climate disruption, population growth, and pollution. These issues have profound implications for political stability, interstate tensions, and U.S. interests in the region. The diverse landscapes of the Indo-Pacific—from glaciers and deserts to tropical rainforests—illustrate the vast array of water-related challenges shaped by both natural variations and human activities such as agriculture and industry.

Asia, home to 60% of the world's population, has less freshwater per capita than any other continent, with just 2.7 m³/person/year (cubic meters per person per year) compared to the global average of 5.8 m³/person/year. This scarcity is exacerbated by the region's rapid economic and population growth, leading to increased freshwater withdrawals from rivers, lakes, and aquifers.⁴

Given that water is a finite resource—essentially the same water molecules present on Earth four billion years ago—and the escalating needs of a growing and urbanizing population, everyone must take responsibility for water stewardship. Yet solutions to water challenges have rarely focused on conservation and care.

The universal need for potable water necessitates collaborative and cooperative approaches to water management. However, internal and transboundary politics often dictate water distribution patterns. Scientific and technological advancements have boosted water availability and offer new ways to enhance access. Paired with transparent and equitable political negotiations, these approaches

present our best hope for advancing water security and resilience in the face of rapidly changing freshwater availability in the Indo-Pacific.

This chapter explores the theoretical framework of integrated water resource management (IWRM) and cooperative water governance to address water security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The primary research question guiding this analysis is: How can scientific, technological, and political strategies be effectively integrated to enhance water security and mitigate water-related conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region? By examining various case studies and regional initiatives, this chapter aims to identify best practices and policy recommendations for sustainable water management and conflict resolution.

Internal Water Challenges and Climate Disruption

The Indo-Pacific region faces diverse water challenges exacerbated by the growing impacts of climate disruption. Extreme weather events, such as droughts, floods, and heat waves, are becoming more frequent and severe, posing significant threats to water security within individual countries. These disruptions strain existing water resources and destabilize ecosystems and livelihoods, highlighting the urgent need for adaptive and resilient water management strategies. Moreover, rising sea levels, another consequence of climate change, are increasingly threatening freshwater resources in coastal areas and island nations through saltwater intrusion into aquifers and wells, further exacerbating water scarcity.

Droughts and Floods

Climate disruption intensifies global droughts, particularly impacting small central-Pacific Islands like Pohnpei, Kosrae, and Majuro.⁵ Historically, moderate dry seasons are now longer, hotter, and more intense, threatening agro-forest food systems and potable

water supplies. These prolonged droughts have forced entire communities to relocate.⁶

Mainland Asia is also grappling with extreme weather events. Record-breaking events in recent years, such as the 2022 floods that submerged a third of Pakistan, have displaced millions and caused widespread waterborne disease outbreaks.⁷ Even densely populated cities like Hong Kong are experiencing unprecedented rainfall events.⁸

Heat Waves and Water Scarcity

In 2024, the Indo-Pacific and many other parts of the globe faced a series of unprecedented heat waves, with temperatures soaring to record-breaking levels.⁹ These extreme heat events, once rare, are now frequent and more severe, significantly straining already limited water resources. In 2023, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam experienced unprecedented high temperatures. The Philippines, meanwhile, recorded a record-breaking heat index of 60°C (140°F) that same year,¹⁰ highlighting the dangerous combination of high temperatures and humidity and underscoring the widespread effects of climate disruption on water availability.¹¹

Beyond Climate Disruption: Natural and Industrial Contamination

Compounding the challenges of climate disruption, natural and industrial contamination pose significant threats to water security in the Indo-Pacific. For example, according to the World Health Organization, at least 90 million people in around 50 countries—including Bangladesh, China, India, and the United States—are exposed to arsenic-contaminated groundwater at levels above ten µg/L (micrograms per liter). While various technological solutions are available to remove arsenic, the widespread nature of the problem and lack of resources often hinder effective implementation.¹²

Industrial pollution is another pressing concern, particularly in rapidly industrializing countries like China. Unregulated industrial waste discharge has contaminated water sources, leading to widespread health issues and ecological damage. Nearly half of China's population struggles to access safe drinking water,¹³ with approximately 86% of its groundwater being unsuitable for human consumption.¹⁴ The World Bank warns of potential “catastrophic consequences for future generations” if pollution is not addressed.¹⁵ Despite the availability of technological solutions to mitigate industrial pollution, weak environmental regulations, enforcement challenges, and corruption often impede progress.

Addressing Internal Water Challenges

Addressing these internal water challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines technological solutions with effective governance and environmental regulations. Investments in infrastructure, such as water treatment plants and wastewater management systems, are crucial. Public awareness campaigns and education programs can promote water conservation and responsible use. Furthermore, strengthening environmental regulations and enforcement mechanisms can help control industrial pollution and protect water resources for future generations.

Transboundary Water Tensions and Conflicts

The need for cooperation over shared water resources is not new. The earliest international treaties on water date back to 2500 BCE, focusing on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. However, history also reveals a long-standing pattern of conflicts over water that continues today.¹⁶ The following examples illustrate the complex interplay of cooperation and conflict in transboundary water management, highlighting both the potential for collaboration and the persistent challenges.

*The Indus River Basin:
Cooperation and Conflict*

One of the most well-known water treaties is the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), established in 1960 after the partition of India and Pakistan led to water disputes. Backed by the World Bank, the IWT has survived three wars, mainly due to its clear division of the Indus River's tributaries: three eastern rivers for India and three western rivers for Pakistan. The treaty prohibits either side from interrupting the designated flows with violations considered acts of war.¹⁷

However, the IWT's simplicity is also its weakness. The treaty lacks collaboration or data-sharing provisions, hindering adaptive management due to climate disruption and growing water demands. The treaty's focus on preventing conflict has arguably come at the expense of fostering cooperation. Recent calls for renegotiation highlight the need to update the IWT to address evolving challenges and promote sustainable water management for both nations.

The IWT illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative water agreements. On the one hand, it has likely been a key factor in preventing kinetic conflict over water. However, as the populations of both nations grow and their water needs increase, the treaty's failure to address fundamental issues of conservation and data sharing threatens to erode its long-term viability. Given the persistent hostilities between India and Pakistan and the projected decline of Indus watershed flows as glaciers shrink due to climate disruption, it is reasonable to question how long the IWT will hold.¹⁸ The future of the IWT depends on the willingness of both countries to adapt to changing circumstances and prioritize collaborative water management.

*The Mekong River:
The Case for Transboundary Cooperation*

The Mekong River illustrates both the presence and lack of transboundary water agreements. With its headwaters and

approximately a fifth of its total watershed within its borders, China holds an undeniable upstream advantage over its downstream neighbors—Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—all of whom depend on the river’s resources.

Without consulting these neighbors or establishing any agreements with them, China has built 11 major dams on the upper Mekong,¹⁹ with a combined capacity of roughly two-thirds that of Chesapeake Bay. Using these dams primarily for hydroelectric power, China restricts water flow during the wet season to fill its reservoirs and releases the stored water during the dry season. This pattern effectively counteracts the annual monsoon-driven flood pulse under which the Mekong and its ecosystems have evolved for millennia.

The consequences include a drastic reduction in the river’s fish stocks, which feed many of the 60 million downstream residents, and a significant decline in sediment flow, altering the ecology of the river’s delta and impacting agriculture and fisheries.

While the downstream countries have banded together since 1955 in the Mekong River Commission, and their agreements have positively affected resource sharing, the lack of Chinese engagement significantly hampers their ability to effectively manage the river’s resources. This lack of cooperation threatens the Mekong’s ecological health and jeopardizes regional stability and economic development.

The Mekong River is a stark example of how the absence of transboundary agreements can devastate an entire region. Data reveal the profound ecological damage caused by China’s upstream damming activities,²⁰ which have dramatically altered the natural ebb and flow of the river. This annual shifting is crucial for the river’s ecosystems and the communities that depend on it. Reduced peak flows during the wet seasons limit the river’s expansion into floodplains essential for fish spawning cycles, leading to a

significant decline in fish stocks vital for the nutrition and livelihoods of millions of people.

During the dry season, the sustained high water levels caused by dam releases inundate downstream forests, suffocating their root systems and permanently altering the delicate ecological balance. The resulting damage to the river's ecosystem has cascading effects, undermining the downstream communities' economies and social structures. This environmental crisis threatens livelihoods and destabilizes the entire region as water scarcity and resource competition escalate tensions between nations.

*The Helmand River:
A Flashpoint on the Iran-Afghanistan Border*

The Helmand River, originating in Afghanistan's central highlands, forms part of the border with Iran, feeding into the vital Lake Hamoun and its surrounding wetlands. The river and the lake are crucial water sources in this arid region, subject to numerous agreements and treaties since 1939.²¹ However, these agreements have not prevented conflict. Political instability, dam construction, water diversions, and climate disruption have all contributed to shrinking water resources,²² sparking accusations of water "weaponization" and escalating tensions. In 2023, clashes between Iranian and Afghan forces erupted, highlighting the potential for water scarcity to ignite violence.²³ The looming threat of future climate-induced water shortages underscores the urgent need for renewed political negotiations to avert future conflict.

The Helmand River crisis exposes the fragility of transboundary water agreements. Despite decades of formal pledges, the fundamental need for water often overrides these agreements. The situation underscores a stark reality: communities may resort to violence to secure their essential resource when water becomes scarce. This case serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the importance of establishing agreements and building robust

mechanisms for cooperation, conflict resolution, and adaptive management in changing environmental conditions. International organizations, such as the United Nations, can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and cooperation between countries, providing technical expertise, and promoting the peaceful resolution of water disputes.

*The Brahmaputra River:
Strategic Restraint Amidst Tensions*

The Brahmaputra River, originating in the Tibetan Plateau, flows through China, India, and Bangladesh. While China's upstream position might suggest an advantage, its control over the watershed contributes a relatively small proportion of the river's total flow—estimates vary between 7% and 30%.²⁴ Despite China and India constructing dams on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, with plans for further development near their shared border, the two nations have largely avoided overt conflict over water.

Instead of escalating tensions, both countries have sought to “de-securitize” the issue, moving it from a security concern to political discourse and negotiation.²⁵ This is evident in their ongoing exchange of hydrological data through memoranda, even without a formal water-sharing treaty.²⁶ However, the deteriorating relationships between the two nations and the potential for upstream water diversion mean the river remains a potential flashpoint.

The Brahmaputra presents a unique case where the lack of a formal treaty has not necessarily led to conflict. Both sides have demonstrated a degree of restraint, actively working to de-escalate potential water disputes. Whether this stems from the absence of a formal agreement, other geopolitical factors, or a combination of both remains to be determined. The sustainability of this approach in the face of growing water demands and escalating regional tensions remains to be determined.

*The Teesta River:
Stalled Cooperation*

Forging international water agreements can be challenging, even with goodwill and shared interests. Case in point: The Teesta River dispute exemplifies this complexity. This tributary of the Brahmaputra, crucial for farmers in India and Bangladesh, has been the subject of numerous negotiations. An agreement seemed imminent in 2011 but was ultimately derailed by objections from the Indian state of West Bengal,²⁷ citing concerns for its farmers' interests. Despite ongoing efforts, no further progress has been made on Teesta River cooperation.

This impasse highlights the limitations of transboundary water agreements. While agreements like the IWT have proven valuable in preventing conflict, they often need more flexibility and comprehensiveness to address evolving challenges. The basic human need for water, coupled with regional politics and competing interests, can easily override even the most well-intentioned agreements. Furthermore, the rapid shrinking of Tibetan glaciers, the source of virtually all major Asian rivers, due to climate disruption adds another layer of complexity. This raises serious questions about the long-term efficacy of existing regional agreements, many of which need to account for the dynamic and unpredictable nature of water resources in climate disruption.

Technological Innovations for Water Security and Resilience

Addressing water challenges in the Indo-Pacific requires a dual approach: mitigation, which aims to reduce the drivers of water insecurity, and adaptation, which focuses on adjusting to the changing water landscape. Mitigation strategies include transitioning to more efficient agricultural irrigation technologies to reduce water consumption. Adaptation strategies involve cultivating crops that require less water in the face of declining rainfall. While both approaches are crucial, promoting water conservation and

stewardship remains fundamental to advancing water security and resilience at all levels.

Scientific and technological innovations offer diverse solutions to water challenges, from resource acquisition and storage to efficient utilization and decontamination. Traditional methods like well-drilling and rainwater harvesting have been refined over time. Modern approaches such as dam construction offer large-scale water storage and flood control, albeit with potential ecological consequences.

Emerging technologies further expand the possibilities. Cloud seeding, practiced since the mid-20th century, and newer techniques involving electrical charges or laser pulses aim to induce rainfall. However, their long-term effects and potential for geopolitical tensions remain under scrutiny.

Technological solutions for addressing water quality issues range from simple to complex, depending on the type and extent of contamination. Basic filtration techniques, such as settling or filtering, can effectively remove dirt and suspended matter. Addressing more complex contaminants like excess salt, increasingly prevalent in coastal regions due to rising sea levels, necessitates more sophisticated methods like reverse osmosis or distillation. Similarly, chemical pollutants like pesticides and herbicides require specialized treatments such as reverse osmosis or carbon block filtration. Heavy metal contamination often demands more advanced approaches, including precipitation, cryogel filtration, or adsorption-based, chemical-based, electric-based, or photocatalytic-based treatments.²⁸

A simple yet innovative solution has emerged in many Pacific Island communities where municipal water systems are unreliable or absent, rainwater harvesting is common, and microbial contamination is a significant threat. The MadiDrop®,²⁹ an inexpensive, porous ceramic tablet infused with silver, can be placed in rainwater storage containers. It slowly releases silver ions,

disinfecting the water without altering its taste or smell. This point-of-use technology provides a year's worth of safe drinking water, making it a practical and affordable solution for communities facing microbial contamination challenges.

Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly with advanced sensor networks, holds immense potential to transform water management practices. AI enables real-time water quality and quantity monitoring and can optimize water usage patterns. It also serves as an early warning system, predicting floods and facilitating rapid response.³⁰

Such emerging technologies offer unprecedented solutions as centralized water systems expand and become increasingly vulnerable to climate-related disruptions. Integrating machine learning with low-cost, versatile sensors enables precise tracking of water needs, usage, and quality across diverse environments. In agriculture, sensors can monitor soil conditions, while machine learning algorithms, combined with satellite data, can provide farmers with actionable insights for optimal planting, irrigation, and harvesting. In urban areas, sensor networks can detect leaks, infrastructure deterioration, and treatment plant failures, enabling proactive maintenance and preventing costly disruptions.

These technologies enhance efficiency and promote sustainability and resilience. AI and sensor networks can transform water management by adjusting water use, detecting problems early, and facilitating data-driven decision-making, ensuring a more secure and sustainable water future for the Indo-Pacific region. However, ensuring equitable access to these technologies and building local capacity for implementation remain critical challenges.

Governance and Cooperation: The Political Dimensions of Water Security

Water security is not just a technical challenge; it is deeply intertwined with politics and governance. The equitable and sustainable management of water resources requires robust institutions, transparent decision-making processes, and commitment to cooperation at both national and international levels. This section explores the political dimensions of water security, examining the roles of governance structures, international agreements, and community participation in shaping a more water-secure future for the Indo-Pacific.

Constitutional Recognition: A Model for Water Stewardship

The need for strong governance structures that prioritize water security is evident. The Hawai'i state constitution, uniquely among U.S. states, explicitly mandates the creation of a water resources agency with broad authority to protect and manage water for the benefit of its people. This model underscores the value of recognizing water as a fundamental right and assigning responsibility for its stewardship at the highest levels of government.

The Mixed Record of International Water Agreements

International water agreements have a long history, with over 3,600 established in the past two millennia.³¹ However, their effectiveness varies, and nearly half of the world's international river basins lack cooperative management agreements.³² While some agreements, like the Indus Waters Treaty, have successfully prevented conflict, they often fail to address evolving challenges like climate disruption and growing populations. The Teesta River dispute exemplifies the fragility of these agreements in the face of political tensions and competing interests.

*De-Securitizing Water:
A Path to Cooperation*

Despite these challenges, international agreements remain crucial for de-securitizing water issues, shifting them from conflict to collaboration. By fostering dialogue, promoting transparency, and establishing mechanisms for dispute resolution, these agreements can help ensure that water resources are managed equitably. The case of the Brahmaputra River, where India and China have exchanged hydrological data despite not having a formal treaty, demonstrates the potential cooperation even without binding agreements. However, the long-term sustainability of such informal arrangements remains to be determined.

*The Way Forward:
Balancing Interests and Ensuring Equity*

Political solutions must prioritize equity, transparency, and stakeholder participation, including recognizing the human right to water and balancing competing interests. All affected communities should be involved in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are considered. Notably, the meaningful inclusion of women in water management decision-making is vital, as they are often disproportionately affected by water scarcity and play a crucial role in household water use and conservation. While international agreements remain essential, their success hinges on their ability to adapt to changing environmental conditions, incorporate scientific knowledge, and address the root causes of water conflict. Ultimately, the success of political solutions depends on the willingness of governments and stakeholders to collaborate, prioritize equitable access to water, and adapt to the evolving challenges of water scarcity and climate disruption.

Shared Waters, Shared Futures: A Call for Collective Action and Innovation

The water security challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region are complex and multifaceted, requiring integrated solutions that address both technical and political dimensions. Science and technology offer a powerful toolkit for enhancing water availability, improving quality, and optimizing resource management. Political will and cooperation are essential for establishing equitable and sustainable water governance frameworks that protect the human right to water and promote regional stability.

The future of the Indo-Pacific is inextricably linked to its shared waters. As the region grapples with the growing impacts of climate disruption, population growth, and pollution, collaborative approaches to water management are not just desirable; they are essential for survival and prosperity. Recognizing this interconnectedness is the first step toward building a shared future where water is a source of cooperation, not conflict.

A Call to Action

To achieve a water-secure future for all in the Indo-Pacific, we must:

- *PRIORITIZE INVESTMENT*: Increase investment in water infrastructure, research, and development, focusing on technological innovation and capacity building.
- *FOSTER COLLABORATION*: Strengthen regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Mekong River Commission, and promote data sharing, joint research, and technology transfer.
- *EMPOWER COMMUNITIES*: Engage local communities in decision-making, ensuring their voices and needs are heard.
- *PROMOTE CONSERVATION*: Encourage sustainable water use practices in agriculture, industries, and households while protecting and restoring critical ecosystems.

- *Strengthen Governance:* Develop and enforce equitable water policies that prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations and promote transparency and accountability.

Building a Shared Future

Beyond these immediate actions, several areas warrant further exploration and collaboration:

- *INNOVATIVE FINANCING:* Explore innovative financing mechanisms, such as water bonds or impact investing, to mobilize resources for water projects.
- *DATA-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS:* Leverage the power of artificial intelligence, big data, and remote sensing to improve water management and predict water-related risks.
- *TRANSBOUNDARY COOPERATION:* Strengthen legal frameworks for transboundary water cooperation and establish conflict resolution and dispute settlement mechanisms.
- *CAPACITY BUILDING:* Invest in education and training programs to build local water management and technology implementation capacity.

The path to shared prosperity in the Indo-Pacific runs through its shared waters. By embracing innovation, collaboration, and a commitment to equitable and sustainable water management, the region can secure a future where water resources are not a source of tension but a catalyst for cooperation and resilience. The future of the Indo-Pacific depends on our ability to recognize that water is a shared resource that requires collective responsibility, innovation, and collaboration. Together, we can ensure a water-secure future for generations to come.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER SIX

LAW AND RISING SEAS: NAVIGATING OCEAN CHANGE

Joanna Siekiera

‘Oceania’ connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea.

— Epeli Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands*, 1993

Abstract

Pacific Island nations, facing an existential threat to their statehood and maritime sovereignty due to climate change-induced sea level rise, are taking innovative legal action. This chapter examines their strategic use of international legal mechanisms, focusing on the deposition of maritime boundaries with the United Nations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. It underscores the unique challenges island nations face and their potential to influence global legal developments concerning climate change and state sovereignty.

Introduction

“Ocean change,” a term preferred over the more commonly used “climate change,” underscores the severe consequences of anthropogenic climate change on the world’s largest marine body—the Pacific Ocean. This chapter examines the unprecedented legal practice adopted by some states in Oceania to protect their sovereignty and the human security of their populations. By depositing maps of their maritime boundaries with the United Nations (UN), these nations are preserving their territorial claims and actively participating in the evolution of international law. This

approach reflects the urgent need to address human security concerns in the face of relentless climate change.

Constructivist international relations theory, which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between state actions and evolving norms, informs the theoretical framework for this analysis. As small island nations face existential threats from rising sea levels and increased natural disasters, they forge a path toward legal innovations that may set precedents for global environmental governance. This chapter explores how these pioneering efforts by Oceania states might influence the broader landscape of international law, answering the critical question: How are these microstates leveraging their limited but unique positions to shape international norms and secure their future against ocean change?

This question is not merely academic. It sheds light on a region often sidelined in global discussions yet stands at the frontline of one of our time's most pressing global challenges. The analysis covers the legal responses of the South Pacific region's microstates, focusing on their strategic use of international legal mechanisms to assert and maintain their territorial integrity and sovereignty. By integrating theory with practical experiences gained during a recent scientific expedition aboard the *Statsraad Lehmkuhl*, this chapter aims to bridge the gap between legal principles and the lived realities of Pacific Islanders.¹ From this vantage point of practical engagement, I advocate for a more proactive approach to international law, one that not only respects but actively promotes the resilience and sovereignty of small island states confronting global environmental change.

Geographical and Environmental Context

The geographical scope of this analysis covers the South Pacific region, known as Oceania, which is divided into three subregions: Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia. This distinction is crucial as

each subregion faces unique challenges and has developed distinct strategies to address the impacts of ocean change.

Despite the global acknowledgment of climate change's effects on various ecosystems, research on ocean change, specifically in Oceania, is surprisingly scant. This oversight could be attributed to the region's distance from the world's decision-making centers, its relatively minor role in global political and economic arenas, or simply the lack of specialized researchers in the narrow field of the legal consequences of ocean change in Oceania. Regardless of the cause, this gap in research undermines the ability of microstates in the South Pacific to counter the devastating effects of climate change on their lands and seas effectively, to protect their statehood, sovereignty, peace, and stability at regional and global levels, and to fortify themselves against any exploitation of their vulnerability.

The Immediate Impact of Ocean Change

Oceania's small island states are already experiencing severe environmental damage: new weather patterns, including sudden changes, flooding, and droughts, are becoming more frequent and intense. These changes pose a real and immediate threat to their territories, central to their statehood and national identity. If current meteorological and geological forecasts prove accurate, these nations risk losing significant portions of their territory permanently.

Socio-Economic Challenges and Global Invisibility

The least developed countries in Oceania, which also have some of the highest poverty rates globally, are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These nations often lack a significant voice in international forums such as the United Nations. This absence of influence has led them to seek legal protections at regional forums independent of global actions. These island nations, identified collectively as Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

and, more specifically, in Oceania as Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), have contributed minimally to global warming due to their negligible industrialization levels. Yet, they endure the most severe consequences.

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) exemplifies the acute challenges faced by the region. For two decades, FSM has combated the destructive impacts of strong tides and significant flooding of atolls, which not only cause extensive material damage but also lead to geochemical changes affecting agriculture and animal husbandry. Daily realities include coastal erosion, the destruction of food crops, limited access to potable water, and damage to marine species due to rising sea temperatures and acidification.²

Regional Legal Responses

In response to these multifaceted challenges, Oceania states have begun to assert their sovereignty and protect their populations through innovative legal strategies. These strategies include depositing maps of their maritime boundaries with the United Nations to secure their territorial claims against the physical and legal uncertainties posed by ocean change. This proactive approach reflects a broader, strategic legal and political framework that aims to ensure the survival and sovereignty of these nations in the face of environmental upheaval.

While these regional efforts mark significant progress, critics might argue that such unilateral actions could complicate international legal consensus or lead to inconsistencies in maritime law enforcement. However, the urgency of the environmental threats faced by these nations necessitates immediate action, underscoring the need for flexible and responsive legal mechanisms at the international level.

The Law and the Sea and Climate Change in Oceania

The Pacific Ocean, covering one-third of the Earth's surface, is not only the largest body of water in the world but also a central element of life for over 10 million people spread across 25,000 islands and islets. These inhabitants, known collectively as Pasifika, or "people of the sea,"³ view the ocean as more than just a vast aquatic expanse. It embodies their very essence, holding a deep metaphysical and spiritual significance.⁴ This profound connection is pivotal as the ocean is also a vital source of sustenance for many, with tuna being a primary, and sometimes sole, source of protein.⁵ Thus, the relationship between Pasifika and the ocean underscores the critical importance of legal and cultural issues associated with marine areas, from fishing rights and territorial claims to broader environmental stewardship.

Legal Implications of Ocean Change

Essential to the survival of these communities is the Law of the Sea, one of the oldest branches of international law, which governs a range of critical issues, from fishing rights to territorial and open ocean zones. The legal framework is essential for defining the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which extends 200 nautical miles (nm) from the coast, where a state has special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources. However, rising sea levels disrupt these definitions by altering reference points to determine these zones. As sea levels rise, islands, atolls, and other low-lying areas shrink, necessitating the reevaluation of where these zones begin and end. Such a change could lead to significant reductions in the size of EEZs, with profound implications for the legal rights and economic opportunities of the states concerned.

Stability and Disproportionality in Maritime Zones

The archipelagic nature of Oceania means these islands have been afforded disproportionately large maritime zones relative to their

landmass. This is because the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) defines maritime zones based on coastlines and baselines.⁶ For example, an island without a close maritime neighbor (i.e., another state's territory within 400 nautical miles) can claim an extensive area—up to 125,664 nm² [431,014 km²] of territorial sea, EEZ, and continental shelf.⁷ Whereas a “rock” can only generate a claim to a territorial sea of 452 nm² [1,550 km²]. As a result, this disproportionality becomes particularly contentious as physical changes caused by ocean change threaten the land that qualifies these nations for their extensive maritime claims, potentially reducing them to the status of “rocks” with much smaller maritime entitlements.

Challenges to Legal Stability

Ocean change and the resulting shifts in coastlines and baselines introduce fundamental instability to the legal order governing maritime zones. As the physical landscape of these islands evolves, so too must the legal landscape that defines their territorial and economic zones. Measuring and defining EEZs amid dynamic geographical changes is becoming increasingly urgent. The international legal community faces the challenge of adapting legal norms and practices to these realities without undermining the rights and sovereignty of the affected states.

Human Security and Climate Resistance

The intimate and intrinsic connection between the Pasifika people and their surrounding marine environment underscores how even minor changes in land territory due to rising sea levels can significantly impact maritime boundaries and threaten state security. This natural association between the statehood and sovereignty of the Pasifika and their ocean is profound—without the sea, Oceania's inhabitants' very existence and identity are at risk. This relationship reflects the “Pacific worldview,” which emphasizes solving

problems in the “Pacific way”—a concept that may seem elusive to those from other continents.⁸

The prevailing solution to rising sea levels has often been relocating populations to countries like Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia. However, Pasifika communities are deeply resistant to such moves, questioning how their statehood, national heritage, and cultural identity can be preserved and cultivated in foreign lands. In response, there is a significant legal and cultural push within Oceania to safeguard their land and maritime territories and maintain their national identities.

Ocean change threatens territorial integrity and diminishes the ocean’s capacity to provide essential services crucial for human survival. This includes food provisions, carbon dioxide storage, and oxygen production. Additionally, less acknowledged yet vitally important are the ocean’s natural defenses against environmental hazards, such as coral reefs, seagrasses, and mangroves,⁹ which are increasingly jeopardized by climate change. The International Union for Conservation of Nature emphasized in a 2017 report that the sustainable management, protection, and restoration of these coastal and marine ecosystems are pivotal for maintaining the ecosystem services essential for human life and health.¹⁰

A proactive, low-carbon strategy is more crucial than ever to sustain marine and human health. The ocean has been critical in mitigating climate change by absorbing over 90% of human-induced atmospheric warming since the 1970s.¹¹ Thus, the overall health of Oceania’s inhabitants is directly linked to the ocean’s health, particularly its temperature and acidity levels.

Sea Level Rise and Statehood of Oceania States

Scientific research and political discourse consistently acknowledge the rising sea levels, which are causing extensive damage to land and maritime environments. Yet, the precise extent and pace at which sea levels will rise remains uncertain, posing grave threats to

populations and the very existence of states as recognized international legal entities. According to the 1933 Montevideo Convention, the existence of a state is contingent upon three elements: a permanent population, a defined territory, and an effective government.¹² The prospect of losing territory threatens these fundamental aspects of statehood, particularly in the Pacific. Notably, low-lying countries such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau, and Tuvalu face the dire prediction of losing most, if not all, of their territory by the end of the 21st century.¹³

Moreover, environmental changes such as flooding, drought, and extreme weather will likely gradually render coastal areas uninhabitable. The socio-economic impacts of these changes pose additional security threats to PSIDS populations. Large-scale migrations, often referred to as movements of “climate refugees”—a term widely used but not legally recognized—represent a significant consequence of these environmental changes.¹⁴ The flooding of urban centers exacerbates existing challenges such as overpopulation, high unemployment rates among youth, and lack of education, further destabilizing these regions.¹⁵

The vulnerability of Oceania’s population is often described as being on the “front line of global ocean change.”¹⁶ This vulnerability is compounded by three main interrelated factors: geographical smallness, isolation, and regional fragmentation. These island nations’ confined land and marine environments are inherently fragile and heavily dependent on the ocean, making them increasingly susceptible to many threats that impact state and human security. These threats include inadequate waste management, population of land and sea, soil erosion, rapid population growth and overcrowded coastal areas, and international migration pressures. Additionally, these states face economic and infrastructural challenges, including dependence on foreign remittances, a lingering reliance on post-colonial foreign aid, volatile market prices, and underdeveloped infrastructure in ports and airports.

These multifaceted challenges underscore the urgent need for robust international cooperation and innovative legal solutions to ensure the survival and sovereignty of these states within the global community. The ongoing legal and political efforts aim to mitigate these immediate threats and preserve the Pasifika people's cultural heritage and national identity against these unprecedented global changes.

Unprecedented Solution to Unprecedented Problem

Faced with an urgent and unique set of challenges, PSIDS cannot afford to wait for the slow churn of international decision-making, especially within frameworks like the United Nations. To secure their existence as sovereign states, these nations have taken the initiative to develop legal solutions at a regional level that are closer to their immediate realities and needs. This approach involves various legal mechanisms, including soft and hard law, tailored to address the unprecedented impacts of ocean change.

The existential threat of rising sea levels has precipitated a series of legal dilemmas. These include questions about the very nature of statehood as defined by the 1933 Montevideo Convention: Can a population without a defined territory still be recognized as a state? What happens to a state's rights and obligations if it becomes deterritorialized? These questions extend into practical issues concerning the demarcation of maritime zones: Should the EEZ baselines be ambulatory to reflect changing shorelines, or should they remain fixed despite environmental transformation?¹⁷

Further complicating matters is the status of displaced populations. Should individuals from nations submerged by rising waters be considered climate migrants, and what would their legal status be in host countries? The absence of an international agreement addressing "climate change refugees" or "climate change displaced persons" highlights a significant gap in current international law. This gap prompts a critical discussion on whether

the UN should develop new agreements or whether a shift in the interpretation of existing laws, such as UNCLOS, is necessary.

These legal inquiries only scratch the surface of the dire situation facing PSIDS. The intent of this chapter is not only to provide definitive answers to these complex issues, as opinions among even the leading experts and stakeholders vary widely. However, considering their unique perspectives and needs, it is crucial to raise awareness of the potential and existing legal consequences of ocean change for Oceania's microstates.

The challenges are not merely theoretical. The potential loss of territorial and maritime jurisdiction under UNCLOS could strip these states of their rights to access and use marine resources, including migratory species and minerals crucial for their economies—resources that are vital for their survival and economic independence. This scenario could lead to significant losses, including access to valuable rare raw materials essential for modern technologies, such as battery production in electric vehicles and potentially critical components in future technologies.

By proactively addressing these issues through regional legal frameworks, PSIDS are striving to safeguard their territories and resources and setting precedents that could influence global legal practices concerning environmental resilience and state sovereignty in the face of climate change.

Regional Custom

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the principal regional organization in Oceania,¹⁸ issued the “Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise” on August 6, 2021 (hereafter referred to as the PIF Declaration).¹⁹ This declaration marked a decisive step from waiting for global consensus or action. From the perspective of international lawyers and relations experts, regional approaches often prove faster, more cost-effective, and more productive than their global counterparts.

The innovative approach embedded in the PIF Declaration is based on the declarative theory of international law, which posits that the declaration of a state's intent is essential for maintaining its status as a basic unit of international law.²⁰

In the PIF Declaration, member states clearly articulated that their maritime zones, as established and notified to the UN Secretary-General per UNCLOS, would maintain their rights derived from that place without reduction, despite any physical changes brought about by sea level rise.²¹ Additionally, the declaration calls for the United Nations to recognize a newly adopted international custom stemming directly from the practices initiated by these Pacific states.

Interestingly, the release of the PIF Declaration coincided with the conclusion of the 72nd meeting of the UN International Law Commission, a session that, for the first time, addressed sea level rise from an international law standpoint.²² While the outcome of this meeting was more of an opinion-forming document rather than one with legal authority, it highlighted the diverse legal and political views regarding the potential consequences of ocean change. Not surprisingly, states less affected by ocean change were more reluctant to amend UNCLOS or to establish new legal frameworks.

Given the lack of a definitive resolution at the international level, the PIF nations have taken it upon themselves to safeguard their statehood and maritime territories through a regional initiative. By interpreting UNCLOS to their advantage, these nations have used Article 76(8), which stipulates that the limits of the continental shelf established by a coastal state "shall be final and binding." By depositing maps and lists of geographical coordinates delineating their baselines and the external boundaries of maritime zones at the United Nations, these states ensure that these coordinates are not subject to further review or changes, regardless of the physical alterations due to climate change. This transparency in defining maritime boundaries ensures the international community can

reliably use the data and inform legal decisions, practical navigation, and research.²³

The depositary authority is the UN Secretary-General through the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in the Division of Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea. Currently, 13 Oceania countries have individually or collectively submitted their maritime border coordinates: the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Tokelau, and Kiribati, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and France (on behalf of French Polynesia).²⁴

This regional practice aims to establish a new international custom acknowledged as a source of law in the doctrine of international law, standing on an equal footing with more formalized treaty laws. “International custom, as evidence of a general practice accepted as law”²⁵ must be based on two elements to be recognized as a source of law: *usus* and *opinio juris sive necessitatis*. The first element, derived from Latin, is *usus*. It refers to a consistent and widespread state practice where multiple states demonstrate a particular behavior over an extended period. This practice should apply to all states equally, toward everyone (*erga omnes*), not limited to select groups or states. The second element, *opinio juris*, is the belief in the legal validity of this practice and, therefore, the attribution of legal force to the practiced custom. This belief transforms the practice into a binding legal norm, creating rights and obligations for all states.

This dual criterion helps solidify the legal actions taken by the PSIDS as not only necessary for their survival but as legitimate contributions to the evolution of international law, particularly in a world where the impacts of climate change pose unique and disproportionate threats to maritime nations.

The development of this regional custom not only aims to secure the legal sovereignty of Pacific Island states but also contributes to

the broader goal of maintaining global peace and stability by adapting international law to contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

As we navigate the early decades of the 21st century, the escalating impacts of climate change, driven by human activity, are met with evolving legal responses, particularly from the Oceania states. These nations have begun crafting a regional practice that progressively leans toward establishing international law custom dedicated to protecting the statehood and sovereignty of entities threatened not by war or aggression but by environmental changes—a domain not yet adequately addressed by existing international law.

The practice of South Pacific states depositing maritime borders with the United Nations is unprecedented. It responds to the unique threat of losing statehood due to environmental factors rather than political conflict. This development is crucial for maintaining international peace and stability as the stability of both land and maritime borders for islands, low-lying, and deltaic states becomes even more critical. Sovereign rights over territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves enable these states to exploit natural resources vital for economic development, such as oil, gas, and other valuable materials.

In alignment with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the submission of maps and geodetic data marking the continental shelf effectively “freezes” the state borders, safeguarding them against the encroaching sea. Diplomatic efforts by the PIF encourage the precise definition of base points and baselines, thereby legitimizing the maritime zones under international law: the 12 nm territorial sea limit, the 24 nm contiguous zone, and the 200 nm EEZ.

The emerging custom in Oceania not only fortifies the legal standing of these states but also sets a precedent that could inspire other maritime regions, such as those in the Indian Ocean or the Caribbean Sea, to adopt similar measures without waiting for an

amendment to UNCLOS or new international agreements. This proactive stance by the Pacific microstates, still grappling with vulnerabilities from their postcolonial legacies, positions them as pioneers in a new chapter of public international law. They exemplify how the targeted interpretation of treaty law, specifically UNCLOS, in the context of climate resilience can preserve statehood and enhance global stability. This approach promotes a model of close legal cooperation that supports human and state security in the face of climate-induced challenges.

Endnotes

- ¹ In July and August 2023, I embarked on a scientific expedition across the Pacific Ocean aboard the Statsraad Lehmkuhl, Norway's largest training ship. During this voyage, I had the privilege of lecturing on topics close to my heart and central to this discussion—the law of the sea and sustainable development of the ocean. This journey was not only an academic endeavor but also a profound personal experience, as it allowed me to engage directly with the realities faced by maritime communities.

My time spent in regions like Fiji, Palau, and Hawaii provided invaluable insights into the practical implications of oceanic law and the tangible effects of climate change on these unique ecosystems and cultures. These experiences have deeply influenced the perspectives and proposals I present in this chapter. The firsthand observations of environmental changes and their impacts on local communities underscored the urgency of the legal measures discussed herein and reinforced my conviction in the necessity for innovative legal responses to climate-related challenges.

By integrating theory with practical experiences gained during this expedition, this chapter aims to bridge the gap between abstract legal principles and the on-the-ground realities that define the daily lives of Pacific Islanders. It is from this vantage point of practical engagement that I advocate for a proactive approach to international law, urging a shift toward legal frameworks that not only respect but actively promote the resilience and sovereignty of small island states in the face of global environmental changes.

- ² Michael B. Gerrard and Gregory E. Wannier, eds., *Threatened Island Nations: Legal Implications of Rising Seas and a Changing Climate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Robin Warner and Clive H. Schofield, ed., *Climate Change and the Oceans: Gauging the Legal and Policy Currents in the Asia Pacific and Beyond* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012).
- ³ Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 148–161.
- ⁴ Brij V. Lal and Kate Fortune, eds., *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 406.
- ⁵ Paul D'Arcy, *The People of the Sea: Environment, Identity, and History in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).
- ⁶ UN General Assembly, Convention on the Law of the Sea, 10 December 1982.
- ⁷ Clive H. Schofield, "Shifting Limits? Sea Level Rise and Options to Secure Maritime Jurisdictional Claims," *Carbon and Climate Law Review* 3 (2009): 405–416, <https://doi.org/10.21552/CCLR/2009/4/111>.
- ⁸ Joanna Siekiera, *Regional Policy in the South Pacific* (Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2021).
- ⁹ Dan Laffoley and John M. Baxter, eds., *Explaining Ocean Warming: Causes, Scale, Effects and Consequences* (Gland: IUCN Publications, 2016), <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/46254>.
- ¹⁰ International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), *The Ocean and Climate Change. Issues Brief* (November 2017).
- ¹¹ IUCN, *The Ocean and Climate Change*.
- ¹² Convention on Rights and Duties of States, art. 1, adopted by the Seventh International Conference of American States, December 26, 1933.
- ¹³ Gerrard and Wannier, *Threatened Island Nations*; Warner and Schofield, *Climate Change and the Oceans*.
- ¹⁴ Legal Definitions Note: There are no legal definitions for "environmental refugees," "climate refugees," or "climate migrants," as the main actors in international law, namely states and intergovernmental organizations (IGO), have not yet codified these

terms. Even the major global IGOs involved with displaced persons—the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IMO)—adhere to this absence of formal definitions.

- ¹⁵ Robert J. Nicholls and Anny Cazenave, “Sea-Level Rise and Its Impact on Coastal Zones,” *Science* 328, no. 5985 (2010): 1517–1520, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1185782>.
- ¹⁶ Phillip H. Muller, former Ambassador of the Marshall Islands to the United Nations, described the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) as “the canary of global warming and rising sea levels.” See the foreword to *Threatened Island Nations: Legal Implications of Rising Seas and a Changing Climate*, ed. Michael Gerrard and Gregory E. Wannier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 147-151.
- ¹⁷ Mara R. Wendebourg, “Interpreting the Law of the Sea in the Context of Sea-Level Rise: The Ambulatory Thesis and State Practice,” *Journal of Environmental Law* 35, no. 3(2023): 499–507.
- ¹⁸ Participation in PIF Summit: The author participated in the 51st Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Summit in Suva, Fiji, in July 2022. As usual, the key topic was ocean change and the prevention of its consequences in the region. For more details, see the Report Communique of the 51st Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting, accessed January 10, 2024, <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/07/17/report-communique-of-the-51st-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-meeting/>.
- ¹⁹ Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise, <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/08/11/declaration-on-preserving-maritime-zones-in-the-face-of-climate-change-related-sea-level-rise>.
- ²⁰ Note on Unilateral Acts and State Recognition: Such a unilateral act of declaring statehood does not finalize the process of self-determination of a state. International recognition by other states is required. There are several well-known examples of entities that, despite declaring independence and meeting the criteria set out in the Montevideo Convention, were not recognized as states.
- ²¹ Frances Anggadi, “Establishment, Notification, and Maintenance: The Package of State Practice at the Heart of the Pacific Islands

- Forum Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones,” *Ocean Development and International Law* 53, no. 1 (2022): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2022.2033143>.
- ²² UN International Law Commission, “Summaries of the Work of the International Law Commission: Sea-Level Rise in Relation to International Law, last updated July 16, 2024, https://legal.un.org/ilc/summaries/8_9.shtml.
- ²³ Clive H. Schofield, “A New Frontier in the Law of the Sea? Responding to the Implications of Sea Level Rise for Baselines, Limits and Boundaries,” in *Frontiers in International Environmental Law: Oceans and Climate Challenges: Essays in Honour of David Freestone*, ed. Richard Barnes and Ronán Long (Leiden, Brill, 2021), 190.
- ²⁴ UN, “Submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, pursuant to article 76, paragraph 8, of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982,” accessed January 10, 2024, https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/commission_submissions.htm.
- ²⁵ United Nations, *Statute of the International Court of Justice*, April 18, 1946, art. 38(1)(b).

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CHAPTER SEVEN

JIHADIST TERRORISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:

RESURGENCE AND RESILIENCE IN THE

POST-CALIPHATE ERA

Sam Mullins

Terrorism can never be accepted. We must fight it together, with methods that do not compromise our respect for the rule of law and human rights, or are used as an excuse for others to do so.

— Anna Lindh, former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs

Abstract

Even with the fall of the ISIS caliphate, the threat of transnational jihadist terrorism persists in the Indo-Pacific. This chapter traces the evolution of transnational jihadist terrorism in the Indo-Pacific, from the rise and fall of the ISIS caliphate to the Taliban's resurgence and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Examining the evolving tactics, targets, and motivations of jihadist networks, the chapter highlights their resilience and adaptability. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and adaptive counterterrorism strategy that combines sustained pressure with efforts to address root causes, foster international cooperation, and counter online radicalization. The chapter also underscores the importance of balancing security measures with the protection of civil liberties in countering this persistent threat. Ultimately, the chapter argues that a failure to adopt a multi-dimensional approach that prioritizes both security and preventive measures could have dire consequences for stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Shifting Landscape of Transnational Jihadist Terrorism in the Indo-Pacific

The changes that have occurred in the global terrorism landscape during the last decade have been profound. The lightning-fast rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 caught the world by surprise, fueling a surge in transnational terrorist activity on a scale that had never before been seen. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters and their families from more than a hundred countries flocked to join the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, throwing the region into chaos and wreaking havoc around the world.¹

The international response was equally unprecedented, and in 2019, ISIS was militarily defeated by a U.S.-led global coalition of 86 countries and other entities united against the shared threat of terrorism. Since then, with the especially notable exception of sub-Saharan Africa, terrorist attacks worldwide have generally declined.² Yet it would be naïve to think that transnational terror networks have been permanently defanged.

Despite the many setbacks they have had to endure, takfiri jihadist groups and their supporters have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, and there is no room for complacency. This chapter focuses on the evolution of these groups in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly South and Southeast Asia. The chapter is structured chronologically, beginning with a brief recap of the period from 2014 to March 2019, during which terror networks were transformed by the rise and fall of ISIS.

The next section examines the years that immediately followed, from April 2019 to August 2021, which coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then from August 2021 to October 2023, which marked the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. A fourth section discusses the impact of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, which began in October 2023. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of these evolving threats for counterterrorism (CT) strategies in the region, emphasizing the need

for adaptable and comprehensive approaches that address both the immediate security challenges and the underlying factors contributing to radicalization.

The Rise and Fall of ISIS: 2014-March 2019

The wider impact of the civil war in Syria and the related return of instability in Iraq from around 2011 onwards is hard to overstate. Among the kaleidoscope of militant groups that emerged during this period, ISIS established itself as the dominant force, utilizing a combination of brutality and savvy propaganda to enhance its appeal. The group was particularly influential on the international stage, and a growing number of violent jihadists in Asia who were formerly aligned with al-Qaeda began pledging allegiance to the group in 2014—some even before the declaration of the caliphate was made that June.³ As support for the group grew, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) to the conflict zone gathered pace, and by 2017, South and Southeast Asia had each seen more than a thousand FTFs and their family members make their way to Syria and Iraq.⁴

The Establishment of Transnational Networks

The establishment of physical and virtual connections to terrorists in the Middle East further enabled the transfer of people, information, and much-needed funds, helping Asian jihadists, newly animated by what they were seeing abroad, to intensify operations at home. This led to the fracturing of transnational terrorist organizations and the outbreak of both intense ideological as well as physical infighting and competition between rival factions—particularly the Taliban and the newly established Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) in Afghanistan. The number of attacks soared as a result.

Between 2014 and 2018, ISK was responsible for nearly 300 attacks and more than 2,000 fatalities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵

ISIS supporters were responsible for numerous mass casualty attacks elsewhere, including the bloody Holey Artisan café murders in Bangladesh in 2016, the siege of Marawi in the Philippines in 2017, the Surabaya suicide bombings in Indonesia in 2018, and many more. Not to be outdone, the al-Qaeda-aligned Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) massacred 149 people, mostly children, at an army public school in Peshawar in December 2014.⁶ During this period, there were also signs that the largely dormant Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, which also stayed loyal to al-Qaeda, was positioning itself to resume armed jihad, having previously eschewed the use of violence.⁷

Counterterrorism Efforts and the Decline of ISIS: 2017-2019

The proliferation of terrorist attacks and the growing influence of ISIS-inspired ideology provoked an overwhelming response. Thanks to a sustained aerial bombardment campaign, coupled with ground operations by local partner forces, ISIS was crushed on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. ISK suffered a similar fate in Afghanistan, as did the Maute Group and their supporters in the Philippines.

The flow of FTFs began to dry up as Turkey closed its borders with Syria, and countries adopted a more proactive approach to preventing terrorist travel and sharing of information. This was supported at the global level by Interpol's FTF database and at the regional level by programs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Our Eyes intelligence-sharing framework, initiated in January 2018.

At the national level, authorities across South and Southeast Asia updated legislation to criminalize terrorist activities, launched new national action plans, introduced rehabilitation programs for returning FTFs and their families, and generally redoubled their efforts to counter terrorism.⁸ Many top terrorist leaders and facilitators were killed by security services, and hundreds more were

arrested. While all of this was going on, social media providers such as Twitter and Facebook had stepped up their efforts to remove terrorists from their platforms, dramatically shrinking their available territory in cyberspace.⁹

By March 2019, when ISIS lost its last sliver of physical territory in the Syrian border town of Baghouz, transnational jihadist networks were on the back foot.

After the Caliphate: April 2019-August 2021

The territorial defeat of ISIS marked the end of a chapter, but the story of transnational jihadist terrorism was far from over. Despite the many setbacks they had suffered in the preceding months, ISIS affiliates and supporters in the Indo-Pacific proved themselves to still be extremely capable in the immediate aftermath of the caliphate. The dust was still settling in Baghouz when a group of mostly affluent and well-educated young men carried out multiple, coordinated suicide bombings on the morning of Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, killing close to 300 people. Though no stranger to terrorism, this was the first attack of its kind in the small island nation and was quite unexpected. In June, the Philippines recorded its first-ever suicide bombing by a Filipino.¹⁰ This was the third suicide attack in a matter of months (the others all conducted by FTFs) in a country where such tactics had rarely before been seen, and was yet another sign of the continued insidious influence of ISIS.

ISIS's Strategic Shift to South Asia

As it sought to recover, ISIS began to rely more heavily on its affiliates and, in particular, began to focus its attention on South Asia and ISK. In May 2019, ISIS announced it was reorganizing to create new “provinces” responsible for India and Pakistan, respectively, leaving ISK responsible for Afghanistan.¹¹ It followed up in February 2020 with the launch of a new publication, “*Voice of*

Hind,” which focused on events in the Indian subcontinent in an effort to exploit local tensions and draw in more recruits from the region.¹² Just how successful these efforts have been is unclear, and the new provinces were later reabsorbed back into ISK, but in 2021, Afghanistan suffered a substantial increase in terrorist attacks and fatalities.¹³ The group was also linked to three relatively minor attacks, a plot disrupted in the Maldives, and at least three disrupted plots in India.¹⁴

The Killing of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

In October 2019, U.S. special operations forces tracked down and killed the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Although it had been an important victory, he was quickly replaced, and in a pattern that would repeat itself as each “caliph” was killed, jihadists throughout Asia wasted no time in publicly declaring their allegiance to his successor, thereby signaling their ongoing commitment to the cause.

Challenges Beyond ISIS

While ISIS was busy restructuring, others were also active, making this an extremely challenging period. In February 2019, Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM) carried out a suicide bombing at Pulwama in Kashmir, killing more than forty Indian security personnel in what was regarded as the worst act of terrorism in thirty years of insurgency.¹⁵ A month later, an anti-immigrant right-wing extremist, who framed his attack, in part, as a reaction to the scourge of jihadist terrorism, gunned down 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which he broadcast online. This, in turn, served to inspire copycat attacks in California and Texas later that year, in which a combined 23 people were killed. Finally, for the first time in nearly twenty years, al-Qaeda again managed to strike the U.S. homeland when a Saudi airman undergoing training at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, who had long-standing, “significant” ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

dating back to 2015 and was in direct communication with them just hours before the attack, shot and killed three sailors.¹⁶

Regional and Global Counterterrorism Cooperation

In spite of these developments, terrorist attacks overall were still far below the global high point of 2015 and, in many places, continued to decline as ISIS and others came under sustained pressure from security forces and governments looked for new ways to counter the threat.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings, for example, India increased its CT support for Sri Lanka and furthermore renewed its efforts to strengthen regional CT cooperation using the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).¹⁸ Elsewhere, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines added a new land-based component to the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA), which they had established in 2017 to help curb terrorism and piracy in the Sulu and Celebes Seas.¹⁹ And, in the aftermath of the attacks in New Zealand, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern led a global initiative known as the Christchurch Call to strengthen cooperation between governments, the private sector, and civil society in countering terrorist and violent extremist content online.²⁰ Though largely reactive and not without limitations, these developments each contributed in their own way to strengthening international CT.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism

Perhaps an even greater boost for CT, surprisingly, was the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, it was feared that terrorists would be able to exploit the pandemic to their advantage, that there would be a surge in radicalization driven by popular discontent, and an explosion in the number of attacks as lockdowns were lifted.²¹ The impact of the pandemic on terrorism was in fact far more nuanced and varied depending upon the ideology and operational circumstances of different groups and individuals. Overall, however, the fears were largely overblown, and the forecasted rise in terrorism did not take

place. Instead, lockdowns and restrictions on international travel served the dual purpose of limiting the movements of terrorists, and despite their best efforts, neither ISIS nor al-Qaeda clearly managed to exploit the pandemic in a meaningful way. As the head of CT policing in Malaysia observed in January 2021, the lockdowns had been a “blessing in disguise.”²²

Return of the Taliban: August 2021-October 2023

Although ISK had emerged as one of ISIS’s most important affiliates and briefly held a significant amount of territory in Nangarhar Province to the east of Kabul, adjacent to the border with Pakistan, the Taliban had remained far and away the dominant faction in Afghanistan. The fact that the Taliban might one day return to power following the withdrawal of American troops—scheduled to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks of September 2001—was, therefore, hardly unthought of.²³ Nevertheless, the speed with which the Taliban were able to sweep across the country, crushing what little resistance they met to retake Kabul and establish themselves once again as the de facto government, sent shockwaves through the international community. The last U.S. troops had not even left before the capital fell on August 15, 2021.

Afghanistan as a Breeding Ground for Terrorism

In preceding negotiations with the United States, the Taliban had committed to preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorists who might use it as a launch pad for conducting attacks elsewhere.²⁴ However, they maintained close ties with al-Qaeda and a horde of similar groups, including the TTP, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), JeM, Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT), and others, all of whom maintained a presence in the country.²⁵ According to the United Nations, in mid-2021, there were an estimated 8,000-10,000 FTFs in Afghanistan, most of whom were tolerated, if not protected by the Taliban.²⁶ Al-Qaeda, including al-

Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was thought to have as many as 500 personnel in the country; TIP several hundred; and TTP up to 6,000.

Meanwhile, ISK, which remained bitterly opposed to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, still had around 2,000 fighters dispersed across several provinces and remained an extremely potent threat.²⁷ This was demonstrated all too clearly when, on August 26, 2021, amidst the last chaotic days of the U.S. evacuation, an ISK suicide bomber detonated his explosive vest at Kabul International Airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and an estimated 170 Afghan civilians who were among the crowds of people who had flooded the airport in the hopes of fleeing the country.

Not only were terrorists evidently still thriving in Afghanistan, but without “boots on the ground” and with no bases in neighboring countries, the United States would have to rely on much more limited, “over the horizon” methods of CT, such as signals intelligence and long-range drone strikes. Together, these factors fueled concerns that Afghanistan would once again become a breeding ground for regional and international terrorism.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban’s victory, congratulations from jihadists around the world poured in. Al-Qaeda supporters especially were greatly enthused by the Taliban’s achievement and held it aloft as an example that should be emulated.²⁸ Even some ISIS supporters, most of whom still regarded the Taliban as apostates, begrudgingly celebrated their success.²⁹ Whether driven by a desire to share in the glory or to compete with and outdo a hated rival, it was, therefore, an enormous source of motivation for jihadists of all kinds, at a time when they badly needed it.

The United States has since demonstrated that over-the-horizon CT is possible—as evidenced by the killing of al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri in a drone strike at a Haqqani guesthouse in Kabul in July 2022.³⁰ And yet, this has been the only strike of its

kind in more than two years, leaving terrorists in the region with little to fear from the world's leading superpower. With the United States largely out of the picture and the Taliban firmly in control, the threat has rapidly metastasized and increasingly begun to bleed over Afghanistan's borders.

Expanding Spillover into Pakistan and the Region

This is particularly true in Pakistan, where terrorist attacks spiked by 73% after the Taliban regained control next door.³¹ In particular, TTP, which was already on the rebound under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, was further emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's victory and dramatically increased its attacks beginning in mid-2021.³²

Under pressure in Afghanistan and eager to make its presence felt across the region, ISK also stepped up its attacks in Pakistan.³³ Between them, the two groups have been responsible for hundreds of attacks and thousands of casualties since 2021.³⁴ This poses a threat not only to Pakistan but also to broader regional and international stability. The escalation in violence has strained relations between Islamabad and the Afghan Taliban, which Pakistan holds responsible for failing to rein in the groups operating on its territory. Beyond this, the escalating violence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region may inspire attacks elsewhere and act as a draw for FTFs. Jihadists in other parts of Asia have been paying close attention to events there and have shown a renewed interest in traveling to Afghanistan, among other locations.³⁵ Although this is now more difficult than it once was, it remains a possibility that cannot be ignored.

ISK's Expanding Global Ambitions

Iran, too, has found itself in ISK's crosshairs, experiencing numerous plots and attacks, most notably a double suicide bombing in the southeastern city of Kerman in January 2024, in which 95

people were killed.³⁶ ISK has furthermore demonstrated its regional ambitions with cross-border plots and attacks targeting Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, along with intensified propaganda campaigns designed to appeal to Central Asians, which appear to be having success.³⁷ Though less impactful, ISK evidently maintains tangible connections to supporters in the Maldives, while ISIS-inspired plots are also routinely disrupted in India, which is indicative of the group's continued ability to motivate and sometimes connect with individuals and cells throughout the region using online propaganda and encrypted communication applications.³⁸

Not content with destabilizing South and Central Asia, ISK has dedicated itself to external operations much further afield and is believed to have been behind nearly two dozen thwarted plots targeting Europe, Turkey, and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.³⁹ These efforts eventually succeeded when ISK operatives (all originally hailing from Central Asia) carried out a fatal shooting at a church in Istanbul in January 2024, which was followed by the deadly assault on the Crocus City Hall arena outside Moscow two months later in which more than 130 people were killed. While it is Afghanistan's immediate neighbors that are still most at risk (particularly Pakistan and Iran), the ISK threat undeniably now extends throughout Asia and far beyond, thus confirming some of the international community's worst fears.

The War in Gaza: Catalyst for Renewed Jihadist Activity (October 2023-Present)

Transnational jihadists received yet another shot of inspiration when, on October 7, 2023, a coalition of militant groups led by Hamas launched an audacious and devastating attack against Israel, in which more than a thousand terrorists stormed across the border and went on a rampage, killing an estimated 1,200 people before retreating with more than two hundred hostages.⁴⁰ The subsequent Israeli bombardment and military incursions into Gaza, which

brought widespread humanitarian suffering and killed more than 40,000 Palestinians within the first year of the conflict, has further enflamed tensions and provided fertile ground for extremist narratives.⁴¹ The longer the conflict lasts, and the further it spreads, the more that terrorists will take advantage.

*Radicalization and Propaganda:
Increasing Risk of Transnational Terrorism*

Historically, groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have never managed to insert themselves into the Israeli-Palestinian theater in a meaningful way, and both sides have been critical of Hamas to varying degrees. However, Palestinian suffering has always served as a powerful and enduring source of grievance for violent jihadists and has often been exploited for purposes of propaganda and recruitment,⁴² fueling extremist narratives across the region.

Despite the enduring doctrinal differences between al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hamas, the recent escalation of violence has further amplified these grievances, creating a potent tool for radicalization. As FBI Director Christopher Wray remarked at the outset of the war, “The actions of Hamas and its allies will serve as an inspiration the likes of which we haven’t seen since ISIS launched its so-called caliphate.”⁴³

The leading Palestinian terrorist groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have maintained a primarily nationalist and regional focus. Hamas has encouraged international protests in support of Palestinians after the most recent war began, but it stopped short of calling for attacks.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in December 2023 four suspected members of Hamas were arrested in Germany and the Netherlands on suspicion of planning attacks on Jewish institutions in Europe, suggesting a possible expansion in their operational strategy.⁴⁵

Another group that has the capability to conduct overseas attacks against Jewish targets and which has a truly global reach is

Hezbollah. The Iranian-sponsored group has launched scores of missile and drone attacks against Israel and is currently preoccupied fighting Israeli troops after they launched a ground incursion against their strongholds in southern Lebanon in October 2024. However, the group's motivation for revenge is likely to remain high for years to come, meaning that international attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets are likely to remain a distinct possibility for the foreseeable future.

Indeed, despite the continual decimation of their top leadership, along with thousands of rank-and-file fighters, both Hamas and Hezbollah are likely to retain the ability to conduct regional and transnational attacks long after the current fighting eventually dies down. In the meantime, there is no end in sight to the violence, which has spread to Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon, leaving the Middle East teetering dangerously on the precipice of an all-out regional war.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS add yet another transnational layer to the threat, explicitly calling for bloodshed worldwide. Soon after the attack on Israel, Al-Qaeda's General Command released a statement praising Hamas for what they referred to as a "major shift in the path of global jihad," calling on Muslims everywhere to "wage jihad wherever [you] can" against "everything that is Crusader, Zionist, and Israeli... in every arena, in every sea, and in every sky."⁴⁶ ISIS, on the other hand, has remained deeply critical of Hamas for what it sees as its heretical ways, yet similarly called for Muslims everywhere to support Palestinians and attack Jewish and Crusader targets, including embassies, synagogues, nightclubs, and economic interests all over the world.⁴⁷

*Global Consequences:
Rising Extremist Activity and Attacks*

There are signs that such calls for action are resonating. Just eight days after the war in Gaza began, a Moroccan asylum-seeker living

in the United Kingdom stabbed a 70-year-old man to death on the street because “Israel had killed innocent children.” Since then, there have been several ISIS-inspired attacks in Europe, which appear to have been at least partially triggered by events in the Middle East, including the non-fatal shooting of a police officer with a crossbow outside the Israeli embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, in January 2024, and a deadly stabbing spree in Solingen, Germany in August.⁴⁸ Several individuals inspired by, or connected to ISIS have also been arrested in North America during this timeframe. Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, for instance, was arrested in Canada in September 2024, accused of planning to carry out a mass shooting at a Jewish center in New York City, which he had planned to coincide with the anniversary of the October 7 attacks by Hamas.⁴⁹

Similar plots have also now begun to emerge in parts of Asia. In August 2024, a 17-year-old boy was arrested for planning a stabbing spree in Singapore, having radicalized online after being exposed to the deluge of ISIS propaganda published in response to the war in Gaza.⁵⁰ And in October, three men, one of whom had come from Iraq, were arrested by authorities in Sri Lanka in connection with a planned attack on an Israeli-run Jewish community center in the popular tourist area of Arugam Bay.⁵¹

More broadly, the conflict has fueled an upsurge in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents and hate speech in numerous countries, including Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, China, and elsewhere.⁵² Although the full details are currently lacking, this includes a number of other violent incidents outside Israeli embassies, including a stabbing in Beijing, the discovery of a pipe bomb in Cyprus, a car ramming in Tokyo, and the arrest of an armed suspect in Azerbaijan.⁵³

The war in Gaza has undeniably resulted in widespread grievance and anger, energizing transnational jihadists and providing them with expanded opportunities for radicalization and recruitment. There is now undoubtedly an increased risk of attacks

on Jewish and Western targets in countries where jihadists are present, including both South and Southeast Asia. Moreover, as the conflict zone continues to expand and regional instability spreads, there will be increasing opportunities for jihadist sympathizers to travel to the region. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has thus provided yet another lifeline to jihadist networks, which may yet enable them to recover from their currently weakened state.

Future Outlook for the Indo-Pacific: No Room for Complacency

Overall, there is little question that, with the exception of groups operating in Pakistan, transnational jihadist networks in the Indo-Pacific have been on the decline ever since ISIS lost its caliphate. In 2023, there was a modest increase in attacks in the Philippines, including the bombing of a Catholic Mass at Mindanao State University in Marawi in December by ISIS East Asia (ISEA).⁵⁴ However, it is presently unclear whether this effort will be sustained, and, for the most part, the general downward trend has continued.⁵⁵ This was punctuated quite dramatically in Indonesia in June 2024 when the longest-standing terrorist group in the country, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), announced that it was disbanding.⁵⁶

Global Consequences: Rising Attacks and Extremist Activity

Despite the decline in transnational jihadist networks since ISIS's caliphate fell, these groups and the ideology that drives them have proven to be nothing if not resilient. Recent geopolitical events, including the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan and the outbreak of war in Gaza, have worked in their favor. This comes at a time when many countries across the region are still recovering economically from the pandemic, and the United States is preoccupied with great-power competition with China. What does this suggest for the future of terrorism and CT in the Indo-Pacific?

Predicting the future is fraught with uncertainty, and, as history has shown, all too often, terrorists wield the element of surprise to devastating effect. That said, it is clear that transnational jihadist networks have been reinvigorated by recent geopolitical events. This portends a general, increased risk of violence, as well as the full range of supporting activities, including the production of propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, arms procurement, paramilitary training, international networking, and terrorist travel. Within this context, the emergence of new, influential leaders or ideologues, and sometimes the formation of entirely new or splinter groups (as occurred in Pakistan and Bangladesh in 2023), may also be indicative of a gathering storm. All of these elements must, therefore, be closely monitored for signs of potential resurgence.

The spectrum of potential targets for attack is practically endless and continues to grow. As discussed above, the risk associated with Jewish institutions and symbols of the West has certainly risen in response to the war in Gaza. In recent years, ISK and others (notably the ethno-nationalist Balochistan Liberation Army) have also increasingly begun to target the Chinese in retaliation for their treatment of the Uighurs and their perceived economic exploitation of the region, suggesting an increasing risk to Chinese interests overseas.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the recent success of the Crocus City Hall attack has renewed terrorists' interest in attacking music concerts, given the potential for mass casualties.⁵⁸ However, the majority of recent attacks in South and Southeast Asia have tended to focus on more localized and often opportunistic targets, especially police and security forces. Political rallies, public transportation, religious minorities, energy infrastructure, and educational institutions have also been attacked, posing a significant challenge for CT and underscoring the need for specific and timely intelligence.

*Challenges in Counterterrorism and the
Risk of Over-Reliance on Tactical Operations*

To prevent terrorists from rebounding, it is incumbent upon national authorities to maintain pressure on jihadist networks and to continue building upon the CT successes of the last decade. Sustained, intelligence-led operations by security services will form the backbone of this effort, however, this alone will not be enough. Governments have generally become very successful at arresting terrorists and preventing attacks. However, there is a danger of over-reliance on tactical-operational means of containing the threat, which all too often exacerbates underlying grievances.

Moreover, despite many successful prosecutions, there are widespread challenges with the spread of violent extremism in prisons, as well as the effective risk management of terrorist offenders on release. Given that hundreds of terrorists have been incarcerated over the last decade, and many will soon be released, this is an issue of some concern. Accordingly, it will be necessary to ensure that preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs both inside and outside of prisons are given appropriate funding and resources. Governments cannot do this alone and should, therefore, seek to strengthen cooperation with civil society organizations and others who are involved in this space. This includes social media providers, whose platforms terrorists continue to routinely abuse in spite of ongoing efforts to remove them.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Sustained inter-governmental cooperation will also be critical. This means that states must look for ways to overcome longstanding political rivalries and further strengthen cooperative efforts using multilateral institutions and agreements such as ASEAN Our Eyes, the TCA, BIMSTEC, and perhaps even the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which appears to have largely been written off as a lost cause. Equally, there must be an ongoing

commitment to sharing information, including proactively contributing to Interpol's FTF database while working to ensure that all relevant agencies have ready access to the information they need.

A related, unresolved issue that must be addressed is the hundreds of FTFs and their family members from the region still languishing in detention centers in northeast Syria. Countries of South and Southeast Asia have been hesitant to bring their citizens back. Yet, given the deplorable conditions and ubiquitous specter of ISIS within these camps, the longer this situation is allowed to drag on, the higher the associated risk is likely to be. It is, therefore imperative that countries find a way to bring their citizens back as swiftly as possible, especially the children, who are likely to be in desperate need of counseling and other forms of support. Failure to do so only increases the risk they will eventually form the next generation of terrorists.

Conclusion

While it is certainly possible to degrade and sometimes even destroy certain groups that resort to violence in pursuit of their political objectives, it is impossible to eliminate terrorism as a tactic or to eradicate the underlying ideology. Thus, while there are certainly grounds for optimism, given the general trajectory of the threat in recent years, there is no room for complacency. Terrorism is an enduring reality that is unfortunately here to stay, and as the October 2023 attack by Hamas—a group that was thought to have been contained⁵⁹—has reminded us once again, terrorists are capable of remarkable patience and repeated strategic surprise.

Besides ensuring that CT agencies are appropriately resourced and continually making efforts to further refine these capabilities as part of a comprehensive approach while simultaneously enhancing international cooperation, countries of the Indo-Pacific must also look within. Internal political instability, interagency rivalries, corruption, social, political, and economic marginalization of

minorities, and human rights violations remain significant problems in many countries, creating ideal conditions in which terrorists and violent extremists are able to thrive. Although terrorism will never disappear entirely, sustained efforts to address the underlying predisposing risk factors and grievances that terrorists exploit will help to diminish the appeal of extremist narratives over time. While terrorists across much of the region are still reeling from successful efforts to dismantle their networks, now is the time to act. Doing so will limit terrorists' ability to rebound while proactively working toward a more stable and resilient region.

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PART TWO

NAVIGATING GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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CHAPTER EIGHT

RESPONDING TO CHINESE EXPANSIONISM IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Denny Roy

The great fish eat the small.

— Ancient Chinese proverb

Abstract

China's pursuit of dominance in the South China Sea has sent ripples of concern across the region, sparking fears of escalating tensions and potential conflict. This chapter examines the complexities of China's expansionist ambitions in this vital region, analyzing its strategic objectives, tactics, and the far-reaching implications of potential Chinese dominance for the United States and its allies. By assessing the effectiveness of current U.S.-led strategies, the chapter proposes a multifaceted approach to deter Chinese aggression, including diplomatic pressure, economic measures, enhanced military presence, and capacity-building for regional partners. With a keen eye on the uncertainties that cloud the region's future, the chapter underscores the importance of continued vigilance and a coordinated response to safeguard a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific, Xi Jinping's People's Republic of China (PRC or China) is aggressively pursuing territorial ambition, often veiled as irredentism, presenting significant challenges to the United States and its partners. This chapter focuses on the South China Sea, a critical region where China's expansive claims, though legally

dubious, are reinforced by military, economic, and diplomatic power.

Employing a realist perspective, this analysis dissects China's strategic motives, tactics, and evolving power dynamics in the region. It examines how ambitions for territorial control, regional dominance, and power projection drive China's actions, including the contentious "nine-dash line" and its disregard for international law.

Beijing's assertiveness is not limited to the South China Sea. In the East China Sea, China's stance on maritime boundaries, especially in zones overlapping with Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), is notably aggressive. Furthermore, China's claim over Taiwan and its expansive territorial demands in the South China Sea epitomize a pattern of expansionism that escalates risks, including the potential for military conflict.

This analysis adopts a comparative historical methodology to scrutinize China's tactics and policies in these contested maritime regions, providing a detailed understanding of Beijing's strategies across different scenarios and historical moments. The focus is mainly on the South China Sea, where China's extensive territorial claims have weak legal justification. A geopolitical analysis will probe how ambitions for territorial control, regional dominance, and power projection drive China's actions.

Additionally, this framework will examine how Washington and its allies respond, evaluating the efficacy of their current strategies and exploring potential approaches to counteract China's expansionist agenda. While U.S.-led efforts have so far thwarted China's ambitions for an easy victory, they have not deterred China's incremental advances. As China strengthens its position, the risk of regional states acquiescing to its pressure grows, threatening to diminish the global commons. Countering China's expansionism may require bolder measures, entailing higher costs and risks for the United States and its partners.

Strategizing Sovereignty: Unpacking China's Ambitions and Methods in the South China Sea

While Beijing has not explicitly articulated its policy in these terms, the primary objective seems to be establishing a Chinese sphere of influence over the South China Sea. Beijing's actual stated claim underscores this ambition in the vague, simple statement, "China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and their adjacent waters,"¹ as demarcated by the nine-dash line on Chinese maps. This broad claim essentially declares sovereignty over nearly the entire South China Sea, including areas recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS or Law of the Sea) as other countries' EEZs. Despite being one of 170 parties to ratify UNCLOS,² Beijing paradoxically rejects the treaty's framework when advancing its South China Sea claims. Instead, it cites historical usage as the basis for its claim, a stance starkly contrasting with UNCLOS principles, prioritizing recent, legally defined maritime boundaries over historical narratives.

In practice, China does not interfere with the passage of civilian cargo ships and tankers through the South China Sea but frequently objects to the presence of foreign military units and the taking of resources by foreigners without Beijing's approval. This accords with the typical understanding of a sphere of influence in international politics.³

Historically, Beijing has used military force to assert its claims in the South China Sea. Notably, in 1974, Chinese sailors and soldiers skirmished with Vietnamese forces for control of the Paracel Islands. Again, in 1988, China used military force to seize Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Group from Vietnam. The fact that Vietnam was not a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) during these confrontations likely influenced the regional dynamics.

Subsequently, Beijing has adopted more subtle strategies in the South China Sea, characterized by "creeping expansionism,"⁴

“lawfare,”⁵ and gray zone tactics. A primary example was the 2012 Scarborough (Masinloc) Shoal incident, where China barred Filipino fishermen from the shoal within the Philippines’ EEZ, renegeing on a withdrawal agreement.

As part of its lawfare strategy, China uses legal rhetoric and domestic legislation to bolster its claims, framing the sovereignty issue in the context of ancient maritime history.⁶ Laws enacted in 1992 and 1998 not only unilaterally affirm China’s claims but also declare them legally binding on foreign governments.

Beijing also suggests administrative control over the South China Sea, as exemplified by the 2012 designation of Sansha City in the PRC-occupied Paracel Islands as the administrative center for the Paracels, Spratly Group, and Macclesfield Bank. Furthermore, during military exercises, the Chinese government occasionally restricts foreign ships and aircraft from certain areas of the South China Sea.

Beijing’s strategy in the South China Sea hinges on non-kinetic but coercive “gray zone” tactics, including dangerous close-quarters maneuvers by military and paramilitary vessels, laser attacks, and high-pressure water cannons aimed at disrupting resource exploration and freedom of navigation patrols.⁷ These tactics create a security dilemma for neighboring countries, blurring the lines between peace and conflict and challenging regional stability. As reports by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative highlight,⁸ this incremental assertion of presence and claims alters the status quo in China’s favor while potentially sparking unintended escalation due to the ambiguity of these actions.

The Chinese government has also been stalling multinational negotiations to establish a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. Beijing’s insistence on provisions that would lock in its dominant position indicates its strategic objectives. These objectives include barring other claimant states from collaborating with non-regional

corporations for resource extraction, prohibiting joint military exercises in the South China Sea with non-Southeast Asian states, and excluding outside organizations from dispute resolution.⁹

From Beijing's standpoint, victory in the South China Sea would mean gaining international acquiescence to China owning all of its features (islands, reefs, rocks, and sandbars) and holding veto power over foreign activities within the nine-dash line—in particular, no exploitation of ocean or seabed resources by foreigners and no foreign military patrols or exercises without the PRC government's permission.

Implications of Chinese Dominance: Assessing the Strategic Shifts in the South China Sea

If Beijing were to realize its goal of controlling the South China Sea, the consequences for the United States and its partners would be significant. First, coastal states other than China would lose their rights to the South China Sea's resources, which are otherwise guaranteed by the Law of the Sea. This region is rich in hydrocarbons, with the U.S. government estimating reserves of 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.¹⁰ Furthermore, the South China Sea is a crucial fishing ground, providing an essential source of protein for coastal Southeast Asian states. China's unilateral fishing bans already impact regional fisheries, with over 600,000 Filipino fishermen losing their livelihoods in the last decade due to Chinese interference.¹¹ Acquiescence to Chinese control would likely exacerbate this situation, favoring Chinese fishing fleets and further disadvantaging others, including those of the Philippines, a key U.S. ally.

Second, the United States and its friends would cede important strategic advantages to China. The South China Sea is a vital international maritime route, with about one-third of the world's sea-borne trade passing through it, including 80 percent of the oil imported by Japan, another formal U.S. ally. While Beijing does not

currently impede commercial shipping, its complete control of the area could change this dynamic. China could restrict the use of the waterway by countries that have political disagreements with Beijing. Forcing ships to divert to slower and more expensive routes could cause substantial economic impacts. If Beijing could exclude foreign military presence from the South China Sea, U.S. fulfillment of its Asia-Pacific security commitments would be jeopardized. Constraining the U.S. Navy's expeditious movements within and through the South China Sea would jeopardize security cooperation with regional partners such as the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. U.S. surveillance capabilities near China's territorial waters would be diminished, allowing China to use the region as a secure operational space for its nuclear missile submarines.¹²

Finally, China's successful assertion of control through unlawful claims and low-level aggression would be a severe blow to the liberal international order championed by Washington and its partners. One of this order's fundamental principles is resolving state disputes through peaceful negotiation and adherence to international law. Beijing's success in the South China Sea could embolden other aggressive actors and erode the confidence of regional states in U.S. commitment and ability to support them, potentially destabilizing the regional order.

Fortifying Resistance: Multilateral Strategies Against China's Maritime Assertiveness

Washington and its security partners have implemented various strategies to counter China's actions in the South China Sea. First, "freedom of navigation operations" (FONOP) conducted by naval ships and overflights by aircraft challenge China's claims to parts of the South China Sea. These operations, which assert that these waters are not Chinese territorial waters per the Law of the Sea, involve U.S. allies such as Britain, Japan, Australia, and Canada. This multinational participation adds diplomatic pressure on China,

undermining Beijing's narrative that the disputes are solely a concern for the United States and rival claimants.

Second, the United States and other nations publicly condemn unprofessional behavior by China, highlighting instances such as Chinese sailors using lasers and water cannons against Philippine vessels in their own EEZ.¹³ In October 2023, the U.S. Department of Defense publicized evidence of over 300 instances of “coercive and risky operational behavior” by Chinese aircraft against U.S. and partner aircraft over two years, exposing PRC aggressiveness.¹⁴

Third, there is an increased focus on building security capacity in Southeast Asia, driven by China's expansionist behavior. This includes a rise in multinational patrols and military exercises, with participation from various nations signaling a unified stance against China's actions. Notably, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness aims to enhance the maritime surveillance capabilities of less wealthy countries with significant EEZs in Southeast Asia.¹⁵ The United States also assists in training the coast guards of Southeast Asian nations. In February 2023, the Philippines expanded U.S. military access to four additional bases.¹⁶ Japan has notably supported the Philippines with 12 Coast Guard patrol vessels, the largest 97 meters in length, and funding to build five additional ships, showcasing regional collaboration.¹⁷

Fourth, China's adversaries are carrying out their own forms of lawfare. A significant example is the Philippines' lawsuit against China in the UN's Permanent Court of Arbitration, which resulted in a 2016 ruling invalidating China's nine-dash line claims.¹⁸ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 2022 statement reinforced this ruling, urging China to “abide by its obligations under international law and cease its provocative behavior.”¹⁹ Additionally, Washington has reaffirmed its commitment to the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty, indicating that an attack on Philippine government assets or personnel would prompt a collective response.

Finally, Washington has imposed targeted economic sanctions on specific Chinese individuals and companies linked to unlawful activities in the South China Sea.²⁰ One notable instance was China's exclusion from the 2018 Rim of the Pacific multinational naval exercise in Hawaii.

Evaluating the Impact:

The Challenges of Counteracting Chinese Maritime Strategy

The effectiveness of U.S. and partner efforts to counter China's expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea has been limited, resulting in a stalemate that seems to be gradually worsening from the U.S. perspective. These strategies have not compelled China to retract its contentious South China Sea policies. U.S. and partner policies did not dissuade Xi from taking the decision to build artificial sandbars on Mischief, Subi, and Fiery Cross Reefs in the Spratly Group and pack them with military infrastructure and weapons.

Incidents such as the 2001 aerial collision near Hainan Island and recent aggressive Chinese encounters with foreign aircraft highlight China's attempts to assert control over international airspace, effectively expanding its territorial claims. Recent events indicate a resurgence in confrontational Chinese tactics despite initial diplomatic efforts to mitigate such behavior. The Philippine Navy ship *Sierra Madre*, grounded on the Second Thomas (Ayungin) Shoal, has seen increased harassment from the Chinese Coast Guard,²¹ indicating a strategic move by China to change the status quo in its favor by targeting the viability of the outpost.

A significant concern is the imbalance in maritime capabilities. China's naval and coast guard fleets are the largest in the world and are expected to grow, outpacing the United States and Southeast Asian nations. China's use of large coast guard vessels and deputized fishing boats in confrontational and territorial claims further augments its advantage in the number of platforms.²²

China enjoys the advantage of geography, as the areas of contention are on its periphery while most U.S. and many allied assets are thousands of miles away. China also has the luxury of focusing on regional contingencies, while the United States must address global demands. This was particularly evident in 2023 and 2024, as Washington was preoccupied with conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, raising concerns about its capacity to effectively counter a potential conflict with China.²³

Furthermore, the artificial islands constructed by China in the South China Sea and the access to the Ream naval base in Cambodia significantly enhance China's military advantage in the region.²⁴ A critical issue is whether U.S. and partner efforts are adequate to encourage Southeast Asian nations to resist Chinese dominance and align with U.S. leadership, given the uncertainty of external support in a regional conflict.

The Philippines is the most willing partner in Southeast Asia to confront China's territorial claims, yet its long-term commitment is uncertain. Vietnam often challenges China's territorial claims and accepts modest strategic cooperation with Washington, but for historical and geographic reasons, Hanoi prioritizes constructive relations with China over partnering with Washington to oppose a Chinese regional hegemony.²⁵

Thailand's interest in opposing China's actions is minimal, as it leans toward a closer security relationship with Beijing.²⁶ Malaysia and Indonesia exhibit concerns over China's actions in their EEZs but generally avoid taking sides in the U.S.-China rivalry. This complex geopolitical landscape raises questions about the effectiveness and future direction of U.S.-led strategies in countering Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea.

Strategic Shifts: Enhancing Deterrence in the South China Sea

During his Senate confirmation hearing, then-Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson vowed to “shut down” China’s militarization of artificial islands, which seemed to signal the United States was prepared to go to war to halt Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea.²⁷ That proved a false alarm but reflected frustration over the United States’ inability to block China from making significant unilateral gains. If Chinese dominance in this critical maritime domain is unacceptable to Washington and its partners, they need more effective methods of deterring Beijing’s “creeping expansionism.”

While it will necessitate greater risks and resource expenditures, a strategic recalibration is necessary to address the challenges posed by China’s maritime assertiveness. It reflects a comprehensive approach that would combine military readiness, diplomatic efforts, and economic measures to safeguard regional stability and uphold the principles of international law. There are two general lines of effort within which the United States and its allies can more effectively counter PRC activities. The first is diplomatic.

Leveraging its global influence, the United States possesses a broad spectrum of diplomatic and economic tools to address behavior that contravenes the rules-based order. Measures such as opposing Chinese participation in specific international fora and imposing financial sanctions would demonstrate the consequences of undermining maritime legal norms and emphasize the collective resolve to protect international standards of conduct.

U.S. and allied strategic communication could be better. Beijing’s official narrative is that PRC policy is justifiable and restrained and that relations between China and the other Southeast Asian nations would be peaceful if Washington were not promoting discord. The United States and its allies should unitedly explain to the international community that (1) while the countries outside the

South China Sea basin take a neutral stance on the sovereignty disputes, China's actions are more aggressive and more threatening to the liberal rules-based order than the actions of the other claimants, and (2) Washington and its partners support the peaceful resolution of the territorial disputes through negotiation and oppose unilateral action that egregiously violates that principle. The United States and like-minded governments should heavily publicize and strongly protest instances of aggressive and unlawful PRC behavior in the South China Sea.

The second line of effort is operational. A more consistent and visible U.S. naval presence in the region would symbolize a strategic pivot from episodic power projection to a sustained commitment to peace and security. Achieving this goal would entail more frequent deployments of both U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard assets to the region. This “beat cop” approach, complemented by logistical and operational support to regional navies and coast guards, signifies a comprehensive engagement strategy to foster a collaborative security environment and deter potential aggressors.²⁸

Joint military exercises in the South China Sea involving a coalition of the United States, its non-regional allies, and Southeast Asian states carry significant political weight. They directly challenge Beijing's narrative that portrays Washington as the sole instigator of regional tensions, showcasing a unified front against China's unilateral actions.

The United States and its larger allies should continue to help the frontline states build capacity to resist Chinese encroachment. The Quad's 2022 Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative was a positive example. Washington should also fully support partner governments like Japan in their efforts to supply maritime security equipment, such as patrol boats and radar systems, to frontline states. More direct U.S. Navy and allied support for Philippine logistical missions to the *Sierra Madre* would underscore a tangible U.S. commitment to ally sovereignty and preserving the status quo

against unilateral aggression. While not immediately diminishing China's strategic presence, such actions would significantly affirm the resolve of the U.S. bloc, sending a clear message of solidarity with Southeast Asian states that fear Chinese domination.

In addition to escorting Philippine military activities, ensuring access for Filipino fishermen to traditional fishing grounds such as Scarborough Shoal would directly confront China's unilateral efforts to restrict maritime freedoms. This initiative would reinforce the U.S. commitment to uphold navigational rights and freedoms for all nations, as enshrined in international maritime law, particularly the Law of the Sea.

The United States must revitalize its defense industrial base to enhance deterrence capability in the South China Sea and, by extension, in the wider Asia-Pacific region.²⁹ The credible ability to project military superiority is essential for deterring aggression and ensuring a balance of power that supports a free, open, and inclusive regional order.

An important question is whether such enhanced efforts by the United States and its allies would deter China from continuing its current interests, which are often framed in nationalistic terms, invoking pledges of territorial integrity.³⁰

China's foreign policy is generally risk-averse when faced with the likelihood of substantial retaliation. This suggests that a determined response could alter Beijing's calculations. The Chinese government is not necessarily doomed to indulge in nationalistic public opinion. Chinese leaders have considerable ability to manage and redirect public opinion.³¹

For example, Chinese sentiment toward the United States abruptly and dramatically improved in late 2023 as China spoke more favorably about the bilateral relationship before the Xi-Biden summit in November.³² In another example, in the 19th century, China ceded 600,000 square kilometers of Manchuria to Russia

under what the Chinese considered an unequal treaty. Nevertheless, public opinion has not pressured the Chinese government to demand the Russian return of that territory because the Chinese government has yet to direct PRC media or schools to mobilize the public to do so.

The PRC government routinely characterizes its claims to sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as Chinese “core interests.” There is some evidence the Chinese government briefly floated the idea of characterizing the South China Sea as a “core interest,”³³ but the idea never took hold in official policy statements.³⁴ This suggests Beijing has decided the imperative of going to war in the defense of “Chinese” territory is lower for the South China Sea than for Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

Shifting Horizons:

Navigating Uncertainties in the South China Sea’s Future

The future of the South China Sea is fraught with variables that could shift the strategic balance. The risk of accidental conflict remains a constant concern, with potential incidents in these contested waters posing a threat of rapid escalation. This unpredictability underscores the need for vigilant, continuous engagement and establishment of crisis management mechanisms among all involved parties. The trajectory of U.S.-China relations, particularly regarding Taiwan, is another significant factor that could influence the dynamics in the South China Sea. A decrease in tensions over Taiwan, through political shifts or strategic reassurances, could contribute to a broader détente, potentially easing the standoff in maritime disputes.

China’s economic development trajectory also looms large over its regional ambitions. Should economic challenges persist, leading to a recalibration of China’s external policies, new opportunities for negotiations and compromise in the South China Sea may emerge. Conversely, a resilient U.S. commitment to the region, bolstered by

strategic clarity and military readiness, is essential for maintaining balance and deterring unilateral actions that threaten regional stability.

Finally, the evolving U.S. posture toward the Indo-Pacific, influenced by internal political dynamics and strategic priorities, will play a crucial role in shaping the future security architecture of the South China Sea. The commitment of the United States and its partners to uphold international norms and support regional allies will be pivotal in navigating the uncertainties and safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders in this vital maritime domain.

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CHAPTER NINE

MYANMAR: THE STRATEGIC BLIND SPOT

UNDERMINING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Miemie Winn Byrd

There are none so blind as those who will not see.

— John Heywood, 1546

Abstract

Overlooked by the international community, the crisis in Myanmar, sparked by the 2021 military coup, has significant regional and global consequences. This chapter examines Myanmar's critical role in the Indo-Pacific and the broader geopolitical impact of the coup. It explores the devastating effects on Myanmar's population, including the rise of organized crime, human trafficking, and widespread displacement, while also highlighting the emergence of a resilient pro-democracy resistance. The chapter analyzes China's opportunistic actions in the conflict and provides policy recommendations for the United States and its partners to address this strategic blind spot, counter authoritarianism, and support the restoration of democracy and stability in Myanmar.

Introduction

In the heart of the Indo-Pacific, the escalating crisis in Myanmar, overshadowed by conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, poses a grave threat to regional stability and democratic values. The 2021 military coup shattered the nation's nascent democracy, plunging it into violence and chaos. This turmoil has become a strategic blind spot for the international community, especially the United States. The lack of decisive action has emboldened the military junta and allowed China to consolidate its influence, further destabilizing the region.

This chapter argues that the crisis in Myanmar is a regional and global emergency with far-reaching consequences. Analyzing the interplay of power politics, strategic interests, norms, and international pressure through a realist and constructivist lens offers a framework for understanding the crisis's complexities and implications for the region and the world. The escalating violence, displacement of nearly 4 million people both internally and across borders,¹ and the spread of organized crime not only threaten the stability of neighboring countries but also weaken democratic values in the Indo-Pacific.

The United States and its partners must recognize the urgency of this situation and act decisively to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, leveraging the Burma Act of 2023 and providing meaningful assistance to restore stability and democratic governance. This is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity to counter authoritarianism, protect human rights, and maintain geopolitical balance in the region.

China's Strategic Imperative: Myanmar as a Linchpin in the Indo-Pacific

China's unwavering interest in Myanmar stems from its pivotal geographic location, direct access to the Indian Ocean, and abundance of natural resources. These three pillars bolster China's economic and military aspirations and serve as crucial leverage in its geopolitical maneuvering, particularly vis-à-vis the United States.

Myanmar:

A Geostrategic Alternative and Gateway to the Indian Ocean

Myanmar's extensive coastline along the Indian Ocean and proximity to the Malacca Strait make it a linchpin in China's strategic calculus. This unique geography provides China a vital alternative route to bypass the Malacca Strait, a chokepoint for its

energy and trade lifelines. By investing heavily in infrastructure projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which includes the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone and oil/gas pipelines, China aims to secure a more direct and reliable passage for its resources, mitigating its vulnerability and expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean region. This strategic maneuvering aligns with the principles of Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese strategist who emphasized the importance of strategic positioning and understanding the terrain to gain an advantage.

Furthermore, Myanmar offers China a backdoor to the Indian Ocean, granting landlocked provinces like Yunnan direct maritime access. This enhances China's trade capabilities and allows for quicker deployment of naval assets, strengthening its geopolitical influence in the region.

Myanmar's growing geostrategic importance has intensified amid escalating strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific. China's deepening influence in Myanmar, especially following the 2021 military coup, has alarmed regional powers like India, which are closely monitoring developments such as China's reported infrastructure expansion on Myanmar's Great Coco Islands. These islands, strategically located near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, have raised concerns over potential Chinese military activity, including constructing airstrips and surveillance posts. While concrete evidence of such activities remains elusive, Myanmar's alignment with Beijing, particularly on the Taiwan issue, has heightened regional anxieties. It is plausible that China's strategic calculations regarding Taiwan may be influenced by its ability to secure alternative routes through Myanmar, further underscoring the critical role this nation plays in the broader geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Myanmar:

A Strategic Maritime Fulcrum for China's Naval Ambitions

From a military perspective, Myanmar's access to the Indian Ocean presents a significant strategic advantage for China. It enables the swift and effective deployment of naval assets, bolstering China's maritime presence and power projection capabilities. This enhanced access allows the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to operate more flexibly, responding promptly to regional contingencies, whether protecting trade routes, conducting anti-piracy operations, or asserting influence in territorial disputes. The potential establishment of naval bases or logistical support facilities in Myanmar would further amplify China's naval operations, providing crucial support for sustained maritime activities far from its mainland.

China's recognition of Myanmar as a crucial gateway to the Indian Ocean is deeply rooted in history. For centuries, landlocked Chinese provinces sought sea access through overland routes via Myanmar, fostering trade, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges. In modern geopolitics, this historical connection has evolved into a strategic imperative, amplified by China's economic growth and global ambitions.

China's active diplomatic engagement and investment in Myanmar, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscores its commitment to safeguarding the Myanmar corridor. By controlling this vital passage, China aims to enhance its economic resilience, expand its naval power projection capabilities, and bolster its regional geopolitical influence.

Myanmar's Abundant Resources:

Fueling China's Ambition

Myanmar's vast reserves of natural resources, including rare earth minerals, oil, natural gas, and timber, are a critical asset for China. These resources are essential for driving China's economic growth,

fueling its technological advancement, and supporting its military modernization efforts.

Rare earth minerals, vital components in high-tech electronics, green technologies, and military applications, are particularly abundant in Myanmar. Between May 2017 and October 2021, Myanmar exported over 140,000 tons of rare earth deposits to China, worth over \$1 billion, according to an official statement from Beijing.² This significant volume solidifies Myanmar's position as China's largest supplier of these essential minerals.

As China continues to pursue its ambitious goals of technological innovation, green energy transition, and military expansion, securing a reliable supply of rare earth minerals from Myanmar becomes increasingly crucial. Myanmar's natural wealth, therefore, not only provides economic benefits to China but also serves as a strategic resource that strengthens its position in the global arena.

*China's Strategic Playbook:
Sun Tzu in Myanmar*

China's approach to Myanmar, while seemingly opportunistic, aligns closely with the principles of Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist. Sun Tzu's timeless wisdom, as outlined in "*The Art of War*,"³ offers valuable insights into China's strategic maneuvering in the region.

First, Sun Tzu emphasized the importance of knowing oneself and the enemy. China's deep understanding of Myanmar's strategic importance and its assessment of the United States and its partners' preoccupation with other global conflicts has allowed it to exploit and outmaneuver other powers.

Second, Sun Tzu advocated for "winning without fighting." China has skillfully applied this principle by investing heavily in Myanmar's infrastructure and deepening economic ties, solidifying

its influence without confrontation. This strategy has effectively drawn Myanmar into China's sphere of influence, securing its regional strategic interests.

Third, Sun Tzu stressed the importance of deception and diversionary tactics. China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea can be interpreted as a strategic maneuver to divert international attention away from its quiet but systematic consolidation of power in Myanmar. While the world focuses on the South China Sea disputes, China steadily advances its infrastructure projects, such as CMEC and oil/gas pipelines, with minimal international scrutiny.

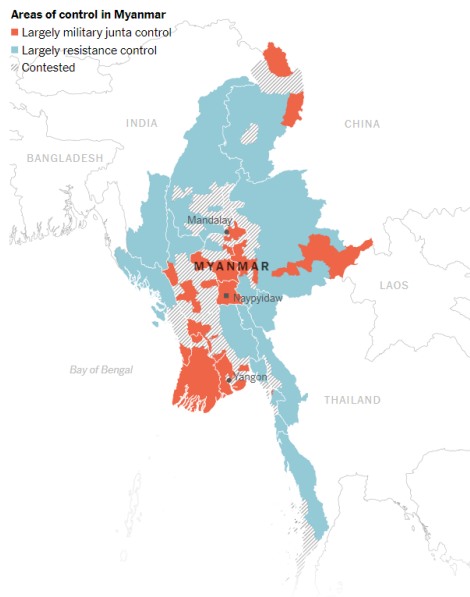
In essence, China is playing a long game in Myanmar that leverages its economic and military might while employing subtle strategies to outmaneuver rivals. The United States and its partners must recognize the sophistication of China's approach and adopt a more proactive strategy to counter its growing influence in Myanmar. This requires addressing the strategic blind spot that has allowed China to solidify its dominance and take decisive action to support the pro-democracy movement and restore stability in the region. The stakes are high, as the future of Myanmar and potentially the entire Indo-Pacific hangs in the balance.

2021 Military Coup:

Descent into Chaos and the Rise of Armed Resistance

The military coup of February 2021 shattered Myanmar's nascent democracy, plunging the nation into a state of widespread chaos and violence. The junta's blatant disregard for the overwhelming electoral victory of the civilian-led National League for Democracy (NLD) and its subsequent brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters triggered a deepening humanitarian crisis. The junta's oppressive response fueled widespread dissent and, ironically, weakened its own governance, as a mass strike of civil servants involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) severely disrupted its administrative operations.

In response to the escalating violence and the junta's illegitimacy, members of the ousted parliament and representatives from various ethnic minority groups formed the National Unity Government (NUG) just two months after the coup. Initially aiming to restore democracy through peaceful means, the NUG's goals shifted toward armed resistance as military and police forces intensified their brutality, burning villages, conducting airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, and forcing thousands of security personnel to defect.



Source: The map is a simplified adaptation based on an effective control map produced by the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M). The original map provides more granular details of the situation of control. - By Wotyi Cai

FIGURE 9.1: MAP SHOWING AREAS OF CONTROL IN MYANMAR, WITH THE JUNTA CONTROLLING ONLY 30% OF THE COUNTRY

Source: Hannah Beech, “An Overlooked War,”
The New York Times, May 8, 2024

Six months into the crisis, the NUG established the People's Defense Force (PDF) under its Ministry of Defense. This marked a turning point in the conflict, transitioning from peaceful protests to

armed resistance with the ultimate goal of removing the military junta and establishing a federal democratic system. The PDF, mentored by military defectors and trained and equipped by seasoned Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO),⁴ quickly became a formidable force against the junta troops.

Despite the military's superior firepower, after three years of intense conflict, the junta has lost control of vast swaths of the country, its authority eroding in the heartland, particularly in the Sagaing and Magway regions, where the PDF have expelled most of the junta's administrators. The junta has also lost significant ground in the border areas to the EAOs. As illustrated in Figure 9.1, the military currently controls a mere 30% of Myanmar, a stark testament to the resilience and determination of the resistance forces and the widespread rejection of military rule by the populace.

Spillover Effects:

The Destabilization of Myanmar and the Region

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar, while largely overlooked by the West, has unleashed a wave of transnational security threats that destabilize the entire region. The collapse of governance and law enforcement under the military junta has transformed Myanmar into a fertile ground for organized criminal organizations, fueling a surge in human trafficking, cybercrime, and drug production. The junta's relentless airstrikes on civilian populations have displaced over 2.6 million people,⁵ exacerbating these criminal activities and straining the resources of neighboring countries like Thailand and India, which are grappling with an influx of refugees and the spillover of illicit activities.

Human Trafficking: Prey on the Displaced

The most tragic consequence of this crisis has been the explosion of human trafficking. Myanmar now holds the grim distinction of

being the world's leading country for human trafficking, as documented in the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index.⁶ Criminal networks, encouraged by the lack of law enforcement, prey upon vulnerable refugees, particularly women and children, luring them with false promises of employment and safety. These victims often end up trapped in forced labor, sexual exploitation, or servitude, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and creating a cycle of trauma and abuse.

This pervasive exploitation of displaced populations has not only worsened the human rights situation in Myanmar but has also created significant security challenges for neighboring countries. As trafficking networks expand across borders, facilitated by corrupt officials, countries like Thailand and India are grappling with the influx of trafficked individuals and the associated social and economic problems. This highlights the urgent need for coordinated regional and international efforts to dismantle these criminal networks, protect vulnerable populations, and address the root causes of this crisis.

*Cyber Scam Epicenters:
A Lucrative Criminal Enterprise*

Over the past decade, the Myanmar military has actively fostered the development of sprawling criminal zones along its borders with China and Thailand. These zones have become hotbeds of illicit activity, with cyber scam operations emerging as a lucrative enterprise. Since the 2021 coup, these criminal enterprises have operated with virtual impunity, expanding their reach across Southeast Asia and beyond.⁷

One particularly insidious scheme, known as “pig-butchering,” involves luring victims with promises of lucrative tech jobs, only to entrap them in forced labor within these scam hubs. It is estimated that between 100,000 to 300,000 individuals have been trafficked

into these operations, generating a staggering \$15.3 billion in illicit revenue in 2023 alone.⁸

By mid-2023, the scale of these operations had reached alarming proportions, with over 30 scam enclaves identified along the Thai border and nearly 100 along the Chinese border.⁹ These enclaves, often protected by the military junta's security forces, have become entrenched centers of cybercrime and human trafficking.

Chinese authorities, alarmed by the targeting of their citizens in these scams, pressured the Myanmar junta to intervene. However, the junta's inaction led China to recalibrate its approach, easing pressure on northern armed resistance groups and tacitly allowing them to challenge the junta's authority. This shift in policy culminated in Operation 1027, a significant offensive led by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) that successfully dismantled a major scam compound in Kokang, a region near the Myanmar-China border. This operation resulted in the surrender of thousands of suspects to Chinese authorities,¹⁰ highlighting the complex interplay of geopolitical interests and the fight against transnational crime in the region.

However, this temporary disruption merely caused the scam operations to relocate, primarily to the eastern Myanmar-Thai border,¹¹ with the assistance of the junta. Shwe Kokko, a part of China's BRI development complex, has now emerged as the largest hub for these sophisticated online scams, employing thousands of forced skilled laborers under the protection of the junta-linked Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), which recently renamed itself the Karen National Army (KNA).¹²

The junta's continued protection of these operations underscores the symbiotic relationship between the military and organized crime. The illicit revenue generated by these scam hubs plays a critical role in sustaining the military regime, highlighting the complex nexus between conflict, crime, and corruption in Myanmar.¹³

*Drug Trafficking:
Fueling Conflict and Instability*

The conflict in Myanmar has also led to a dramatic surge in drug production and trafficking. The country has overtaken Afghanistan as the world's leading opium producer, with the opiate economy estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually.¹⁴ This illicit trade not only enriches drug lords and funds armed groups but also exacerbates regional instability as neighboring countries struggle with the influx of narcotics and associated social problems.

The transnational security implications of the crisis in Myanmar demand urgent attention and concerted action from the international community. The combination of flourishing organized crime, mass displacement, cross-border trafficking, and regional instability poses a grave threat to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. The United States and its partners must recognize the urgency of this situation and work collaboratively to address these challenges, stem the tide of illicit activities, and support the people of Myanmar in their quest for a stable and democratic future.

**Myanmar Military:
A Regime on the Brink**

Despite financial support from illicit activities and military aid from China and Russia, the Myanmar junta is steadily losing ground to the pro-democracy resistance coalition. The military has suffered significant losses on multiple fronts, plagued by recruitment challenges, inadequate training, and plummeting morale. Desperate measures, like deploying police to the frontlines, enacting conscription policies,¹⁵ and restricting overseas travel, underscore the junta's weakening grip on power.¹⁶

The junta's reliance on air power, a consequence of consistent ground setbacks, has further alienated the populace. While intended to instill fear and suppress dissent, the indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian targets have only fueled resistance and solidified the people's resolve to overthrow military rule. Conflict data consistently reveals widespread clashes between the junta and resistance forces, with nearly 90% of the country's townships affected by the ongoing conflict in 2024 alone, as shown in Figure 9.2. This represents a continuation of the widespread conflict that engulfed 94% of townships in 2023, highlighting the persistent and pervasive nature of the resistance.

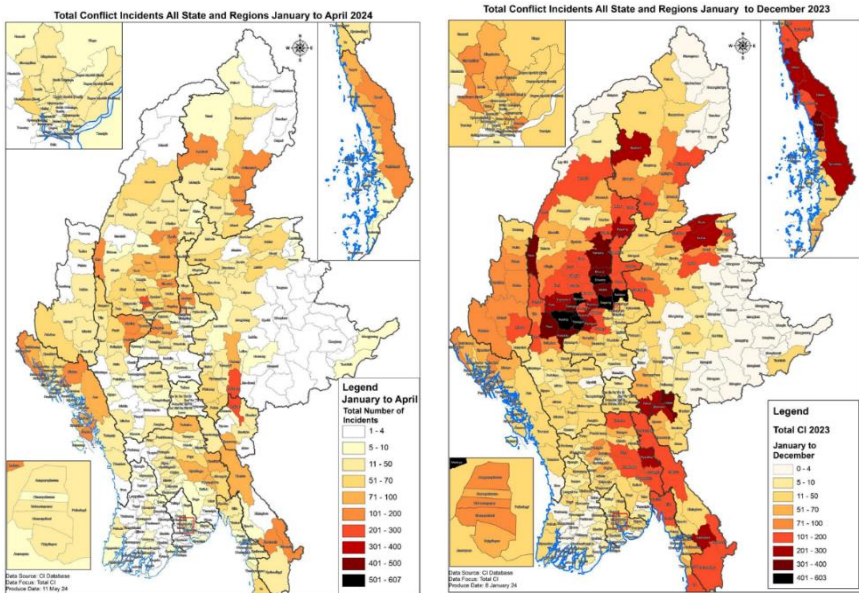


FIGURE 9.2: CONFLICT DATA FOR MYANMAR SHOWS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF CONFLICT INCIDENTS PER TOWNSHIP FOR JANUARY-APRIL 2024 (LEFT) AND JANUARY-DECEMBER 2023 (RIGHT)

Source: Matthew B. Arnold, "National Situation Update: April 2024 (left) December 2023 (right) Conflict & Atrocity Data," (Research Study: Yangon, Myanmar), maps used with permission from the author

The junta's internal dysfunction further compounds its woes. Endemic corruption has eroded the military's effectiveness, leading to a breakdown in the chain of command and a loss of confidence among the rank and file. Reports of mass defections, desertions, and surrenders paint a picture of a military on the verge of collapse. The junta's top leadership, isolated and consumed by self-preservation, clings to the misguided belief that control can only be maintained through mass suffering.

Given the junta's intransigence and the escalating humanitarian crisis, a combination of strategic, nonlethal, and lethal tactics may be necessary to pressure the regime toward negotiation and ultimately restore democratic governance in Myanmar.

Key Catalysts of the Resistance's Successes

The resistance movement in Myanmar has defied expectations, demonstrating remarkable resilience and achieving significant victories against the military junta despite its superior firepower and brutal tactics. These unexpected successes can be attributed to several key factors, each crucial in undermining the junta's power and advancing the cause of democracy.

Unprecedented Collaboration: Forging a Unified Front against Tyranny

The resistance movement in Myanmar has achieved a historic milestone: the unprecedented alliance between the newly formed People's Defense Force (PDF) and established Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO). This collaboration, a watershed moment in the country's struggle for democracy, has unified diverse groups across ethnic and religious lines, pooling their vast combat experience, resources, and strategic insight to form a formidable opposition against the military junta.

The alliance emerged from dialogues between major EAOs from Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Chin (K3C) regions and the National

Unity Government (NUG), focusing on building trust and understanding. Recognizing the need to transcend historical divisions and mistrust, these groups acknowledged that only through unity could they effectively counter the junta's overwhelming firepower and brutal tactics.

This newfound cooperation has been a game-changer for the resistance. By sharing intelligence, coordinating strategies, and conducting joint operations, the coalition has significantly enhanced its effectiveness on the battlefield, inflicting substantial losses on the junta's forces. A pivotal moment came in October 2023, when the 3BHA, a coalition of resistance forces, achieved a significant victory in northern Shan State, showcasing the alliance's military capabilities and marking a turning point in the conflict.

Beyond its military significance, this collaboration represents a profound shift in Myanmar's political landscape. The junta's longstanding strategy of divide and conquer, which exploited ethnic and religious divisions to maintain its grip on power, is being actively dismantled by this united front. The resistance movement's diversity, forged through shared struggle and dialogue, lays the groundwork for a more inclusive, federal, and democratic Myanmar in the post-conflict era. This historic alliance is a testament to the resilience and determination of the Myanmar people, who are willing to overcome deep-seated divisions to forge a new path toward a brighter, more democratic future.

Mass Defections:

A Crumbling Military and Growing Resistance

An unprecedented wave of defections from the Myanmar military's ranks has significantly weakened the junta's grip on power. This exodus of personnel, initially sparked by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) among civil servants, has escalated to include many security forces personnel. These defections have deprived the junta of a vital workforce and armed the resistance with invaluable

insider knowledge about the military's operations, vulnerabilities, and internal struggles.

This intelligence has proven crucial in the resistance's strategic efforts, exposing critical weaknesses such as severe personnel shortages, logistical breakdowns, and disconnects between senior leaders and operational realities. This information has aided in tactical planning and served as a potent psychological weapon, eroding morale within the military and fueling further defections.

Interviews with defected battalion commanders in December 2022 revealed that many battalions were operating at less than 20% capacity. Since then, the military's situation has continued to deteriorate, with escalating casualties, mass surrenders, and even entire units defecting. The junta's desperate attempts to replenish its ranks through conscription and travel restrictions have largely failed, highlighting the deep-seated disillusionment and discontent within its forces.

The mass defections are not simply a numerical disadvantage for the military; they represent a fundamental erosion of its legitimacy and operational effectiveness. The loss of personnel and the invaluable intelligence provided by defectors have become pivotal factors in the resistance's ongoing successes. This internal unraveling, driven by the courage and conviction of those who have chosen to abandon the junta, is a testament to the power of individual agency and collective resistance in the face of tyranny. It also signals a potential turning point in the conflict, as the military's once seemingly unassailable grip on power continues to weaken from within.

*Unwavering Popular Resistance:
A Nation Defiant*

Survey results consistently reveal that nearly 90% of the Myanmar population opposes the military junta.¹⁷ This unwavering popular support for the resistance movements, even after three years of

immense hardship, demonstrates the remarkable resilience and determination of the Myanmar people. Their steadfast backing has been a cornerstone of the resistance's success, providing critical resources, logistical support, and a constant influx of recruits.

The junta's heavy-handed tactics, intended to instill fear and quell dissent, have paradoxically fueled the flames of resistance. The military's indiscriminate violence, including the burning of villages and bombing of civilian areas, has only intensified the public's resolve to overthrow the regime. Instead of submission, the junta has reaped a whirlwind of anger and defiance, uniting the population in their shared struggle for freedom.

Recent desperate measures by the junta, such as imposing conscription and restricting overseas travel, have further alienated the populace and inadvertently strengthened the resistance. These actions have driven a surge in recruitment for People's Defense Force (PDF) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) as more citizens are driven to take up arms against the regime.

The lack of popular support has also severely hampered the military's logistical operations. Once able to rely on local communities for supplies and intelligence, the military now faces frequent ambushes and supply disruption, leaving its forces isolated and vulnerable. This was evident during Operations 1027 when the army struggled to deploy reinforcements due to widespread public resistance.

The Myanmar people's unwavering opposition to the junta, fueled by its brutality and desperation, has become a powerful force in its own right. It is a testament to the indomitable spirit of a nation that refuses to be silenced or subjugated and serves as a stark reminder that the junta's days are numbered.

*The Diaspora's Digital Frontline:
A Global Network for Resistance*

The Myanmar diaspora, a vast network of individuals scattered across the globe, has emerged as a formidable force in the fight against the military junta. Leveraging digital tools and networks honed during the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's decade-long transition to democracy, they have become a lifeline for the resistance movement, providing vital funding, technical assistance, and international advocacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its forced shift to virtual communication, unexpectedly accelerated the diaspora's mobilization efforts. As the world embraced remote work and online collaboration, diaspora members seized the opportunity to connect, strategize, and mobilize effectively across borders. Virtual platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook became indispensable tools for sharing information, organizing fundraising campaigns, and coordinating advocacy efforts, effectively bridging the geographical divide.

Myanmar's earlier strides toward democracy, which resulted in increased internet access and smartphone usage, further empowered the diaspora. This digital infrastructure allowed them to establish robust transnational networks, providing real-time advice, technical training, and intelligence sharing to those on the ground. This collaborative digital ecosystem has amplified the voices of those within Myanmar and applied significant pressure on the military regime through coordinated campaigns targeting policymakers, international organizations, and the global public.

The diaspora's impact extends beyond the digital realm, with the resistance movement evolving into a multi-generational struggle for Myanmar's future. Gen Z activists are taking to the streets and even the frontlines, while Gen X leverages their technical skills to provide crucial support in areas like cybersecurity and communication. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers contribute financial resources and

unwavering moral support, ensuring the movement's sustainability and longevity. The intergenerational unity, combined with the significant participation of women in prominent roles across all generations, showcases the diaspora's diverse strengths and unwavering commitment to a free and democratic Myanmar.

The mobilization of the Myanmar diaspora serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of collective action and the unwavering determination to reclaim their nation's democratic future. It highlights the critical role that transnational networks can play in challenging authoritarian regimes, amplifying the voices of the oppressed, and fostering global solidarity in the fight for freedom and human rights.

*Women at the Forefront:
A Revolution Redefining Gender Roles*

In a remarkable departure from traditional gender norms, women have emerged as a driving force in the resistance against Myanmar's military coup. They have become indispensable to the struggle, actively participating in every facet of the movement, from frontline combat to civilian protests, fundraising, and online activism.

The junta's brutal crackdown, which disproportionately targeted women, has not deterred them but instead fueled their defiance. The tragic death of Mya Thwet Thwet Khine, the first protester killed, became a rallying cry for women who continue to make up the majority of those protesting the regime.¹⁸ Their fearless resistance not only challenges the military's authority but also actively dismantles the patriarchal structures the coup seeks to reimpose.

Their contributions extend far beyond the streets. Women have spearheaded innovative resistance tactics, such as the "sarong revolution," which cleverly leveraged cultural superstitions to undermine soldier morale. They have been a vital force in sustaining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), particularly in the

education sector, significantly hindering the junta's administrative capacity.

Women have also harnessed the power of social media, becoming influential voices in the digital sphere. Prominent activists like Ei Thinzar Maung, Pencilo, and Ma Shwe Moe have galvanized global solidarity through online campaigns, while grassroots women's organizations have fostered unprecedented unity among diverse ethnic groups.

Furthermore, women have taken up arms in the fight for freedom, forming all-female combat units like the Myaung Women Warriors and Tiger Women Drone Force. Their active participation in armed resistance, employing diverse tactics from landmine warfare to drone operations, underscores their courage, resilience, and multifaceted contributions to the struggle.¹⁹

Beyond the frontlines, women are critical in fundraising, providing humanitarian aid, and countering the junta's misinformation campaigns. Their unwavering dedication, strategic insight, and resilience in the face of immense adversity have made them an undeniable force for change.

The women of Myanmar are not merely resisting the military takeover; they are revolutionizing their societal roles. Their leadership and active participation are challenging the junta's authority and reshaping gender dynamics in Myanmar, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

China's Calculated Interference: Evolving Strategies in a Shifting Landscape

Driven by its vested interests in Myanmar, China has consistently sought to shape the trajectory of the conflict, exploiting the chaos and instability to further its agenda. While China ostensibly prefers stability, its aversion to a thriving democracy on its doorstep has led it to engage in a complex balancing act.

Initially, China, like many others, anticipated a swift victory for the Myanmar military, given its overwhelming firepower and history of suppressing dissent. Beijing actively engaged with the military junta, exerting pressure on northern Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) to refrain from joining the resistance. This approach aligned with China's preference for a pliant authoritarian regime that could be easily influenced to serve its interests.

However, the rapid proliferation of cyber scam hubs within Myanmar after the coup, many of which targeted Chinese nationals, forced Beijing to reassess its strategy. The junta's failure to address these criminal enterprises, despite China's concerns, led Beijing to ease pressure on northern EAOs, tacitly allowing them to challenge the military regime. This calculated shift culminated in Operation 1027, a successful offensive led by the 3BHA, which dealt a significant blow to the junta and demonstrated the growing strength of the resistance.

However, China's apparent support for the resistance was short-lived and self-serving. Once its immediate concerns regarding cybercrime were addressed, Beijing reverted to its preference for stability, pressuring the 3BHA into a ceasefire with the junta. This move, prioritizing China's economic interests over Myanmar's democratic aspirations, further solidified the perception of Beijing as an unreliable partner and deepened distrust among the Myanmar people.

China now faces a dilemma with the military junta's grip on power increasingly tenuous. Unwilling to fully back the pro-democracy movement, Beijing's current strategy seems aimed at preventing the resistance from coalescing into a united front, which would threaten both the junta and China's interests. To achieve this, China has employed a range of tactics, including:

- *MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS*: Spreading disinformation and propaganda to sow discord among the various resistance groups, undermining their unity and effectiveness.

- *DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE*: Leveraging its economic and political clout to pressure regional actors to refrain from supporting the resistance movement.
- *ECONOMIC COERCION*: Using a combination of economic incentives and penalties to pressure EAOs and other groups into cooperating with the junta or remaining neutral in the conflict.
- *THREAT OF INTERVENTION*: Signaling its willingness to intervene directly in the conflict should its interests be threatened, as evidenced by reports of Chinese troops conducting drills near the border and the presence of Chinese security personnel within Myanmar.

China's calculated interference in Myanmar's conflict demonstrates its willingness to exploit the ongoing chaos to advance its own strategic goals. Whether through supporting or undermining different factions, China's actions are guided by a pragmatic and self-interested approach that prioritizes stability and control, even if it comes at the expense of the Myanmar people's democratic aspirations and regional security.

Charting a Path Forward:

Policy Recommendations for the United States and its Partners

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar not only presents a complex challenge but also an opportunity for the United States and its partners. The courageous people of Myanmar have made remarkable strides in their fight against the military junta, demonstrating resilience and resourcefulness despite limited international assistance. However, a shift in strategy is required to achieve a decisive victory for democracy and regional stability.

Historical analyses of successful revolutions consistently highlight three key factors: defections from the ruling regime, international pressure, and unwavering popular support. In

Myanmar, women have already demonstrated the effectiveness of non-lethal strategies in undermining the military's authority. At the same time, the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) and People's Defense Force (PDF) have proven their capabilities in armed resistance. A coordinated approach, combining both lethal and non-lethal resistance and armed struggle, is crucial to tip the balance in favor of the pro-democracy movement.

To support the pro-democracy movement and achieve a lasting resolution to the conflict, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- *IMPLEMENT A ROBUST STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN:* The United States and its partners should work with the National Unity Government (NUG) and civil society organizations to develop and execute a comprehensive communication strategy. This campaign should utilize various platforms, including social media, international news outlets, and diplomatic channels, to expose the junta's human rights abuses, corruption, and illegitimacy. By amplifying the voices of the resistance and highlighting the atrocities committed by the military, international pressure can be intensified, potentially leading to further sanctions, arms embargoes, and diplomatic isolation of the junta.
- *OPTIMIZE HUMAN RESOURCES AND TALENTS:* The resistance movement, with support from international partners, should invest in training and capacity-building programs to enhance its organizational, leadership, and technical skills. This includes training on non-violent resistance tactics, cybersecurity, and media relations and fostering inclusive leadership that empowers women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Additionally, the international community can offer expertise in humanitarian aid, medical care, and legal support to strengthen the resistance's capacity to provide essential services to the population.

- *PRIORITIZE TARGETED SANCTIONS AND DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE:* The United States and its partners should expand targeted sanctions against the junta, its business interests, and its foreign enablers. These sanctions should aim to disrupt the junta's financial flows, restrict its access to weapons and technology, and isolate it from the international community. Simultaneously, diplomatic efforts should be intensified to garner support for the pro-democracy movement from regional and global actors. This could include lobbying for a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the coup and imposing an arms embargo, as well as building coalitions with like-minded countries and Myanmar neighbors (Thailand, India, and Bangladesh) to coordinate pressure on the junta.
- *PROVIDE DIRECT SUPPORT TO THE RESISTANCE:* While non-lethal assistance remains a priority, the United States and its partners should also consider providing carefully calibrated and targeted lethal aid to resistance forces, particularly the EAO and PDF. This could include providing military equipment, training, and intelligence support to enhance their capabilities and effectiveness on the battlefield. However, such assistance should be contingent upon the resistance's adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards. It should be carefully monitored to ensure that it is used to enhance the effectiveness of the resistance without leading to unintended escalations.

Potential drawbacks and considerations:

While these recommendations offer a pathway to support Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, there are potential risks that must be carefully weighed. The complexities of the situation necessitate a strategic, measured approach to avoid unintended consequences, including:

- *ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE*: Increased international support, especially lethal aid, could trigger a more brutal response from the junta, leading to further suffering of the Myanmar people.
- *REGIONAL INSTABILITY*: The conflict could spill over into neighboring countries, creating a regional security crisis and potentially drawing in other actors.
- *CHINESE INTERVENTION*: China may escalate its involvement to protect its interests, potentially leading to a proxy or direct confrontation.

Despite these risks, the urgency of the situation in Myanmar necessitates a bold and proactive response. By addressing this strategic blind spot and supporting the pro-democracy movement, the United States and its partners can alleviate the suffering of the Myanmar people, protect their interests, and promote democratic values in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

The Crisis in Myanmar, though largely obscured from global attention, is a pressing issue with significant regional and international implications. The military junta's brutal crackdown on democracy and human rights, coupled with China's opportunistic interference, has plunged the nation into chaos and fueled a wave of transnational security threats.

The resistance movement, bolstered by unprecedented collaboration, mass defections, unwavering popular support, global diaspora mobilization, and women's active participation, offers hope. However, its struggle is far from over. The junta's resilience, fueled by illicit revenues and external support, poses a significant challenge.

The United States and its partners must recognize Myanmar as a strategic blind spot that, if left unaddressed, could undermine their

interests and empower authoritarian regimes in the Indo-Pacific. It is imperative to act decisively, leveraging the Burma Act and providing meaningful assistance to the resistance. This includes non-lethal support and carefully calibrated and targeted lethal aid, contingent upon the resistance's adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards.

While such intervention carries risks, the cost of inaction is far greater. Failure to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar would not only betray the aspirations of the Myanmar people but also jeopardize regional stability and democratic values. The time for complacency is over. The future of Myanmar and the broader Indo-Pacific region depends on a coordinated and resolute response from the international community. A successful pro-democracy movement in Myanmar would not only restore freedom and human rights to its people but also serve as a powerful beacon of hope for other nations struggling under authoritarian rule.

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CHAPTER TEN

NAVIGATING SPATIAL POLITICS: THE COMPACTS OF FREE ASSOCIATION AND OCEANIA'S GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Rachelle Rodriguez

*Space is not static. It is not a flat surface across which we walk.
It is, rather, a pincushion of a million stories.*

— Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 1994

Abstract

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are not merely legal agreements; they are instruments of spatial politics—the ways in which space is used to exert power and influence—that shape the geopolitical landscape of the Pacific. This chapter examines COFA between the United States and the Freely Associated States (FAS)—the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—through the lens of spatialization, the intricate relationship between space and identity. By analyzing the historical and contemporary spatial narratives surrounding the Pacific region, the chapter reveals how COFA reflects and reinforces the spatialization of Oceania as a strategic arena, exposing power imbalances and divergent priorities. This analysis argues that a deeper understanding of spatial dynamics is crucial for reimagining a more equitable and sustainable partnership that prioritizes the environmental security, self-determination, and cultural preservation of Pacific Island communities. Ultimately, the chapter proposes recommendations for the 2043 COFA negotiations, advocating for revisions to foster a more just and equitable future for the region, grounded in the principles of spatial justice.

Introduction

Maps, much like any form of representation, are inherently subjective. They reflect the perspectives and biases of both the cartographer and the intended audience, shaping how we understand the world and its complexities. This is particularly true in Oceania, where the vast expanse of the Pacific, dotted with countless islands, is often reduced to mere dots or swallowed by broad strokes of national borders. Yet, as scholar Epeli Hau'ofa eloquently highlighted in his landmark work on spatial language, the way we perceive this region—whether as a “sea of islands” or “islands in a far sea”—profoundly impacts our understanding of its unique identity and the dynamics between its inhabitants and external powers.¹

This chapter employs the theoretical framework of spatialization to delve deeper into this complex relationship,² with a focus on preparing for the strategic renewal of the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) scheduled for 2043. Spatialization examines the intricate relationship between space and identity, particularly how power dynamics and narratives shape and are shaped by the spatial constructs we create. In the geopolitical context of Oceania, spatialization reveals how dominant powers leverage geographical perceptions to exert influence and control. However, it also highlights the agency of Pacific Island communities in resisting and reinterpreting these imposed spatial narratives.

Spatialization will be used to critically analyze the recently renegotiated Compacts of Free Association (COFA) between the United States and the Freely Associated States of Micronesia, including Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. Established in the 1980s and 1990s, these agreements grant the United States significant military rights and responsibilities in exchange for economic assistance and certain immigration privileges for citizens of the Freely Associated States. By examining how COFA reflects and reinforces the spatialization of the Pacific as a strategic arena,

we can uncover the underlying power dynamics, evolving narratives, and implications for oceanic sovereignty. This analysis will shed light on the complex relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States and illuminate how Pacific Islanders are actively negotiating and redefining their place in the world.

The Compacts of Free Association: A Brief Overview

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are a series of agreements between the United States and three Pacific Island nations: the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau. These agreements, established in 1986 for the RMI and FSM and in 1994 for Palau, are unique in their structure and implications.

At its core, the COFA grants the United States significant military rights and responsibilities in the Freely Associated States. This includes exclusive access to the islands' land, airspace, and territorial waters for military purposes. In exchange, the United States provides financial assistance, access to certain federal programs, and the right for FAS citizens to live and work in the United States without visas.

The Compacts are intended to be mutually beneficial, promoting economic development and self-governance in the Freely Associated States while ensuring U.S. security interests in the region. However, the agreements are not without controversy, with critics highlighting the power imbalance inherent in their structure, particularly U.S. unilateral control over military provisions and the limited say Freely Associated States have in shaping the terms of the agreements.

This chapter will delve deeper into the complexities of COFA, examining how the agreements have evolved over time and how they are perceived and experienced by both the United States and

the Freely Associated States. Through the lens of spatialization, this chapter analyzes how these agreements have shaped, and continue to shape, the geopolitical landscape of the Pacific, impacting everything from environmental security to regional identity.

Conceptualizing an Oceanic Security Space

Applying spatialization as a framework requires critically examining the historical narratives surrounding “space” in Oceania. Traditional geopolitical views, often rooted in realism and small-state theory, tend to portray Pacific Island countries as having limited agency, their existence reduced to the mere occupation of physical space. This perception relegates island nations to secondary roles, seemingly with limited options for navigating the complexities of the international system.³

In stark contrast, an islander perspective centers on indigeneity and identity as fundamental components in defining “space.” This understanding transcends physical distances between islands, encompassing the deep-rooted connections and shared history that foster a profound sense of regional unity. Historian Matt Matsuda’s exploration of the “empty space” concept challenges the notion of the Pacific as a blank canvas for external powers. He argues that recognizing a “place” necessitates acknowledging its rich history and the people who have shaped it.⁴ The forced occupation of these spaces by external forces, as exemplified by the 1998 Nouméa Accord between France and New Caledonia, starkly reveals the historical erasure of indigenous presence and agency.⁵

Through the lens of spatialization, the militarization of Oceania emerges as a tool for projecting external identities onto the region. It becomes a process of perpetuating imposed values, often at the expense of local realities and indigenous perspectives. A poignant example is Lauren Hirshberg’s stark depiction of the contrast between the Americanized military base on Kwajalein Atoll and the impoverished conditions on nearby Ebeye Island.⁶ This

juxtaposition reveals how spatialization manifests in the physical landscape, reinforcing power dynamics and profoundly shaping local communities.

Understanding COFA necessitates contextualizing it within this history of spatialization and external influence. The islands' designation as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, under U.S. administration until they transition to independence, exposes the paternalistic undertones of early U.S. engagement.⁷ The Solomon Plan, as highlighted by Sara Cannon, exemplifies this strategic approach,⁸ viewing the islands primarily through a lens of military utility and reinforcing the notion of the Pacific as a vast expanse ripe for exploitation.⁹

This legacy of spatialization is further entrenched in the COFA agreements themselves.¹⁰ While framed as mutually beneficial, the inherent power imbalance is evident in provisions like the termination clause, which grants the United States unilateral veto power over ending military aspects of the agreement.¹¹ Even the choice of the Department of the Interior (DOI), with its domestic focus on internal development, as the primary U.S. representative in COFA negotiations is telling. This contrasts sharply with the sovereign status of the FAS nations,¹² suggesting an extension of U.S. domestic interests onto the international stage.¹³

The spatialization of Oceania as a security sphere, shaped by colonial histories and ongoing militarization, has profound and far-reaching implications for the region. By understanding this complex interplay of space, power, and identity, we can begin to uncover the divergent priorities and perspectives that emerge from a spatialized islander viewpoint. This divergence, born from a complex interplay of historical and geopolitical forces, has profound implications for COFA and the broader relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States.

Outcomes of 2023 Negotiations: Progress and Future Considerations

The 2023 COFA renegotiations yielded significant amendments, including \$6.5 billion in economic assistance to be distributed among Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau over the next 20 years.¹⁴ This funding aims to bolster key areas such as environmental resilience, health, education, and infrastructure, reflecting both U.S. strategic interests and the developmental needs of the Freely Associated States within the COFA framework.

However, these amendments should be viewed as a starting point for addressing the complex spatial politics that shape the relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States. A deeper evaluation of sustainable economic growth, environmental sustainability, and the FAS's socio-economic independence remains crucial as they approach the 2043 renewal.

As stakeholders engage in long-term planning for the 2043 renewal, it is crucial to build on the momentum of the recent negotiations by proactively addressing these and other emerging challenges.¹⁵ This approach will strengthen current cooperation and ensure that future amendments align more closely with both the strategic and humanitarian goals of the COFA agreements.

Environmental Security and Islander Spatialization

Spatialization reveals a stark contrast between the United States' strategic prioritization of the Pacific and the environmental security concerns to Pacific Islander identity. While the United States has historically prioritized strategic positioning in the Pacific, indigenous communities conceptualize the region through a fundamentally different lens. Drawing inspiration from the work of Epeli Hau'ofa and others, Pacific scholars emphasize two critical components of oceanic identity: the recognition of each island's individuality and the importance of maintaining regional unity across the vast expanse of the ocean. This identity is inextricably

linked to the ocean, which serves as both a physical connector and a cultural touchstone. Debates about the ocean's representation—whether as a “blue continent” or a network of transit routes—highlight the dynamic relationship between language, identity, and space within the Pacific context.

The emergence of Pacific regionalism in the mid-twentieth century, spurred by anti-colonial movements and the desire for self-determination, further solidified this unique spatial perspective. Organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) have played a crucial role in fostering regional collaboration and addressing shared challenges, including the growing threat of climate change. In November 2023, the PIF's endorsement of the Regional Framework on Climate Mobility underscored the centrality of environmental security in the islanders' spatial understanding of Oceania.¹⁶ This framework calls for “people-centered movement” strategies that prioritize the needs and agency of Pacific communities facing climate-related displacement and migration.¹⁷

However, COFA presents a complex challenge to addressing climate change and environmental security. While COFA aims to foster economic development and eventual independence for the Freely Associated States, its effectiveness in achieving these goals has been questioned.¹⁸ The persistent focus on military priorities, coupled with inadequate action on climate-related issues, raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of these agreements.

The legacy of U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands further complicates the issue.¹⁹ A prime example is the Runit Dome, a concrete structure built on Runit Island in the Marshall Islands to contain radioactive debris from dozens of nuclear tests conducted by the United States between 1946 and 1958. Concerns about the Runit Dome's structural integrity and the potential leakage of radioactive waste pose a significant environmental threat to the Marshall Islands and the wider Pacific region.²⁰ Additionally, the recent COFA renegotiations revealed tensions surrounding the

Marshallese Nuclear Claims Trust Fund, highlighting the historical sensitivities and unresolved grievances that continue to shape relations between the United States and the Marshall Islands.²¹ It is important to note that while the United States has made some efforts to address the environmental legacy of nuclear testing and to provide assistance for climate change adaptation, these actions have been criticized as insufficient and overshadowed by the continued emphasis on militarization.

While the renegotiated COFA agreements include provisions for climate adaptation and disaster resilience,²² their effectiveness remains questionable in the face of the United States' contradictory approach to environmental security.²³ As scholars Tiara Na'puti and Sylvia Frain argue, the United States engages in a form of "blue-washing," where performative environmental initiatives mask ongoing militarization and environmental degradation.²⁴ This tension between rhetoric and action underscores the misalignment between U.S. policy and the existential threats facing Pacific Island communities.

In contrast, islander spatialization places environmental conservation at the forefront of regional priorities. The ocean is not merely a strategic asset but a life-giving force intertwined with cultural heritage and survival. This perspective calls for a localized, community-based approach to environmental security that prioritizes sustainable practices and indigenous knowledge.

Economic Disparities and the Spatialization of Dependency

The spatialization of the Pacific extends beyond military and environmental concerns; it also manifests in the economic relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States. COFA's provisions for financial assistance have created a complex web of economic dependency, where the Freely Associated States heavily rely on U.S. aid for basic services and infrastructure. This dependency, exacerbated by the region's geographic isolation

and limited economic opportunities, has perpetuated a power imbalance that hinders the Freely Associated States' ability to achieve true self-sufficiency and sustainable development.

The spatialization of the Pacific as a region needing external aid further reinforces this dependency. The narrative of “developing” nations, often portrayed as lagging behind Western standards, perpetuates a paternalistic attitude that undermines the agency and capabilities of Pacific Islanders. This can be seen in the disproportionate influence of the U.S. dollar in FAS economies, the limited diversification of industries, and the challenges local businesses face in competing with imported goods.

Moreover, the economic provisions of COFA have been criticized for their lack of transparency and accountability. The distribution of funds is often opaque, with limited oversight from FAS governments or communities. This has led to concerns about corruption, mismanagement, and the unequal distribution of resources, further exacerbating social inequalities within the Freely Associated States.²⁵

Reimagining the economic relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States requires addressing these spatial dimensions of dependency. This involves increasing the amount of aid and ensuring that it is used effectively and transparently to support sustainable development initiatives that align with the priorities and needs of local communities.

It also requires fostering economic diversification and empowering local businesses to compete in the global market. This can be achieved through investments in education, infrastructure, and technology, as well as creating opportunities for trade and investment that benefit both the Freely Associated States and the United States.

Ultimately, a more equitable and sustainable economic partnership must recognize the agency and potential of Pacific

Island communities. By moving beyond the narrative of dependency and embracing a model of mutual respect and shared responsibility, the United States and the Freely Associated States can build a stronger economic future for the Pacific region.

This spatialized approach to economic analysis reveals how COFA can be viewed as a perpetuation of a colonial economic model. Reliance on external aid, often tied to specific conditions and priorities, can hinder the development of diverse and self-sufficient economies within the Freely Associated States. The continued use of the U.S. dollar as the primary currency further reinforces this dependency, limiting the Freely Associated State's ability to control its own monetary policy and manage economic fluctuations.

Moreover, the historical legacy of nuclear testing and environmental degradation has created unique economic challenges for the Freely Associated States. The destruction of land and resources, coupled with ongoing health concerns and displacement, has hampered economic development and created a reliance on external aid for basic necessities.

Reimagining the economic relationship under COFA requires shifting from dependency toward an empowerment and sustainable development model. This involves prioritizing investments in education, infrastructure, and local industries, promoting fair trade practices, and supporting initiatives that empower local communities to manage their own resources.

A revised COFA framework can create a more equitable and sustainable partnership by addressing the economic dimensions of spatialization, one that recognizes the economic potential and self-determination of Pacific Island nations. This will require a commitment from both the United States and the Freely Associated States to move beyond traditional aid models and embrace a more collaborative approach to economic development that prioritizes the long-term well-being of Pacific Island communities.

Reimagining Partnership: A Call for Spatial Justice

The spatial analysis presented in this chapter underscores the urgent need to reimagine the relationship between the United States and the Freely Associated States. The current model, shaped by historical legacies of militarization and geopolitical anxieties, perpetuates a power imbalance that hinders genuine cooperation and undermines the existential needs of Pacific Islanders.

Moving forward, a more equitable and sustainable partnership must be grounded in the principles of spatial justice. This means acknowledging and respecting the unique spatial perspectives of Pacific Island communities, recognizing their inherent right to self-determination, and prioritizing their environmental security and economic prosperity.

To achieve this, the following recommendations are crucial:

1. *DECENTRALIZE POWER*: In the 2043 COFA renegotiations, revise the agreements to grant the Freely Associated States greater autonomy over their affairs, particularly concerning environmental policy, resource management, and economic decision-making.
2. *PRIORITIZE ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY*: Elevate climate change and environmental concerns to the forefront of the COFA agenda, ensuring adequate funding and resources for mitigation, adaptation, and resilience efforts. This includes addressing the legacy of environmental damage caused by nuclear testing and promoting sustainable resource management practices.
3. *EMBRACE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE*: Integrate traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into environmental and economic decision-making processes, recognizing its value in understanding local ecosystems, sustainable practices, and cultural preservation.²⁶

4. *PROMOTE MULTILATERALISM*: Explore opportunities for diversifying regional security and economic development partnerships, including greater collaboration with other Pacific Island nations and international organizations, to complement the existing U.S. security role.
5. *REIMAGINE SPATIAL NARRATIVES*: Challenge the dominant narrative of the Pacific as a mere security sphere or a collection of economically dependent islands. Instead, promote a more holistic view encompassing the region's rich cultural heritage, ecological diversity, and potential for self-sufficient and sustainable development.

By embracing spatial justice and incorporating these recommendations, the United States and the Freely Associated States can forge a sustainable partnership that genuinely benefits both parties and ensures the long-term well-being of the Pacific region.

Conclusion:

Reframing the Future of COFA through Spatial Justice

In their February 2024 letter to U.S. Senate leaders, the Presidents of the Freely Associated States succinctly captured the anxieties and limitations arising from the current COFA framework.²⁷ While acknowledging the economic benefits of the Compacts, they highlighted the growing “uncertainty among our peoples” and the potential for “economic exploitation by competitive political actors active in the Pacific.”²⁸ This underscores the inherent tensions within COFA, where strategic interests often overshadow the existential concerns of Pacific Islanders.

This chapter has demonstrated the power of spatialization as a theoretical lens for unraveling these complexities. By examining the historical legacies of colonialism, militarization, and differing spatial perspectives, this chapter has exposed the power imbalances that underpin the Compacts and their impact on the region. The

future of the Pacific cannot, and should not, be dictated solely by the geopolitical interests of external powers. The existential threat of climate change, which disproportionately threatens the very existence of Pacific Island nations, necessitates a radical rethinking of regional security and cooperation. A sustainable future for the Pacific must prioritize environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and the self-determination of its people.

While the complete dissolution of the Compacts may not be feasible given the region's strategic importance and history of militarization, a fundamental shift in approach is imperative. The United States must move beyond the narrow lens of security and embrace a more holistic understanding of spatial relations in the Pacific. This involves recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and aspirations of the Freely Associated States, as well as their deep-rooted connection to the ocean and its resources.

Looking toward the 2043 renewal, the recent 2023 negotiations, while providing a foundational framework, also underscore the urgent need for ongoing dialogue and reform. Crafting a truly balanced approach requires genuinely respecting and integrating the diverse interests of all parties, particularly given the looming challenges of climate change. Rising sea levels directly threaten critical infrastructure and livelihoods, demanding a just and equitable partnership acutely attuned to their environmental and socio-economic realities.

Moreover, the United States should explore opportunities for diversifying partnerships in regional security, including greater collaboration with other Pacific Island nations and international organizations, to complement the existing U.S. military presence. This could involve focusing on areas such as disaster preparedness, sustainable resource management, and cultural exchange. In doing so, the United States can demonstrate a genuine commitment to the Pacific region that goes beyond military interests and acknowledges

the complex interplay of environmental, social, and economic factors that shape the lives and futures of Pacific Islanders.

Ultimately, the future of COFA hinges on the willingness of both parties to embrace a new spatial imaginary—one that transcends geopolitical calculations and prioritizes the well-being and agency of Pacific Islanders. By recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic factors and fostering a genuine partnership based on mutual respect and shared responsibility, the United States and the Freely Associated States can chart a new course toward a more equitable and sustainable future for the Pacific region. A future where the Pacific is not merely a strategic chessboard but a vibrant and interconnected community of nations working together to address shared challenges and achieve common goals.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

INDIA'S RISE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN ACTION

Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath

*India's strategic location gives it the potential to play a pivotal role,
but potential is not action*

— Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister
and founder of Singapore.¹

Abstract

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, India is asserting itself as a major player in the Indo-Pacific. This chapter examines India's evolving foreign policy, characterized by "strategic autonomy," and its multifaceted approach to regional engagement. It analyzes India's key partnerships, security challenges, and efforts to bolster its global stature and regional supremacy. The chapter also explores the complexities and opportunities that lie ahead as India flexes its newfound geopolitical muscle to shape the regional order.

Introduction

"It is inevitable," said Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, in March 1949, "for India to play an important global role not because of any ambition of hers, but because of the force of circumstances, because of geography, because of history."²

In the decades since, a world defined by shifting power dynamics and complex challenges has seen India rise as an emerging power on the global stage. From its early adherence to the non-alignment doctrine championed by Nehru, India's foreign policy has evolved to expand those principles to "strategic autonomy."³

Dubbed non-alignment 2.0, India's foreign policy emphasizes "multialignment," maintaining autonomy while engaging with all

major powers. It carefully balances relationships with Russia, the United States, and China without falling into any exclusive camp. This approach reflects India's adaptability to navigating the 21st-century complexities with independence and flexibility, fostering diverse partnerships while protecting its national interests.

This chapter examines the evolution of India's foreign policy and its strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. It explores India's key partnerships, its role in regional security, and the challenges it faces in achieving its objectives. By analyzing India's balancing act with major powers like the United States and China, as well as its regional initiatives, this chapter sheds light on India's aspirations to shape the regional order and enhance its global stature.

India's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is evolving as a central pillar of its foreign policy, focusing on securing its interests in a region marked by growing competition, economic opportunities, and strategic challenges. With its geographic positioning, economic ambitions, and security imperatives, India views the Indo-Pacific as vital to its aspirations as a global power.

India's approach integrates economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions, all aimed at bolstering its global stature and fostering regional stability and prosperity. Deeply entwined in this approach are some key strands—business, migration, and security—which mark a historic shift to India's doctrine of strategic autonomy. This doctrine empowers India to pursue its interests and shape the regional order independently. To operationalize its Indo-Pacific strategy, India has adopted a multi-pronged approach:

- *NEIGHBORHOOD FIRST POLICY*: Launched in 2014, this policy emphasizes strengthening relationships with its South Asian neighbors by promoting trade, connectivity, cultural exchange, and joint security initiatives. Key partners include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

However, tensions with Pakistan remain, particularly over cross-border terrorism, and continue to obstruct cooperation within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the eight-nation regional group aimed at fostering economic and political collaboration. To bypass these challenges, India has shifted toward bilateral and sub-regional initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework. These smaller, more focused partnerships enable India to advance its Neighborhood First goals while fostering regional collaboration on manageable scales.

- *ACT EAST POLICY*: This policy forms the cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Initiated in 1991, it has evolved from a primarily economic engagement to a comprehensive strategic partnership with Southeast Asia, evidenced by India's participation in numerous regional forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and its free trade agreements with ASEAN. Furthermore, India has increased investment in infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, aiming to improve connectivity and boost trade. Defense cooperation has also been strengthened through joint military exercises with countries like Vietnam and Singapore and technology-sharing agreements.⁴
- *THE QUADRILATERAL GROUPING (QUAD)*: India's participation in the Quad with the United States, Japan, and Australia signifies its commitment to a rules-based order and maritime security. The Quad serves as a platform for cooperation on critical issues, including maritime domain awareness,

counterterrorism, and emerging technologies. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad launched a vaccine initiative to provide doses to countries in the Indo-Pacific, demonstrating its commitment to regional leadership.⁵

- *MARITIME SECURITY AND CONNECTIVITY*: Recognizing the critical importance of sea lanes of communication in the Indo-Pacific, India has intensified efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness, coastal security, and disaster response. This includes investments in port development and connectivity initiatives such as the Sagarmala project, which aims to modernize India's port infrastructure by building new ports and terminals, modernizing existing ones, and enhancing connectivity with inland waterways and road networks. This project is crucial for facilitating trade, promoting economic growth, and ensuring the security of maritime trade routes.⁶ India has also increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and conducted joint exercises with partner navies to enhance interoperability and address shared security challenges.
- *INDIA AS A NET SECURITY PROVIDER*: India seeks to position itself as a net security provider in the region. This involves actively participating in regional forums, conducting capacity-building initiatives with partner nations, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁷ For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, India launched Operation Gambhir, deploying naval ships and aircraft to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to affected countries in the region.⁸ India also regularly conducts joint military exercises with countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, focusing on capacity building and enhancing interoperability. These efforts demonstrate India's desire to play a leading role in addressing shared challenges.

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Landscape

The Indo-Pacific region has become the epicenter of a geopolitical contest, with major powers vying for influence and seeking to shape the regional architecture. India's strategic location, with its growing economic and military power, makes it a key player. However, it faces a complex landscape with various actors pursuing their own agendas.

- *THE UNITED STATES*: The United States seeks to maintain its predominant position in the region through its “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. This involves strengthening alliances with countries like Japan and Australia through initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS, a trilateral security pact aimed at enhancing cooperation on defense technologies. The United States is also deepening partnerships with India and several Southeast Asian nations through increased military exercises, technology sharing, and economic initiatives. It has increased its military presence in the region and actively challenges China's assertive actions in the South China Sea through freedom of navigation operations. Furthermore, Washington is promoting economic initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to foster regional economic integration and counter China's economic influence.
- *CHINA*: China is extending its influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure project aimed at connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe through a network of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure projects. The BRI, perceived as a challenge to the U.S.-led order, is seen as a way for China to expand its economic and strategic influence in the region by financing and building critical infrastructure. China is also modernizing its military, expanding its naval capabilities, and asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea, leading to increased tensions

with neighboring countries. China's construction of artificial islands and deployment of military assets in the disputed waters have raised concerns about its intentions and its willingness to use force to achieve its objectives.

- *OTHER ACTORS:* Beyond the U.S.-China rivalry, other actors are also playing significant roles. Japan and Australia are key U.S. allies, actively participating in security initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS. Japan has increased its defense spending and is developing its own long-range strike capabilities, while Australia is acquiring nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement. Southeast Asian nations seek to balance their relationships with both the United States and China, prioritizing economic growth and stability while navigating the complexities of the regional power dynamics. These countries are cautious about taking sides and are seeking to maintain good relations with both major powers.

India, in this context, is pursuing an approach of strategic autonomy, leveraging its partnerships and actively engaging in regional initiatives to promote its interests and contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific. This requires a delicate balancing act, as India seeks to maintain good relations with the United States while not isolating China as it tries to resolve current border conflicts, all while safeguarding its own sovereignty and security. India's participation in the Quad allows it to cooperate with like-minded nations on security issues, while its Act East policy strengthens its ties with Southeast Asia. India is also enhancing its own military capabilities and deepening its defense partnerships with countries like the United States, France, and Russia to ensure its security and strategic autonomy in this competitive environment.

Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

While cooperative engagement is central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy, it also faces a complex security environment that necessitates a robust defense posture. India must contend with territorial disputes, military standoffs, terrorism, cyber threats, and the destabilizing effects of climate change. This requires a multifaceted approach that balances military modernization, diplomatic efforts, and economic resilience.

Traditional Security Challenges

Traditional security challenges, including territorial disputes, military standoffs, and the proliferation of weapons, continue to pose significant challenges to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. These challenges require India to maintain a robust defense posture and actively engage in diplomatic efforts to mitigate tensions and prevent conflict.

China

China's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, including its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea and its military modernization, poses a significant challenge to India. The border dispute between India and China, marked by recent clashes in the Galwan Valley and the Tawang sector, remains a persistent source of tension.⁹ Beyond territorial disputes, China's economic heft and technological competition, particularly in areas like artificial intelligence (AI) and 5G, also pose challenges to India's security and economic interests.

Pakistan

The enduring conflict over Kashmir continues to pose a major security threat to India. This is exacerbated by Pakistan's growing strategic partnership with China, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's BRI.

CPEC, with its development of Gwadar Port, enhances Pakistan and China's ability to project power in the Arabian Sea, posing a challenge to India's maritime interests.¹⁰

Furthermore, Pakistan is actively modernizing its naval forces with Chinese support, acquiring advanced submarines and warships in an attempt to counterbalance India's dominance in the Indian Ocean.¹¹ This raises concerns about a potential shift in the regional naval balance and the possibility of increased Sino-Pakistan naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

The potential for Pakistan to become a full proxy for Chinese influence in the region adds another layer of complexity to India's strategic calculus.¹² Pakistan's ability to leverage Chinese support, particularly in its military modernization efforts, could significantly impact India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. This necessitates that India carefully consider the possibility of coordinated actions between Pakistan and China when formulating its security strategies.

Afghanistan

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has raised serious concerns in New Delhi about the resurgence of terrorism and instability in the region. India fears that Afghanistan could become a safe haven for anti-Indian terrorist groups, potentially serving as a launchpad for cross-border attacks. This fear is not unfounded, as neighborhood groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which have historically targeted India, particularly in the Kashmir region, may find renewed support and operational space.

India has long viewed a stable and peaceful Afghanistan as essential for regional security, particularly in preventing the spread of extremist ideologies that could destabilize its own borders. The current situation presents a significant challenge to this objective, as

the Taliban's ideology and their potential support for terrorist groups pose a direct threat to India's security.

The evolving dynamics in Afghanistan also have implications for India's maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. The instability in the region could disrupt trade routes and energy supplies that pass through the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, further complicating India's security environment. Moreover, the potential for increased Chinese influence in Afghanistan, particularly through economic and infrastructure projects, could further challenge India's strategic interests in the region.

Non-Traditional Security Challenges

Beyond traditional security threats, India faces a range of non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific that require a comprehensive and collaborative approach. These challenges, including terrorism, transnational crime, and the effects of climate change, transcend national borders and require cooperative solutions. Addressing these non-traditional security threats is essential for fostering a stable and secure environment conducive to economic growth and development in the region.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)

The Indo-Pacific region remains a fertile ground for violent extremist organizations (VEO) that exploit social and economic vulnerabilities to recruit and operate.¹³ These extremist networks exploit the region's complex geopolitical landscape, porous borders, and diverse societies to spread their extremist ideology and conduct attacks. India has been a target of these groups, notably the 2008 Mumbai attacks. In response, India has enhanced its counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence gathering, border security, and specialized counterterrorism forces. Furthermore, India actively collaborates with partners like the United States and Israel to disrupt terrorist networks and their

financing. This includes intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and cooperation on counterterrorism technology.¹⁴

Transnational Crime

The Indo-Pacific is also plagued by transnational criminal activities that threaten regional security and stability.

- *MARITIME PIRACY*: While once concentrated in the Horn of Africa, piracy has spread to Southeast Asia, disrupting trade and endangering lives. These acts of piracy frequently involve armed assaults on vessels, disrupt global trade, hinder investment, and foster an atmosphere of insecurity.¹⁵ Indian ships and fishermen have been frequent victims of these attacks, suffering significant losses and endangering lives. These attacks not only pose a threat to India's economic interests but also highlight the vulnerability of its citizens working in the maritime domain. In response, India has intensified its naval presence, collaborating with international partners to counter piracy. By escorting vessels, conducting joint patrols, and sharing intelligence, the Indian Navy has played a crucial role in safeguarding maritime trade and protecting the nation's economic interests.¹⁶
- *DRUG TRAFFICKING*: The Indo-Pacific region is a key transit route for the global drug trade, with Afghanistan and Myanmar being major sources of narcotics. These illicit substances fuel addiction, crime, and violence in India and beyond.¹⁷ Drug trafficking also provides a financial lifeline for VEOs and insurgent groups, enabling them to acquire weapons and carry out attacks.¹⁸ To counter this threat, India has strengthened its anti-drug efforts through increased surveillance, regional cooperation, and international partnerships. For instance, in 2024, India made its largest-ever offshore narcotics seizure, intercepting a fishing boat

coming from an Iranian port with 3,300 kilograms of drugs, including heroin and methamphetamine.¹⁹ This demonstrates India's growing capabilities in maritime interdiction.

- *HUMAN TRAFFICKING*: The region is also a hub for human trafficking, with vulnerable individuals being exploited for forced labor and sexual exploitation. This illicit trade preys on the region's economic disparities and porous borders. Countries like Thailand, India, Nepal, Cambodia, and Myanmar serve as both source and destination countries for victims. Women and girls are often trafficked for domestic servitude, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation, while men and boys are frequently subjected to forced labor in industries such as fishing, construction, and agriculture.²⁰

These transnational crimes—piracy, drug trafficking, and human trafficking—form a dangerous nexus that threatens the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. These illicit activities erode the rule of law, providing a lucrative funding source for violent extremist organizations. The profits generated from these crimes are used to fuel terrorism, purchase weapons, and bribe officials, creating a vicious cycle of insecurity and instability in the region.

To effectively counter these interconnected challenges, India recognizes the importance of collaborative action. By partnering with other nations in the region and beyond, India seeks to enhance information sharing, coordinate law enforcement efforts, and build capacity to address these transnational threats. This cooperative approach is central to India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the misuse of anti-terror laws by India and some regional governments to suppress dissent and persecute minorities undermine these efforts. Such actions risk fueling grievances that extremist groups like the Islamic State exploit to strengthen their foothold.²¹

India's Cooperation Partnerships

To advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has actively pursued cooperative partnerships with a range of countries in the region and beyond. These partnerships span various domains, including security, economics, and climate action, and are crucial for addressing shared challenges and promoting regional stability.

Key Bilateral Partnerships

India has cultivated strong bilateral partnerships with key countries in the Indo-Pacific to advance its strategic objectives and promote regional stability. These partnerships are characterized by a growing convergence of interests, shared democratic values, and a commitment to a rules-based order.

India-U.S. Relationship

The India-U.S. relationship has undergone a remarkable transformation over recent decades. Once characterized by Cold War-era skepticism, it has evolved into a robust strategic partnership rooted in converging interests. Since the late 1990s, every U.S. president—from Bill Clinton onward—has further strengthened ties, leaving the relationship sturdier than before. This deepening partnership reflects a growing recognition of its significance for regional and global stability, as both nations increasingly view each other as vital to addressing contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Key initiatives and mechanisms contributing to this partnership include:

- *2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE*: Established in 2017, this high-level dialogue brings together the foreign and defense ministers of both countries to discuss strategic and security issues. It has institutionalized strategic cooperation and elevated the bilateral relationship.²²

- *INITIATIVE ON CRITICAL AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY (ICET)*: Launched in 2023, iCET focuses on collaboration in cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, semiconductors, and biotechnology. This initiative reflects the growing convergence in technological innovation and its importance for economic growth and national security.²³
- *INDIA-U.S. DEFENSE ACCELERATION ECOSYSTEM (INDUS-X)*: This initiative aims to catalyze defense innovation and industrial cooperation, serving as a platform to connect defense companies, promote co-production opportunities, and foster technological collaboration.²⁴

These initiatives highlight the growing depth and breadth of the India-U.S. partnership, with both countries working together on critical and sensitive issues, reflecting a shared commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

India-Japan Relationship

Driven by converging strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, this relationship is a comprehensive strategic partnership, extending beyond its economic foundations.

This deepening partnership is reflected in collaborative initiatives such as:

- *ECONOMIC COOPERATION*: The foundation of the relationship remains strong, with the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement (CEPA) facilitating increased trade and investment.²⁵ Both countries are also actively collaborating on initiatives related to digital technology, clean energy, and semiconductors.
- *2+2 MINISTERIAL DIALOGUE*: Established in 2019, the dialogue between the foreign and defense ministers of both countries was initiated to further deepen bilateral security

and defense cooperation and the special strategic and global partnership between them.²⁶ India has the “2+2” Ministerial format with very few countries, including the United States, Australia, and Russia.

- *DEFENSE AND SECURITY COOPERATION*: The India-Japan partnership increasingly encompasses defense and security cooperation. The Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) facilitates logistical support and interoperability between their armed forces. Both countries also participate in joint military exercises, such as the Malabar naval exercise, and engage in dialogues on maritime security.²⁷
- *SHARED STRATEGIC VISION*: India and Japan share a common vision for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region underpinned by a commitment to a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law. Both countries are active participants in the Quad.

The India-Japan partnership is a cornerstone of India’s Act East policy and its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, reflecting a growing convergence of interests and a shared commitment to keeping the Indo-Pacific region secure.

India-Philippines Relationship

India’s partnership with the Philippines is witnessing an upswing, driven by shared concerns about China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. This burgeoning partnership encompasses several key dimensions:

- *DEFENSE COOPERATION*: The strengthening of defense ties is a notable development. In 2022, India signed a contract to supply BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines, marking India’s first major defense export to Southeast Asia.²⁸

- *STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE*: India and the Philippines share a common interest in upholding a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Both Countries are vocal in their support for freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.
- *ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TIES*: While defense and strategic cooperation have taken center stage, India and the Philippines are also working to enhance economic and cultural ties.

The growing partnership between India and the Philippines is a significant development in the Indo-Pacific, which holds the potential to further counterbalance China's growing influence.

India-Vietnam Relationship

In recent years, the India-Vietnam partnership has evolved into a robust and multifaceted relationship encompassing defense, political, and economic collaboration. Their shared commitment to a rules-based Indo-Pacific is shaped by mutual concerns over China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, where Vietnam faces territorial disputes, and India has vested economic interests, particularly with its oil exploration projects.²⁹

- *DEFENSE COOPERATION*: The India-Vietnam defense relationship is a cornerstone of their partnership, characterized by military training, equipment transfers, and credit lines provided by India. Joint naval exercises further enhance maritime security and promote regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. In a landmark move in 2023, India gifted an operational Indian Navy missile corvette to Vietnam—the first instance of India transferring an active warship to a friendly nation—underscoring the strategic depth of their ties.³⁰
- *ALIGNED INTERESTS*: Elevated to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” in 2016, India and Vietnam share this

designation with only a select group of nations. As of 2024, the group includes South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Australia—three of which are Quad members.³¹ Both nations are among the world’s fastest growing economies, attracting investment from other countries seeking alternatives to China.³²

- *ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL TIES*: Bilateral trade reached \$15 billion in 2023, with India ranking as Vietnam’s seventh-largest trading partner and a key importer of Vietnamese products.³³ In 2024, the two countries signed nine agreements to strengthen cooperation in areas such as culture, tourism, broadcasting, and agriculture, further enriching their economic and cultural relationship.³⁴

Regional and Multilateral Initiatives

Beyond bilateral partnerships, India actively engages in regional and multilateral initiatives to promote its Indo-Pacific vision and address shared challenges. These initiatives encompass a wide range of areas, including security, climate action, maritime cooperation, and economic integration.

Net Security Provider

India aspires to be a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific, contributing to regional peace and stability. This involves:

- *MARITIME SECURITY*: Ensuring the security of sea lanes, conducting anti-piracy operations, and participating in joint naval exercises with regional partners.
- *HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF (HADR)*: Providing HADR to neighboring countries and contributing to regional disaster response mechanisms.

- *CAPACITY BUILDING*: Engaging in capacity-building initiatives with partner nations to enhance their security capabilities.

India's "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship) initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified its effort toward global leadership. By providing vaccine doses to countries in the Indo-Pacific, India signaled its ability to contribute to regional health security.³⁵

Climate Action and Disaster Resilience

Recognizing the growing threat of climate change, India has prioritized climate action and disaster resilience in its regional policies. Key initiatives include:

- *COALITION FOR DISASTER RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE (CDRI)*: This global initiative, launched by India in 2019, brings together governments, organizations, and the private sector to promote climate-resilient infrastructure.³⁶
- *ASEAN-INDIA GREEN FUND (AIGF)*: This collaborative initiative established in 2007 supports projects focused on climate change adaptation and mitigation, renewable energy, and environmental conservation.³⁷

These initiatives reflect India's adherence to building regional resilience to climate change and natural disasters, recognizing their potential to destabilize the region and hinder development.

Maritime Security

As a major maritime power with a long coastline and a growing navy, India plays a crucial role in maintaining maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Key aspects of India's maritime security efforts include:

- *MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS*: Enhancing maritime domain awareness through surveillance, patrolling, and information sharing.
- *REGIONAL COOPERATION*: Deepening cooperation with regional partners through joint naval exercises, information sharing, and capacity-building initiatives.
- *INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS CENTRE (IMAC)*: Strengthening India's maritime domain awareness and contributing to regional initiatives like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).³⁸

These efforts are crucial for safeguarding India's maritime interests, protecting sea lines of communication, and promoting a stable and secure maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Economic Integration

India is increasingly engaging in regional trade agreements and economic initiatives to boost its economic growth and influence in the Indo-Pacific. Key examples include:

- *INDO-PACIFIC ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK (IPEF)*: India is an active participant in IPEF, which aims to deepen economic ties among Indo-Pacific nations with a focus on areas such as supply chain resilience, clean energy, and digital trade.³⁹
- *FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS (FTA)*: India has signed several FTAs with regional partners, including ASEAN, South Korea, Japan, and Mauritius to promote trade and investment.

Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

While India's strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific is ambitious and multifaceted, its efforts face various internal and external challenges that could hinder its ability to achieve its objectives.

1. *DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS*: India's domestic economic challenges, such as slow growth, fiscal deficits, or high unemployment, will limit its capacity to invest in strategic initiatives abroad. These economic constraints can affect:

- *Defense Modernization*: Limited resources can hinder India's ability to modernize its armed forces and acquire advanced military technology. For example, an examination of the defense budget for FY 2024-2025 accounts for only 12.9% of the total budget, falling short of adequately addressing the scale of threats the country faces. This allocation is actually lower than the previous fiscal year's, highlighting the challenges India faces in funding necessary military modernization.⁴⁰
- *Diplomatic Initiatives*: Financial constraints will also limit India's ability to engage in robust diplomacy, including funding embassies, providing development assistance, and participating in international forums.
- *Infrastructure Development*: India's own infrastructure gaps, including inadequate transportation networks and energy infrastructure, will hinder its ability to participate in regional connectivity initiatives and promote trade.

Furthermore, national political considerations and concerns about protecting domestic industries have influenced India's cautious approach to regional trade agreements. This is evidenced in:

- *Withdrawal from RCEP*: India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019. RCEP is a free-trade agreement among 15 Asia-Pacific nations, including China, Japan, and Australia. India's concerns centered on the potential negative impact on domestic industries and the economy.⁴¹

- *Limited Interest in CTPP*: India has shown limited interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a free trade agreement among 11 Pacific Rim countries, including Japan, Canada, and Australia. India's concerns stem from the potential impact on domestic industries and the agreement's stringent standards, which could be challenging for India to meet given its current regulatory and economic environment.⁴²

These examples highlight the tension between India's strategic interests in regional economic integration and its domestic concerns about protecting its industries and ensuring equitable economic growth.

Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

India's commitment to "strategic autonomy" is a defining feature of its foreign policy. It allows India to maintain flexibility and independence in its international relations, avoiding entanglement in rigid alliances and pursuing its own national interests. This approach has historically allowed India to maintain balanced relations with various powers, even those with conflicting interests. For example, India has managed to sustain ties with both the United States and Russia, even amidst growing tensions between them. This is evident in India's continued purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia despite the threat of U.S. sanctions and its simultaneous participation in the Quad.

However, this approach can also present challenges in the Indo-Pacific:

- *PERCEPTION OF AMBIGUITY*: India's reluctance to explicitly criticize actions by countries like Russia and Iran or to take firm stances on certain global conflicts creates a perception of ambiguity about its commitment to a rules-based order. This can potentially erode its credibility on the world stage.

and diminish its influence in shaping the regional and global security architecture.⁴³

- *MISSED OPPORTUNITIES*: This cautious approach could lead to missed opportunities for India to exert greater leadership in the Indo-Pacific and contribute more actively to shaping a stable and rules-based regional order.

While strategic autonomy offers India valuable flexibility, it requires careful calibration on key global issues. India will need to balance its commitment to independence with a demonstrated dedication to upholding international norms and countering actions that threaten the rules-based order. This balance is particularly crucial in the Indo-Pacific, where India aspires to lead in fostering regional stability.

However, India's increasing reluctance to fully support the existing global order raises questions about its stance. By maintaining "strategic silence" on contentious global issues, India risks long-term reputational damage, as its neutrality may be perceived as tacit approval of anti-democratic and revisionist actions. For example, India's decision not to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn criticism from global partners, who see this stance as contradictory to India's historical support for sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁴

A case could be made that India's abstention reflects a view of the Ukraine conflict as a distant European issue, outside South Asian interests. Yet, India's restraint extends beyond Europe. In 2022, India abstained from a United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) vote to establish a fact-finding mission on human rights abuses in Iran after the protests over Mahsa Amini's death.⁴⁵ This decision appeared to prioritize relations with authoritarian regimes over accountability and reform.

Similarly, India abstained from a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) vote calling for an immediate end to violence in

Myanmar and the release of political prisoners, opting instead for “quiet and patient diplomacy.”⁴⁶ This stance aligned India with Russia and China, powers often seen as challenging the rules-based order, and signaled tacit tolerance of Myanmar’s military junta. By refraining from supporting democratic governance and human rights, India missed an opportunity to demonstrate principled leadership.

This pattern of neutrality raises legitimate concerns about India’s commitment to democratic values on the global stage. While restraint may safeguard short-term interests, it risks eroding India’s credibility and influence as a democratic advocate. To achieve influential global leadership, India will need to recalibrate its approach, balancing autonomy with principled positions on key issues. Aligning its actions more closely with its professed democratic ideals would not only reinforce its commitment to a rules-based order but also enhance its reputation as a responsible and engaged global actor.

Regional Volatility

India’s efforts to foster regional cohesion under the Neighborhood First policy remain fraught with volatility. Relations with Pakistan continue to be strained by longstanding territorial disputes and security concerns, stalling meaningful cooperation. Diplomatic challenges with neighbors like Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka persist, often driven by border disagreements and political differences. Compounding these issues is China’s expanding influence in South Asia, particularly through its BRI, which poses a significant challenge to India’s efforts to counterbalance Beijing’s economic and strategic footprint in the region.

The volatile geopolitical landscape in India’s neighborhood—highlighted by the ousting of Sheikh Hasina’s government in Bangladesh, the military coup in Myanmar, Pakistan’s precarious balance, Taliban control in Afghanistan, and fractious ties with Sri

Lanka and the Maldives⁴⁷—poses another set of challenges, which have spillover effects on India's security and economic interests.⁴⁸ This necessitates that India be less irascible when neighbors complain at its heavy-handedness and devote significant resources and diplomatic efforts in its Neighborhood First Policy to manage these relationships, potentially diverting attention and resources from its broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

India's Aspiration for Leadership in the Global South

India's increasingly assertive role in international affairs, particularly its challenge to the traditional Western-dominated rule-making processes, is a significant factor to consider when assessing its commitment to a rules-based international order. India first announced its support for such an order at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, and the term has since become a staple in India's official statements.⁴⁹ However, India has concurrently criticized the non-representative nature of international bodies like the United Nations (UN), calling them “not representative of current realities.” At a 2024 UN summit, the Indian Intelligence Bureau Director underscored this view by highlighting Africa's limited representation on the UN Security Council, despite Africa being the focal point of over half the Council's work.⁵⁰ This stance reflects India's advocacy for a more inclusive global governance structure.

India is leveraging its growing influence to bridge the gap between the Global South and Global North, advocating for climate justice, equitable economic development, and technology access. Its active participation in multilateral forums like the United Nations, G20, and BRICS demonstrates its commitment to advancing the interests of developing countries. India played a prominent role in inducting the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023,⁵¹ solidifying its position as a champion for greater inclusion of the Global South in international governance. Furthermore, with the expansion of BRICS to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates India hopes to strengthen its goal

for leadership within the Global South and its ability to shape the agenda on key global issues.

The BRICS Expansion: Implications for India

India plays a unique role within BRICS. As the most Western-oriented member, it aims to bridge the gap between the West and the Global South. Simultaneously, India is arguably the primary beneficiary of BRICS' expansion, leveraging the platform to amplify its global influence. This unique position allows India to balance ties with the West while using BRICS to foster economic partnership and champion a non-Western yet non-confrontational approach.⁵² Indian leaders have framed BRICS as an entity that operates outside Western-centric frameworks, a stance that has resonated across the bloc. Russian President Vladimir Putin echoed India's sentiment that BRICS is "not anti-Western; it's just non-Western." This shared perspective was reaffirmed at the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, presenting BRICS as a pluralistic rather than adversarial coalition.⁵³

At the same summit, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argued for India's role as leader of the Global South, stating, "The Global South has a high degree of trust and expectation from India." India has actively embraced this leadership role, with neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and Bhutan acknowledging India as a "big brother" and "benevolent elder sibling."⁵⁴ However, India's regional ambitions also face criticism. While it seeks to lead, India must overcome significant internal constraints—such as poverty, unemployment, infrastructural gaps and religious divisions—while also contending with the growing regional influence of China.

India and China: The Regional Face-Off

A notable moment in India-China relations occurred at the 2024 Kazan BRICS summit, where Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Modi held sideline talks addressing the protracted border tensions.⁵⁵ This dialogue marked a tentative step toward reconciliation after the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in casualties and eroded confidence-building measures that had historically helped prevent conflict escalation.

India and China hold contrasting visions for Asian governance. While China's BRI promotes a China-centric order, India advocates for a multipolar region with shared power among states. This divergence fuels India's concerns about China's motives, particularly as Beijing consolidates influence over smaller neighboring countries. India's ambition on establishing itself as a leader of the Global South serves to counterbalance China's regional influence while avoiding direct military confrontations. However, economic interdependencies complicate this relationship: in 2024, China accounted for 5.8% of India's exports and 14.8% of its imports, making it India's largest trading partner in FY 2024.⁵⁶ These ties, necessitate caution, as any economic estrangement could carry significant costs for India.

In response, India has actively diversified its diplomatic and economic partnerships. This includes engaging in multilateral platforms like the Quad, which provides additional options for balancing China's influence. By fostering these multilateral relationships, India aims to be better positioned to reduce its economic reliance on China and mitigate regional insecurities. This strategy, that could pay huge dividends for all sides, is yet to attract increased foreign investment to India or position it as a competitor to China in infrastructure and technology across the region. Reflecting a pragmatic approach to global governance, India aims to shape a more inclusive and balanced world order while deftly

managing regional complexities. However, the Indo-Pacific remains a dynamic and evolving landscape, requiring India to continuously adapt its strategies to meet emerging challenges and opportunities.

The Future of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's rise as a major power in the Indo-Pacific is reshaping regional dynamics. Its multifaceted approach—anchored in strategic partnerships, regional initiatives, and a commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—has significant potential to bolster regional stability and prosperity. However, India faces notable challenges, including domestic constraints, the complexities of balancing strategic autonomy, and regional volatility. Addressing these challenges effectively will allow India to solidify its role as a leading power and actively shape a rules-based, inclusive regional order.

Strong regional and global partnerships will be critical to India's success. A failure to assert its stance on key issues risks undermining its role in stabilizing the region and diminishing its ability to counter China's growing influence. Reaffirming its commitment to a rules-based international order will be imperative for India to maintain its stature and influence in both regional and global affairs.

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific is still evolving. As the regional and global landscape continues to shift, India will need to adapt its strategy to address new challenges and capitalize on new opportunities. Several key factors will determine the future trajectory of India's Indo-Pacific approach:

1. *THE EVOLVING REGIONAL ORDER*: The Indo-Pacific is witnessing a dynamic interplay of forces, with the rise of China, the U.S.-China competition, and regional instability creating a complex security environment. India will need to deftly navigate these shifting dynamics to secure its interests and promote regional stability. This will require a nuanced

approach that balances its strategic autonomy with the need to forge strong partnerships with like-minded countries.

2. *THE ROLE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES*: Emerging technologies, such as AI, cyber capabilities, and space technologies, will play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. India will need to invest in these technologies and develop its own capabilities to ensure its security and maintain its strategic edge. It will also need to actively engage in shaping norms and regulations for the responsible use of these technologies in the region.
3. *INDIA'S GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS*: India's growing economic and military power is accompanied by rising global aspirations. India seeks to play a more prominent role in global governance institutions and contribute to shaping international norms and rules. This will require India to actively engage in multilateral forums, strengthen its diplomatic capabilities, and demonstrate its commitment to a rules-based international order.
4. *ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT*: India's ability to sustain its Indo-Pacific strategy will depend on its success in addressing domestic challenges, such as promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, advancing social cohesion, and improving infrastructure. These domestic factors will shape its capacity to invest in defense modernization, diplomatic initiatives, and regional connectivity projects.
5. *ENHANCING SECURITY COOPERATION*: Deepening security cooperation with partners will be crucial for navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific. India can prioritize the following areas:

- *Maritime Security*: Establish a joint maritime domain awareness center, conduct complex combined naval exercises, and facilitate technology transfer for maritime security.
- *Counterterrorism*: Enhance intelligence sharing, expand capacity-building programs, and conduct joint counterterrorism exercises.
- *Cybersecurity*: Establish a cybersecurity information-sharing partnership, conduct joint cyber exercises, and develop a regional cyber code of conduct.
- *Climate Change and Disaster Resilience*: Develop a regional disaster response mechanism, collaborate on early warning systems, and provide climate change capacity building.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is a work in progress. Its success will depend on its ability to adapt to the evolving regional and global landscape, leverage emerging technologies, and address domestic challenges. By effectively navigating these complexities and deepening security cooperation with its partners, India can advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific and play a leading role in shaping a stable and prosperous regional order.

Conclusion: Navigating Multilateral Groupings, Polycrisis, and Diplomatic Realignments in the Indo-Pacific

India's emergence as a major power is perceptibly impacting the Indo-Pacific. Its approach to the region is defined by a multifaceted strategy that combines active multilateral engagement, a commitment to rules-based order, and a proactive response to global challenges. This was exemplified by India's 2023 G20 presidency, where it spearheaded initiatives on climate change, digital transformation, and sustainable development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of nations under the theme "One Earth, One

Family, One Future.”⁵⁷ India’s leadership in the G20 demonstrates its stated fidelity to cooperative multilateralism and its determination to address shared challenges while solidifying its position as a responsible global actor.

The current era of “polycrisis”—marked by the convergence of pandemics, geopolitical tensions, and environmental emergencies—presents both challenges and opportunities for India. In response to these intersecting crises, India has adopted a proactive and resilient approach, demonstrating leadership in global health security and climate action. The “Vaccine Maitri” program, which provided COVID-19 vaccine support to over 90 countries, was meant to demonstrate India’s commitment to global health cooperation.⁵⁸ Similarly, India’s co-founding of the International Solar Alliance signals its dedication to sustainable solutions for developing countries.⁵⁹ These initiatives reinforce India’s role as a stabilizing force that contributes to collaborative solutions in a complex and unpredictable world.

India’s diplomatic approach is characterized by strategic autonomy, allowing it to engage with a diverse range of global actors while preserving its independence. This approach, which emphasizes “involvement with restraint,” is evident in India’s tightrope balancing of relations with major powers like the United States, Russia, and China. While India participates in the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, it also maintains longstanding ties with Russia in areas of defense and energy. This reflects India’s commitment to deepening partnerships that serve its national interests without compromising its strategic autonomy. The growing India-U.S. strategic partnership, for example, has benefited from American flexibility regarding India’s purchases of Iranian oil and Russian military equipment, including the S-400 missile system.⁶⁰ This understanding of India’s unique geopolitical context reinforces U.S. support for a stronger and more autonomous India.

Furthermore India's emergence as a major defense exporter, with the United States, France, and Armenia as top customers, highlights its growing role in the global security industry.⁶¹

India's ambitions to become a global power are significantly challenged by domestic issues, particularly a lack of social cohesion.⁶² Despite its economic growth and geopolitical advancements, internal divisions rooted in religion,⁶³ caste, regionalism, and economic inequality continue to pose substantial risks.⁶⁴ These factors will undermine India's ability to project unity and stability, which are essential for achieving and sustaining a prominent global role.⁶⁵

Externally, shifting geopolitical dynamics—such as the war in Ukraine and escalating tensions among major powers—compel India to constantly reassess its partnerships and alliances. While the United States has supported India's rise, historical tensions and lingering skepticism within India about U.S. intentions persist. Memories of past U.S. sanctions and military support to Pakistan contribute to this cautiousness.⁶⁶ Compounding these challenges are concerns about India's democratic backsliding, which may strain ties with Western democracies.⁶⁷ Conversely, Russia's consistent support—exemplified by its avoidance of sanctions against India—has cultivated a perception of reliability among segments of Indian society, adding complexity to India's balancing act on the global stage.

As India's global role expands, it will need to adapt its diplomatic strategies to navigate an increasingly complex and multipolar world. This requires continued investment in institutional capacity and the cultivation of strategic partnerships that enable India to exercise its influence responsibly and effectively. India is actively working to shape a multipolar order that prioritizes sovereignty, adherence to international law, and regional cooperation. Its approach, defined by "involvement with restraint," allows India to preserve its strategic autonomy.

However, aspiring global leaders must also take principled stances on democracy and human rights. Beyond economic and military strength, lasting credibility and influence are built on foundations of core values, even when doing so entails diplomatic costs. For India, balancing strategic restraint with active engagement will be crucial to building its soft power and global reputation.

India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects its commitment to regional stability and its aspirations to be a leading force in shaping the regional order. By balancing its strategic autonomy with active participation in multilateral initiatives, India is navigating the complexities of the Indo-Pacific while upholding its longstanding principles. This is exemplified by its engagement in the Quad, where it collaborates with like-minded nations to promote a free, open, and rules-based regional order. Through a combination of multilateral groupings and strategic partnerships, India seeks to further establish its credentials and consolidate its stature as a regional power and a reliable partner in navigating the complexities of this increasingly vital region.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

STRATEGIC SMALLNESS IN SOUTH ASIA:

LEVERAGING INFLUENCE AMONG GIANTS

Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath

We may be small, but that does not give you the license to bully us.

— Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, President of the Maldives,
upon his return from a triumphant visit to China,
Velana Airport, January 2024.¹

Abstract

Caught between the strategic ambitions of India and China, South Asia's less powerful states navigate a delicate balance to safeguard their sovereignty and advance their development goals. This chapter examines how these smaller nations could leverage multilateral platforms to diversify alliances, amplify their global voices, and reduce reliance on dominant powers. It explores their challenges, strategies, and successes in transforming geopolitical vulnerabilities into strengths while pursuing stability and sustainable growth in a multipolar world.

Introduction

When a small state like Bhutan, nestled in the Himalayas, manages the competing pressures of regional giants India and China,² it highlights the strategic resilience of South Asia's smaller states. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka exist in a perpetual balancing act, striving to safeguard their sovereignty while pursuing economic growth amid the ambitions of dominant powers. Their precarious position demands careful diplomacy to avoid being drawn into the escalating rivalry between the two behemoths. This rivalry, compounded by global power shifts and economic uncertainties, has created a complex

geopolitical landscape that requires smaller states to chart independent and calculated paths.

This chapter contends that smaller states of South Asia must move beyond reactive approaches and adopt a proactive stance in regional and global affairs.³ By fostering regional cooperation and actively engaging in multilateral platforms, these nations can leverage their collective strength to secure their sovereignty and achieve lasting stability in an increasingly multipolar world.

The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, rising debt burdens, and the ripple effects of conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have severely impacted South Asia's economies. The smaller, more vulnerable nations of the region have borne the brunt of these crises, facing widespread social unrest, violent protests, and the ousting of political elites, all of which have deepened regional uncertainty. This upheaval unfolds against a backdrop of intensifying global strategic competition between the United States and China, further complicated by a regional power struggle between China and India.⁴

In this environment, South Asia's lesser powers must navigate not only external pressures but also internal vulnerabilities. By embracing strategic autonomy, strengthening regional ties, and enhancing their engagement in multilateral forums, these nations can transform their vulnerabilities into opportunities and position themselves as critical contributors to regional and global stability.

Historical Context:

The Rise of New Powers in South Asia

South Asia's smaller states have long aspired to shape their own futures, yet their geopolitical trajectories have been heavily influenced by the actions and interests of larger powers. Historically, India, as the dominant regional power, engaged with its neighbors through bilateral agreements,⁵ often prioritizing its strategic objectives and maintaining a firm aversion to external

influences in the region. While this approach gave India leverage in individual dealings, it has constrained the options of smaller states seeking diversified partnerships. Additionally, India's development assistance programs, though substantial, have often been criticized for mirroring the glacial pace of its own domestic policies, failing at times to address the urgent needs of its neighbors effectively.

This dynamic began to evolve with the rise of China as a global economic powerhouse. Although China's strategic partnership with Pakistan dates back to the 1960s,⁶ its economic engagement with the region has expanded significantly in recent decades. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a decade ago offered South Asian states an alternative source of funding for critical infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and power grids.⁷ Six South Asian countries—excluding India and Bhutan—joined the initiative, drawn by China's deeper financial resources and its reputation for efficient project execution. This economic engagement gradually transitioned into political influence, challenging India's traditional dominance in the region,⁸ prompting⁹ India to define China as a bully.¹⁰

The irony is not lost among the lesser powers of South Asia, for whom India is clearly the bully.¹¹ Anti-India sentiment has continued to play a key role in reshaping South Asia's geopolitics for the past 40 years. While some grievances stem from historical disputes, many arise from India's highhandedness, coercive diplomacy,¹² and interference in its neighbors' domestic affairs. These sentiments, coupled with neighboring states' efforts to assert their sovereignty, have had significant repercussions, including strained diplomatic ties, increased Chinese influence, and disruptions in regional cooperation initiatives.

In contrast to India, China, despite sharing borders with five South Asian countries—Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan—operates without the historical baggage of British colonial rule or combative ties with South Asian minorities.¹³ This

allows China to adopt a more pragmatic and transactional approach in its dealing with the region. While the BRI has faced criticism for creating debt burdens and raising transparency concerns,¹⁴ China's strategic presence, arguably as the "ninth South Asian nation," has become an unavoidable reality that India and her less powerful neighbors must navigate.¹⁵

Strategic competition in South Asia is defined by the China-India contest for supremacy. The escalating competition between them—rooted in territorial disputes, rapid military modernization, and economic rivalry—has further complicated the geopolitical landscape in South Asia. Lesser powers are often forced to make difficult choices, balancing relationships with the two giants while safeguarding their own interests. India's highhanded approach toward its neighbors has occasionally alienated them,¹⁶ driving some closer to China. For instance, while India remains the largest trading partner of Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, China has eclipsed India in trade relationships with Bangladesh¹⁷ and Pakistan. The growing Chinese footprint has given smaller states opportunities to play one power against the other, gaining leverage and benefits from both sides.¹⁸

This intensifying India-China competition presents both risks and opportunities for South Asia's smaller states. On the other hand, it opens the possibilities for strategic maneuvering, allowing smaller states to leverage relationships with both giants to their advantage.¹⁹

South Asia's lesser powers stand at a pivotal crossroads.²⁰ To navigate this complex landscape and preserve their sovereignty, these nations must adopt a proactive approach. By embracing strategic autonomy, fostering regional cooperation, and prioritizing sustainable growth, they can transform their vulnerabilities into strengths. This path forward requires courage, innovation, and collaboration—a recognition that even the smallest states can exert meaningful influence when they chart their own course with clarity and purpose.

Small States, Strategic Places: South Asia's Geopolitical Landscape

Despite their size, the smaller states of South Asia exert considerable influence due to their strategic geopolitical positioning. These nations capitalize on their unique locations to secure regional and international interests while navigating complex power dynamics.

- *NEPAL AND BHUTAN*: Nestled in the Himalayas, Nepal and Bhutan act as critical buffers between the two Asian giants, India and China. Bhutan's cautious diplomacy underscores its commitment to sovereignty and an independent foreign policy. Maintaining close relations with India while avoiding formal ties with China,²¹ Bhutan ensures its security without becoming entangled in great power rivalries. Nepal, on the other hand, actively engages with both India and China, leveraging their competition to maximize its strategic autonomy and secure economic benefits.
- *SRI LANKA AND MALDIVES*: These island nations command vital maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, making them indispensable to global trade and security. Sri Lanka's location has drawn significant attention from both India and China, with the Hambantota Port project symbolizing the strategic importance of its waters. The Maldives skillfully balances its relations, receiving security assistance from India while attracting Chinese infrastructure investment. Its leadership on climate resilience showcases how smaller states can influence global discourse, positioning themselves as advocates for vulnerable nations in international climate negotiations.
- *BANGLADESH*: Strategically situated along the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh serves as a crucial connectivity hub linking South and Southeast Asia. It adeptly balances its relations,

leveraging deep cultural and historical ties with India while securing substantial Chinese investment in infrastructure projects. Beyond the region, Bangladesh's significant contributions to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions elevate its global standing, reinforcing its image as a responsible and proactive international actor.

These smaller states demonstrate that strategic positioning can translate into outsized influence. By leveraging their geographic advantages, balancing external relationships, and advancing global advocacy, they navigate the complexities of South Asia's geopolitical landscape with agility and purpose.

The Strategic Dilemma: Navigating the Regional Dynamics

India and China wield considerable influence over the geopolitical landscape of South Asia,²² using economic, political, and military tools to shape the region according to their strategic interests. This intensifying competition creates both opportunities and challenges for the smaller states caught in the middle.

Economic Contestations

India has traditionally dominated South Asia economically, leveraging its deep historical and cultural ties with neighboring countries. Initiatives like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program underscore India's commitment to fostering regional development and capacity-building.²³ Additionally, India uses its soft power through cultural diplomacy and fostering people-to-people connections to strengthen regional ties. However, its recent muscular foreign policy has strained relationships with several neighbors,²⁴ including Nepal, Maldives,²⁵ Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, creating opportunities for China's growing regional engagement. Coupled with its long-standing rivalry with Pakistan, India faces increasing challenges in

competing with China's significant capital inflows, which have attracted South Asian nations seeking infrastructure and economic development.²⁶

China's economic influence in South Asia has grown significantly, driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative has provided substantial funding for infrastructure projects like roads, ports, and power plants, particularly in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Investments in critical sectors such as energy, transportation, and logistics reflect China's broader strategy of addressing regional infrastructure gaps while securing strategic interests, including energy resource access.²⁷

Despite the tangible development benefits these projects offer, concerns over debt sustainability and strategic leverage loom large.²⁸ Sri Lanka's debt crisis, partly linked to Chinese-funded projects like the Hambantota Port, highlights the risks of over-reliance on external capital by poorly governed states. Beyond economics, China's military modernization and assertive territorial claims in areas like the South China Sea add complexity to regional security dynamics.

The dynamic interaction between Indian and Chinese influence shapes a complex geopolitical landscape in South Asia. While smaller states have leveraged this rivalry to secure investments and trade opportunities, they often struggle to maintain sovereignty and navigate the precarious balance between these two powers.

Political Strategies and Challenges

China and India pursue distinct political strategies in South Asia, reflecting their divergent approaches to influence. China emphasizes strategic partnerships, such as its enduring alliance with Pakistan, to counterbalance India's regional dominance. Its policy of non-interference in domestic politics allows it to maintain relations with diverse regimes, making it an attractive partner for states wary of interventionist powers.²⁹

In contrast, India emphasizes shared cultural and historical ties while promoting regional cooperation through organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and, more recently, the Global South bloc. India's soft power—rooted in shared cultural heritage, educational exchanges, and economic links—has been a cornerstone of its regional diplomacy. However, India's Pavlovian tendency to intervene in the domestic affairs of its neighbors, such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, has strained relationships.³⁰ For instance, India's unofficial blockade of Nepal in 2015, aimed at pressuring Kathmandu to amend its new constitution to align with New Delhi's political interests, caused significant resentment³¹ while waves of anti-India sentiment in the Maldives fueled by the “*India-Out*” campaign,³² have further complicated relations. Critics argue that India's perceived interference in neighboring countries undermines their sovereignty, driving some closer to China.³³

These dynamics create a politically delicate environment in South Asia. India's active involvement often faces resistance, prompting smaller states to engage with China as an alternative. Meanwhile, China's hands-off approach enables it to deepen its influence without accusations of meddling in internal affairs, further challenging India's traditional dominance.

Military Maneuvers and Security Dynamics

China and India are both increasingly asserting their military presence in South Asia, exacerbating security dilemmas for smaller states. China's deepening defense ties with Pakistan include the provision of advanced military technology and bilateral security cooperation, which India views as a direct threat.³⁴ Additionally, China's naval expansion in the Indian Ocean—marked by the development of dual-use facilities in the ports of Gwadar and Jiwani (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka)—has amplified its strategic reach, raising alarm in New Delhi.³⁵

India has responded by strengthening its military capabilities, increasing defense spending, and expanding security partnerships. Joint military exercises with regional neighbors bolster India's influence, while collaboration with Indo-Pacific partners like the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) aims to counterbalance China's growing presence. These efforts underline India's strategy to maintain regional dominance and deter Chinese encroachments on its sphere of influence.

For smaller South Asian states, this intensifying rivalry presents a complex challenge. Dependence on one side risks undermining their foreign policy independence, leaving them vulnerable to external pressures. This "strategic trap" not only constrains their capacity to engage neutrally on regional and multilateral platforms but also complicates their efforts to safeguard sovereignty.

The escalating India-China rivalry shapes South Asia's regional dynamics, presenting both risks and opportunities for smaller states. While these nations can leverage the competition to secure development benefits, they must also navigate the associated political and security challenges with caution. By prioritizing strategic autonomy, fostering regional cooperation, and engaging selectively with both powers, South Asia's smaller states can mitigate external pressures and pursue sustainable development while safeguarding their sovereignty.

Foreign Policy Pathways of South Asia's Smaller States: An Overview

The foreign policies of South Asia's smaller states are shaped by their unique geographical, economic, and political contexts. Positioned between two regional giants, India and China, these nations face complex challenges in navigating the competing influences of these powers while safeguarding their sovereignty and advancing their development goals. Each state's approach reflects a

nuanced blend of pragmatism and strategic ambition as it seeks to balance domestic priorities with the demands of an evolving global order.

This section explores how smaller South Asian states—Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan—strategically chart their foreign policy pathways. From leveraging geographic advantages and pursuing economic diversification to balancing regional power dynamics and engaging in global multilateralism, these nations exemplify the varied strategies employed to navigate a multipolar world. Their responses not only highlight their resilience but also underscore their growing role in shaping South Asia’s geopolitical landscape.

Nepal

Nepal’s foreign policy is characterized by a delicate balancing act between its two powerful neighbors, India and China. Traditionally aligned with India due to shared cultural and historical ties, Nepal has increasingly diversified its foreign relations by engaging with China through infrastructure projects and economic cooperation under the BRI. This strategic pivot enables Nepal to leverage its relationship with China to counterbalance India’s influence while striving to maintain sovereignty and avoid overdependence on either power.³⁶ Nepal also actively engages with international partners to support its development goals.

Nepal, one of the poorest South Asian countries, relies heavily on its service sector (tourism) and energy sector (hydropower) for economic growth. Foreign trade constitutes 48% of its GDP, with India as its dominant trading partner, accounting for 71.9% of exports and 63.2% of imports. Other key export markets include the United States, Germany, Türkiye (2.0%), and the United Kingdom, while imports also come from China (13.5%) and other regional players.³⁷

Bhutan

Bhutan's foreign policy is marked by a cautious and strategically neutral approach aimed at safeguarding its sovereignty. Maintaining diplomatic relations with only 57 countries, excluding all permanent members of the UN Security Council,³⁸ Bhutan minimizes external influence and prioritizes its autonomy. This aligns with its historical strategy of isolation, and its close partnership with India formalized through the 1949 Treaty of Friendship.

Concerns over Chinese territorial ambitions were heightened in the 1950s when China released maps asserting claims over Bhutanese territory and occupied 300 square miles in 1958.³⁹ While these disputes remain unresolved, Bhutan and China have shown interest in resolving border issues through negotiations, although they do not maintain formal diplomatic relations.

Bhutan's partnership with India remains central to its foreign policy, anchored by the 1949 Treaty of Friendship, which was modernized in 2007 to affirm India's non-interference in Bhutan's internal affairs while encouraging consultation on *external relations*.⁴⁰ India also plays a significant role in Bhutan's security, providing defense training and equipment through the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT).⁴¹

However, Bhutan's special relationship with India has not made it immune to India's intrusive neighborhood policy. A notable instance occurred in 2013, when India withdrew fuel subsidies ahead of the Bhutanese elections, widely viewed as a political maneuver to influence domestic politics.⁴² This sparked a wave of anti-India sentiment, provoked public protests, and intensified debates about Bhutan's foreign policy independence. It also fueled discussions within Bhutan on its over-dependence on India and Indian interference in Thimpu's foreign policy decisions and led to growing advocacy within Bhutan for diversifying its diplomatic and economic partnerships, aiming to reduce reliance on India and strengthen its sovereignty.

Economically, Bhutan relies heavily on hydropower, largely financed and consumed by India. The non-hydropower sectors face challenges in global competitiveness. Bhutan's economy grew by 5.3% in fiscal years 2023 and 2024, driven by tourism recovery and mining.⁴³ In 2023, India accounted for 52.7% of Bhutan's exports and 78.5% of imports, with other trade partners including Bangladesh, Italy, Nepal, and China.⁴⁴

Bangladesh

Bangladesh pursues a pragmatic foreign policy that balances its relations with India and China while addressing its geographic realities alongside India and Myanmar. While maintaining strong economic and cultural ties with India, Bangladesh also actively engages China for investment in large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI. China's support includes funding for key projects such as seaports, railways, and power plants, alongside military assets like tanks and missile launchers.⁴⁵

In addition to ties with its regional neighbors, Bangladesh diversifies its international partnerships, engaging with nations like the United States and Japan to diversify its strategic options. This approach underscores Bangladesh's commitment to maintaining autonomy and reducing overreliance on any single power.

The textile and garment industry forms the backbone of Bangladesh's economy, contributing 11% to GDP and accounting for 80% of exports.⁴⁶ In 2023, ready-made garment exports to the European Union (EU) were valued at \$47.39 billion, while exports to the United States totaled \$7.29 billion.⁴⁷ This economic strength, coupled with proactive international engagements, enables Bangladesh to navigate its geopolitical challenges while securing sustainable growth.

Pakistan

Pakistan's foreign policy is heavily shaped by its strategic rivalry with India, driving its close alliance with China. The partnership, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), enhances Pakistan's infrastructure and energy capabilities while reinforcing its alignment with China as a counterweight to Indian influence.⁴⁸

Beyond its ties with China, Pakistan maintains significant relationships with Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as the United States, to secure economic assistance, energy supplies, and military support. This multifaceted approach reflects Pakistan's efforts to diversify partnerships and safeguard its national interests.⁴⁹

Foreign trade constitutes 33% of Pakistan's GDP, with textiles dominating the export sector, followed by rice. Imports include petroleum, palm oil, telecommunication equipment, and coal. In 2023, the United States was Pakistan's largest export market (20.1%), while China remained its largest source of imports (23%).⁵⁰

Pakistan's foreign policy reflects a careful balancing act. It leverages its alliance while maintaining critical ties with the United States to navigate its geopolitical challenges and ensure economic stability.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's foreign policy focuses on balancing relations with both India and China while navigating its geopolitical and economic realities. India has traditionally been a key partner due to cultural and geographic proximity, while China's influence has grown significantly through investments in major infrastructure projects like the Hambantota Port under the BRI.⁵¹ However, this dependency on Chinese funding partially contributed to Sri Lanka's

worst financial crisis in over seven decades, culminating in an economic default.

In response, Sri Lanka has sought to diversify partnerships by engaging with reliable Asian partners like Japan and participating in smaller economic forums.⁵² Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean enhances its importance for maritime security, prompting further engagement with the United States and other international actors.⁵³

Trade accounts for 47% of Sri Lanka's GDP, with key exports including tea and textiles and imports consisting of petroleum, fabrics, and medicaments. In 2023, its main export destinations were the United States, the United Kingdom, and India, while imports were sourced primarily from India, China, and the UAE.

Maldives

The Maldives employs a flexible and adaptive foreign policy, balancing security ties with India and infrastructure investment from China. While traditionally aligned with India campaigns like “India-Out” gained traction under President Mohamed Muizzu reflect domestic concerns over India's real and perceived interference.⁵⁴

Strategic location along vital maritime routes, the Maldives engages with global partners like the United States and European Union to mitigate overreliance on India and China.⁵⁵ In 2023, Asia accounted for most of its exports, with Thailand leading at 54%. Europe followed with 31%, led by the United Kingdom (14%).⁵⁶

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's foreign policy is shaped by its landlocked geography, ethnic diversity, and strategic importance as a geographic crossroads. While striving to balance its relations with neighbors and internal actors, the country continues to grapple with persistent internal conflicts. Its relationship with Pakistan is particularly fraught,⁵⁷ marked by shared ethnic ties and deep mistrust. Pakistan

is frequently accused of interfering in Afghan affairs to secure strategic depth, further complicating bilateral relations.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan's foreign relations have taken on a mix of ideological rigidity and pragmatic outreach. Most of the international community, including the United States, has withheld official recognition of the Taliban government.⁵⁸ India, while providing humanitarian assistance,⁵⁹ is cautiously engaging the Taliban through various channels,⁶⁰ as acknowledged by its Ministry of External Affairs.⁶¹ In contrast, China has moved closer to de facto recognition, appointing an ambassador to Kabul who formally presented credentials to the Taliban and hosting Taliban representatives in Beijing.⁶² China's engagement focuses on economic projects and counterterrorism, reflecting its broader strategic priorities in the region.

Afghanistan's trade, which reopened to international markets in 2001, accounted for 51% of GDP in 2021. The economy relies heavily on the export of low-value items such as dried fruit, carpets, and textiles, while imports consist primarily of wheat, textiles, and petroleum. Pakistan and India remain Afghanistan's key trading partners, highlighting the importance of regional economic ties amidst the country's ongoing political and economic challenges.⁶³

Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan's foreign policy reflects its efforts to secure limited partnerships, balancing ideological commitments with the practical need for economic and security cooperation. However, its path forward remains uncertain as it seeks recognition and stability in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

The Strategic Case for Multilateral Engagement

Smaller South Asian states are increasingly recognizing the value of multilateral and minilateral platforms as tools to navigate a complex regional and global environment. These platforms offer pathways to diversify alliances, amplify collective influence, and address shared

challenges, enabling smaller nations to strengthen their autonomy and advance their development goals. For states caught between regional giants like India and China, multilateral engagement provides an opportunity to reduce dependence on dominant powers while fostering collaboration with a broader range of partners. This section explores how smaller South Asian countries utilize these platforms to secure economic, political, and strategic benefits while addressing the challenges they face in maximizing their potential.

Diversification of Alliances

Participation in multilateral and minilateral platforms offers smaller South Asian states a strategic means to diversify their alliances, reducing dependence on dominant regional powers like India or China. These forums provide access to economic assistance, security cooperation, and diplomatic leverage, enhancing their autonomy and resilience in a competitive regional environment.

For instance, Bangladesh's engagement in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) allows it to strengthen economic and trade ties not only with India but also with Myanmar, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian nations. This diversification fosters trade routes beyond immediate neighbors, promoting economic stability. Similarly, platforms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) enable nations such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives to collaborate with a broad range of maritime partners from Africa to Southeast Asia. Through IORA, these states can attract investment from partners like Japan, Australia, and the UAE, providing alternatives to China's BRI while mitigating the risks of single-source dependency.

Platform for Collective Bargaining

Multilateral and minilateral platforms also serve as critical venues for smaller states to amplify their voices and protect their interests. By presenting united fronts, these nations can address shared

challenges, secure fairer economic terms, and resist undue influence from larger powers.

The Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), for example, has allowed members such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan to advocate for international climate action and funding for adaptation measures.⁶⁴ Bangladesh has successfully used the CVF to highlight the urgency of climate resilience, securing commitments for climate financing.⁶⁵ Similarly, Sri Lanka and the Maldives leverage IORA to coordinate marine conservation efforts, safeguarding fisheries and preserving tourism-dependent economies.

Labor migration represents another critical area for collaboration. The Colombo Process, a regional consultative forum for labor migration, enables countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to collectively negotiate improved conditions for migrant workers in host countries,⁶⁶ particularly in the Middle East. By aligning their migration policies, these states secure better protections for their citizens abroad while ensuring continued remittance flows vital to their economies.

Enhanced Strategic Visibility

Engagement in multilateral and minilateral platforms also enhances the strategic visibility of smaller states, enabling them to assert their unique perspectives and raise awareness of their challenges on the global stage. These platforms position smaller states as active contributors to regional stability and global governance.

The Maldives, for example, has used forums like the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) to rally global support for climate action,⁶⁷ emphasizing the existential threats posed by rising sea levels. This advocacy has elevated the Maldives' international profile, establishing it as a leading voice for small, climate-vulnerable nations and influencing global climate policy.

Economic platforms like the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) also provide opportunities for smaller South Asian states to attract foreign investment and advance their development agendas.⁶⁸ Through ASEM, countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan engage with European partners, fostering trade and investment while showcasing their commitment to international cooperation. By actively participating, these nations demonstrate their capacity for collaboration on political, economic, and social issues, positioning themselves as credible players within the Indo-Pacific region.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations in Multilateral Engagements

While multilateral and minilateral platforms offer significant benefits, smaller South Asian states face numerous institutional and political challenges that impede their ability to fully leverage these opportunities. These barriers, ranging from resource constraints to internal political instability, limit their capacity to engage effectively, coordinate actions, and advocate cohesively on regional and international issues.

Resource Constraints

Financial, technological, and human resource limitations are significant obstacles for smaller states, curtailing their ability to participate meaningfully in multilateral initiatives. For example, Bhutan's modest GDP restricts its capacity to contribute to initiatives like BIMSTEC, even when such projects promise long-term economic benefits.⁶⁹

Sri Lanka exemplifies how external resource dependencies can further complicate multilateral engagements. Reliance on Chinese loans has influenced its foreign policy, reducing its ability to maintain balanced stances in initiatives like BRI. These constraints often force smaller states to prioritize immediate domestic needs

over long-term collaborative goals, diminishing their effectiveness in regional and global platforms.

Internal Political Challenges

Political instability and governance issues undermine smaller states' ability to engage consistently and constructively in international forums. In Pakistan, frequent leadership changes and internal political strife have resulted in inconsistent foreign policy positions, particularly within SAARC. This lack of continuity has stalled regional progress and contributed to perceptions of unreliability.

Afghanistan, plagued by weak governance and corruption even before the Taliban takeover, struggled to participate in regional projects like CASA-1000, an initiative to facilitate electricity trade between Central and South Asia. Such internal challenges not only erode credibility but also weaken negotiating power, further isolating nations on the international stage.

Pathways to Overcome Challenges

To address these obstacles, smaller South Asian states must adopt targeted strategies to enhance institutional capacity and foster internal stability.

- *CAPACITY BUILDING*: Strengthening bureaucratic and diplomatic capacity through international support and training programs can empower smaller nations to coordinate and advocate more effectively in multilateral settings.
- *RESOURCE POOLING*: Collaborating within regional frameworks to share resources and expertise can help level the playing field for resource-constrained nations. Platforms like Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal Initiative (BBIN) offer manageable avenues for achieving tangible outcomes.

- **GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL STABILITY:** Addressing internal governance issues, fostering political continuity, and building domestic unity is essential for ensuring effective engagement in international forums. Stable governance allows for a greater focus on regional and global commitments.

Overcoming these challenges requires sustained effort and reform. By improving governance, fostering political stability, and strategically leveraging regional partnerships, smaller South Asian states can position themselves as active and effective contributors to regional and global initiatives, securing greater benefits for their economies and populations.

Conclusion: Embracing Strategic Autonomy through Multilateral Engagement

For South Asia's smaller states, achieving strategic autonomy has become a necessity rather than a choice. By diversifying foreign relations, fostering regional cooperation without the two giants, and strengthening domestic capacities, these nations can carve out independent pathways that safeguard their sovereignty and promote long-term stability in an increasingly multipolar world. Transforming geopolitical vulnerabilities into strategic advantages requires proactive engagement, thoughtful planning, and resilience in the face of external pressures.

However, a unified South Asian bloc that challenges the dominance of India and China is unlikely to go uncontested. Coercive tactics, such as economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, or strategic maneuvers, could disrupt these efforts and test the resolve of smaller states.

Greater participation in multilateral and regional platforms offers these nations vital opportunities for economic growth, strengthened diplomatic relations, and enhanced collective security. Such forums empower smaller states to diversify trade routes,

reduce dependence on dominant neighbors, and access alternative sources of development cooperation. Moreover, they provide a platform for smaller states to amplify their voices on pressing global issues like climate change, regional security, and economic stability, ensuring their concerns are acknowledged and addressed.

Participation in multilateral frameworks also empowers smaller states to negotiate better terms in international agreements, secure critical resources and technologies, and develop more balanced foreign policies. Collaborating with a diverse range of partners mitigates the risk of overreliance on larger powers like India and China. It fosters knowledge sharing, capacity building, and institutional development, equipping these smaller states with the tools needed to strengthen their economies and governance structures.

Ultimately, multilateral and minilateral engagement offers South Asia's smaller states a pathway to assert their sovereignty, shape global outcomes, and thrive in an interconnected world. By embracing these strategies, they position themselves as dynamic and proactive contributors to regional and global stability, ensuring a sustainable, prosperous, and autonomous future.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEYOND AMBIGUITY: OPERATIONALIZING SOUTH KOREA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Lami Kim

The difference between a good strategy and a bad one is often the quality of its assumptions.

— Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy Bad Strategy*, 2011

Abstract

In an era of escalating U.S.-China rivalry and the war in Ukraine, South Korea's traditional strategy of "strategic ambiguity" is facing growing challenges. This chapter examines South Korea's shift from strategic ambiguity to clarity in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, driven by these geopolitical tensions and China's increasing assertiveness. It analyzes the factors that have eroded the benefits of ambiguity and explores the opportunities and challenges associated with South Korea's new approach to regional engagement. The chapter also assesses the potential impact of domestic politics on the strategy's sustainability, highlighting the importance of public support and policy continuity for its success.

Introduction:

South Korea's Strategic Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific

The escalating rivalry between the United States and China has profoundly cast a long shadow over the Indo-Pacific, forcing nations in the region to grapple with a complex strategic dilemma. While economically intertwined with China, many countries rely on the United States for national security, leading to a widespread reluctance to explicitly choose sides. This balancing act has puzzled some observers, as prevailing theories in international relations, like Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory and Stephen Walt's

balance of threat theory, would anticipate different behaviors. Waltz's theory posits that in an anarchic international system,¹ states tend to form alliances to counterbalance a dominant power and maintain stability, while Walt's theory refines this, arguing that states align against the most threatening actor, considering factors like aggressive intentions, military capabilities, and geographic proximity.² In the current context, both theories would predict that nations in the Indo-Pacific might align against China, given its growing economic and military might and increasing assertiveness in territorial disputes. Yet, the reality is more nuanced. Smaller nations often opt for strategic neutrality or accommodation with a more powerful neighbor to avoid conflict, a strategy reminiscent of "Finlandization" employed during the Cold War.³ This approach prioritizes national survival through careful balancing, often at the expense of explicit alignment with either major power.

The chapter delves into the underpinnings and practical implications of South Korea's recent shift from strategic ambiguity toward a more explicit alignment with the United States through its Indo-Pacific Strategy. It examines the factors driving the domestic political dynamics that influence the strategy's sustainability. By analyzing this case study, we can gain valuable insights into the complexities of navigating great power competition in the 21st century.

South Korea's Balancing Act: A History of Strategic Ambiguity

Under President Moon Jae-in's leadership, South Korea pursued a hedging policy or "strategic ambiguity," carefully navigating its relationships with major powers like the United States and China. This approach stemmed from the progressive desire for greater autonomy in foreign policy, emphasizing self-reliance and maintaining an "equidistant" stance between these powers. This contrasted with the conservative preference for strengthening ties primarily with the United States. For example, during the presidency

of conservative leader Park Geun-hye, relations with China deteriorated following the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea, a move met with strong opposition from China. Upon taking office, the progressive Moon administration actively sought to repair relations with China, offering assurances through the “Three Nos” policy: no additional THAAD deployments, no integration into the U.S. missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance with the United States and Japan.⁴ This policy aimed to appease Beijing’s concerns regarding THAAD deployment and demonstrate South Korea’s commitment to maintaining a balanced relationship between the two major powers. In another conciliatory move toward China, the Moon administration, unlike some Western nations, opted not to exclude Chinese companies like Huawei from participating in the development of South Korea’s 5G network.

South Korea also maintained a cautious approach toward initiatives perceived as directly challenging China. This includes not joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and refraining from participating in military operations to counter China’s influence. These positions led some to perceive South Korea as a potential vulnerability within the U.S.-led coalition. However, proponents of strategic ambiguity argue that this approach allows South Korea to maintain crucial economic ties with China as well as elicit China’s cooperation in dealing with North Korea while preserving its security alliance with the United States.

The Weakening Case for Strategic Ambiguity

While strategic ambiguity has historically been a pragmatic approach for South Korea to navigate complex geopolitical realities, its efficacy is increasingly under scrutiny. Several key factors are contributing to the erosion of its advantages, prompting a reevaluation of its long-term viability.

*Bifurcating Global Environment:
A Catalyst for Strategic Realignment*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the great power competition between the United States and China amplified global ideological divisions, intensifying pressure on South Korea to align with the West. The Moon administration's initial hesitancy to impose sanctions on Russia, a notable outlier among U.S. allies, drew criticism from the United States and Europe.⁵ This reluctance highlighted the limitations of neutrality in an increasingly polarized global landscape. The United States subsequently excluded South Korea from a list of 32 countries exempt from licensing regulations aimed at preventing technology transfers to Russia.⁶ This move further emphasized the consequences of not taking a clear stance. Additionally, the U.S. invitation for South Korea to join the "Chip-4 alliance"—an initiative aimed at curbing China's microchip industry and hindering its overall economic and military growth—compelled Seoul to make a definitive choice,⁷ eliminating the option for neutrality. The increasing geopolitical divide thus served as a catalyst, forcing South Korea to reevaluate its approach to navigating geopolitical tensions and consider the potential costs of maintaining strategic ambiguity.

China's Diminishing Role in Addressing North Korea Issues

China's increasing unwillingness to cooperate on North Korean issues raises skepticism about its role in alleviating instability on the Korean Peninsula. Recent actions by Beijing, including high-level visits to Pyongyang by officials like Vice Premier Liu Guozhong,⁸ and its reluctance to condemn North Korea's missile launches, which violate United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions, signal strengthening ties between the two countries. Furthermore, China has actively obstructed efforts to impose additional sanctions on North Korea, effectively vetoing a U.S.-proposed resolution at the Security Council.⁹ Moreover, reports from the UN Panel of Experts have also revealed evidence of China's complicity in

helping North Korea circumvent existing sanctions, including through illicit oil transfers and the employment of North Korean workers.¹⁰

Even with China's cooperation, denuclearizing North Korea seems increasingly unlikely, especially given North Korea's deepening relationship with Russia. Russia's veto of the Panel of Experts renewal,¹¹ and a reported mutual defense agreement between the two countries in June 2024 underscore this growing alliance.¹² Against this backdrop, Seoul must reevaluate the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity in alleviating the growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

*Economic Considerations:
A Shifting Landscape*

While China's economic importance to South Korea remains undeniable, having been its largest trading partner since 2003,¹³ the economic rationale for supporting strategic ambiguity is transforming. China's increasing willingness to leverage its economic clout for political gain, as seen in cases involving nations like Australia, Norway, and the Philippines, has prompted countries, including South Korea, to actively diversify their export markets to mitigate the risks associated with over-reliance on China. The economic fallout from China's sanctions on South Korea following the THAAD deployment, estimated at \$7.5 billion to \$15.6 billion,¹⁴ was a stark reminder of these risks. This experience accelerated South Korea's pursuit of market diversification through initiatives like the New Southern Policy, which focuses on strengthening economic ties with Southeast Asia and India.

Furthermore, China's market is no longer as lucrative for South Korea as it once was, evidenced by the first trade deficit with China since 1992, recorded between September 2022 and January 2024.¹⁵ In December 2023, South Korean exports to the United States surpassed those to China for the first time in two decades,¹⁶ a trend

that has continued into 2024.¹⁷ This shift is attributed to China's internal economic challenges, increased domestic production, and the impact of U.S. restrictions on Chinese imports, creating opportunities for South Korean exporters.¹⁸

These converging factors challenge the traditional notion that strategic clarity invariably harms South Korea's economy while ambiguity benefits it. Although China remains a significant economic partner, the potential financial consequences of adopting a more apparent stance toward the United States are likely less severe than previously assumed. As South Korea's trade relationships diversify and China's economic landscape deteriorates, the cost-benefit analysis of maintaining strategic ambiguity is shifting, prompting a reassessment of its long-term viability.

South Korea's Vulnerability to Chinese Pressure

South Korea's position as a perceived "weakest link" in the U.S.-led coalition, stemming from its historical reliance on strategic ambiguity, makes it a prime target for China's coercive tactics. Beijing has consistently demonstrated a harsher stance toward Seoul than other allies like Japan and Australia, especially when South Korea deepens its ties with Washington. However, despite their clear alignment with the United States, Beijing's recent efforts to mend relations with both Tokyo and Canberra signal a strategic recalibration. President Xi Jinping met with Prime Minister Kishida in November 2023, and the subsequent pledge to hold high-level talks on economic and other issues indicates a potential warming of relations with Japan.¹⁹ Similarly, China-Australia relations have seen a marked improvement in 2023,²⁰ with the resumption of high-level dialogue, despite previous tensions over Australia's participation in the AUKUS security pact and its rejection of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

This strategic shift by Beijing suggests a calculated approach. By focusing coercive efforts on countries perceived as more susceptible to changing their alliance stances, China aims to maximize its influence while minimizing potential backlash. In this context, South Korea's perceived vulnerability could be seen as an opportunity for Beijing to exert pressure and sway its policy decisions.

However, this also presents an opportunity for South Korea. By adopting a more resolute stance and demonstrating a willingness to withstand Chinese pressure, Seoul could deter further coercion. This would safeguard its national interests and contribute to a more balanced and stable regional dynamic, where all actors are incentivized to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation rather than resorting to coercive tactics.

Strategic Clarity and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Promising Start, but Challenges Remain

President Yoon Seok-yeol's inauguration in May 2022 marked a notable shift in South Korea's foreign policy, transitioning from strategic ambiguity to clarity. Yoon envisioned transforming the nation into a "global pivotal state," championing freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values and international cooperation.²¹ This vision swiftly translated into policy, with early commitments to strengthen the South Korea-U.S. alliance and contribute to addressing global challenges, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Yoon's historic participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in June 2022 further solidified his commitment.²²

In December 2022, South Korea unveiled its inaugural "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific" (Indo-Pacific Strategy),²³ aligning closely with U.S. objectives in the region. The strategy encompasses shared goals such as opposing unilateral changes to the status quo, advocating for a rules-based maritime

order, promoting peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and ensuring freedom of navigation. The explicit adoption of the term “Indo-Pacific Strategy” itself signaled a significant policy shift toward strategic clarity, earning a positive reception from the United States and like-minded countries.

A year later, a progress report highlighted initial achievements, including participation in the NATO Summit, strengthened trilateral ties with the United States and Japan, deepened regional connections, increased Official Development Assistance (ODA), and a consistent message on the importance of rules-based international order.²⁴ The government also unveiled a 52-point action plan to implement the strategy further, focusing on ODA, capacity building, information sharing, maritime security, and strategic consultative frameworks.²⁵ Announcing these plans, Jang Ho-jin, the First Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, affirmed, “The Republic of Korea’s dedication to enhancing freedom in the Indo-Pacific region remains steadfast.”²⁶ The March 2024 creation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy Officer, tasked with managing and evaluating the strategy’s implementation, and the appointment of an Indo-Pacific Strategy Ambassador further underscored this commitment.²⁷

However, challenges remain in translating this vision into concrete action. While the strategy articulates ambitious goals, it needs more specificity regarding the methods and resources required to achieve them. The action plan, though a step forward, needs detailed security measures. Seoul’s achievements thus far primarily focus on diplomatic engagement, which, while necessary, should ultimately lead to measurable outcomes. For instance, despite stating opposition to changes in the status quo in the Taiwan Strait,²⁸ the strategy lacks a clear plan to achieve this objective, raising questions about South Korea’s potential military support for the United States in a Taiwan contingency.²⁹

The world is closely observing how South Korea will fulfill its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and its role as a “global pivotal state.” This is a critical juncture for South Korea to translate its strategic vision into concrete actions and demonstrate its resolve on the global stage.

Strategic Opportunities: Advancing the Indo-Pacific Agenda

Fortunately, numerous opportunities exist for Seoul to actively engage in this strategy, thereby bolstering regional security and its own position as a “global pivotal state.” These opportunities span various domains, from military capacity-building and defense technology collaboration to safeguarding infrastructure and upholding rules-based maritime order.

Military Capacity-Building Support: A Strategic Pivot

South Korea's arms industry, ranked among the world's top ten,³⁰ presents a unique avenue for enhancing regional security through military capacity-building support. With ambitions to significantly increase defense exports from \$14 billion to \$20 billion by 2024 and become one of the top four arms exporters by 2027,³¹ Seoul is well-positioned to expand its influence.

South Korea's defense sector, honed by its continuous state of “technical war” with North Korea, is renowned for producing high-quality, cost-effective weaponry more efficiently than its Western counterparts. Recent agreements, such as the significant arms deal with Poland,³² highlight the potential for further growth. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, which faces challenges in its own defense industrial base, and to China, which can rapidly supply arms but often produces lower-quality products.³³ In addition, the low geopolitical risk associated with sourcing arms from South

Korea makes it an attractive alternative for nations hesitant to engage with the United States, China, or Russia.

To maximize this advantage, South Korea should reorient its arms export strategy toward a geopolitical focus, utilizing arms transfers to strengthen regional partnerships and security. This could involve donating or selling older but still effective systems and comprehensive training and maintenance support to regional partners in need. The promise of resupply during crises would further enhance these partnerships. This approach caters to the growing demand for military hardware amidst global insecurity, especially as nations seek to diversify away from Russian arms.

Japan's Official Security Assistance (OSA) program, launched under its 2022 National Security Strategy, serves as a model for South Korea. Japan demonstrates the strategic value of such initiatives by providing defense equipment and technology to enhance maritime awareness and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.³⁴ South Korea could adopt a similar approach, potentially coordinating with Japan to optimize resource allocation and avoid duplication of efforts.

Beyond hardware, South Korea can also enhance regional military capacity by offering software support to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island nations. These regions grapple with challenges like counterterrorism, piracy, and illegal fishing, necessitating enhanced military capabilities. South Korea's expertise in these areas, combined with increased engagement through joint exercises, training, and advisory support, would significantly bolster the collective defense of like-minded countries in the region.

*Upholding a Rules-Based Maritime Order:
Freedom of Navigation Operations*

South Korea's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific necessitates a proactive stance in upholding a rules-based maritime order. This includes fulfilling its promise to conduct freedom of

navigation operations (FONOP) in the East and South China Seas, where China's ambitions to alter the status quo pose a significant challenge. Beijing's gray zone tactics, employing its Coast Guard and maritime militia to gradually encroach upon the sovereign territories of other countries, threaten to normalize China's claims if left unchecked. The United States and its allies have consistently conducted FONOPs to counter these tactics, with expanding participation of extra-regional partners like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the European Union.³⁵ This collective effort has been further strengthened by multilateral joint naval exercises, such as those conducted by Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the United States in April 2024, emphasizing the importance of maintaining open sea lanes and airspace.³⁶

South Korea's active participation in these endeavors would be a logical extension of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, demonstrating its commitment to a rules-based maritime order. While China may raise objections, the growing coalition of nations engaged in FONOPs would mitigate any potential pressure on South Korea. By joining these efforts, Seoul would contribute to regional stability and reinforce its standing as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific.

*Technological Collaboration:
A Cornerstone of Collective Security*

The rapid advancement of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), 5G/6G mobile technology, cyber capabilities, and autonomous weapons has significant implications for economic development and military operations. The fierce competition between the United States and China in these domains underscores the importance of maintaining a technological edge for national security and global influence. While the United States is leading in certain areas, China possesses notable advantages, including vast access to data, advanced technologies developed under the "Military-Civil Fusion" initiative, and a highly competitive tech

sector. To maintain its competitiveness, the United States must leverage its comparative advantage by collaborating with allies and partners.

With its established capabilities in AI, 5G infrastructure, and memory chip manufacturing,³⁷ South Korea can play a crucial role in strengthening the U.S.-led coalition's technological edge. Seoul has already engaged in discussions and agreements with the United States and other partners, including the trilateral summit at Camp David in 2023 and talks with AUKUS security partners (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) regarding defense technology collaboration.³⁸ Expanding upon these existing efforts, South Korea should actively pursue joint development of innovative technologies with the United States and like-minded countries in the region. Additionally, collaborating on developing operational concepts for utilizing these new technologies and integrating them into the armed forces would enhance overall military effectiveness and interoperability.

*Countering China's Grip in Critical Infrastructure:
A Strategic Partnership*

China's growing dominance in critical infrastructure sectors like 5G and nuclear energy presents a strategic concern. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE control a significant chunk of the global 5G market share.³⁹ At the same time, China's competitive pricing and financing packages make them a tempting option for nuclear energy projects.⁴⁰ However, this dependency creates vulnerabilities for other nations, potentially leaving them susceptible to China's assertive tactics and economic coercion. Historically, China has leveraged its economic clout to further political objectives. Concerns surrounding 5G technology center on alleged "backdoors" in network equipment, potentially facilitating espionage and data surveillance.⁴¹ Similarly, reliance on China for nuclear energy could expose countries to economic pressure.

Here is where South Korea emerges as a pivotal player with the potential to disrupt China's hold:

- *A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE:* South Korea boasts a robust 5G infrastructure industry, with companies like Samsung leading the charge. In the nuclear sector, South Korea possesses expertise in constructing power plants efficiently and cost-effectively.
- *COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTHS:* South Korea's strengths can be strategically combined with those of the United States. Collaboration on joint export initiatives in 5G and nuclear energy can create a formidable force against Chinese dominance. The United States excels in areas like microchip design and nuclear safety protocols, further solidifying this partnership.
- *STANDARD AND NORM SETTING:* The United States and South Korea can work together to establish and uphold international standards for the safe and secure use of these critical technologies. This ensures they serve their intended purpose and are not exploited for malicious purposes.

By proactively mitigating China's influence in the critical infrastructure sector, South Korea strengthens its position as a responsible stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific. This approach fosters regional security and stability while promoting a more balanced and secure global landscape. Consequently, South Korea can position itself as a key player in shaping the future of global critical infrastructure development.

*Bolstering South Korea's Military Might:
A Cornerstone of Regional Security*

Last but not least, a robust defense posture, particularly the ability to project power beyond the Korean Peninsula, is pivotal for South Korea's contribution to a secure Indo-Pacific. The development of

intermediate-range missiles, capable of reaching targets across Northeast Asia, marks a significant step in this advancement. While officially aimed at deterring threats from North Korea, these dual-capable missiles implicitly address broader regional challenges, including those posed by China, though the South Korean government discreetly avoids emphasizing this aspect to maintain diplomatic equilibrium with Beijing.

This strategic approach likely played a role in the United States' May 2021 decision to lift restrictions on the range and payload of South Korean missiles. These restrictions, initially imposed in 1979 to prevent South Korea from developing nuclear-capable delivery systems, limited ballistic missile ranges to 800 kilometers.⁴² By enhancing its missile capabilities, South Korea alleviates pressure on the United States to deploy its own intermediate-range missiles in the region, a move that faced resistance from countries like Japan and the Philippines due to concerns about becoming potential targets in a U.S.-China conflict.⁴³ This development not only bolsters South Korea's defense autonomy but also contributes to a more balanced security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, South Korea's growing space program, with successful launches of surveillance satellites in December 2023 and 2024 and plans to launch three more by 2025, strengthens its ISR and precision-strike capabilities. These advancements enhance South Korea's national security and deepen its cooperation with the United States in the space domain.⁴⁴

As such, South Korea has numerous avenues to actively implement its Indo-Pacific Strategy and contribute to a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, realizing these ambitious goals requires sustained commitment and policy continuity across multiple administrations, a challenge in South Korea's polarized political landscape. The question remains: can Seoul overcome this domestic hurdle to fulfill its regional and global aspirations?

Domestic Politics and Sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: Public Opinion as a Stabilizing Force

While concerns exist about the sustainability of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, particularly given President Yoon's low popularity and the Democratic Party's recent landslide victory in the April 2024 General Election,⁴⁵ a shift in leadership does not necessarily equate to a policy reversal. Despite the Democratic Party's traditional preferences for strategic ambiguity, several factors suggest the Indo-Pacific Strategy may endure even under a new administration.

Firstly, public opinion overwhelmingly favors a more proactive role for South Korea in international affairs, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This aligns with Yoon's vision of South Korea as a "global pivotal state." A 2023 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) survey revealed that 87.9% of respondents advocate active participation in international issues, with 52.8% supporting broader involvement beyond Northeast Asia.⁴⁶

Secondly, South Korean society has a pervasive sense of unease and skepticism toward China. A 2021 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that 56% of respondents identified China as the greatest threat in the coming decade, surpassing North Korea (22%).⁴⁷ This sentiment is corroborated by a 2021 KINU survey, where 71.8% of respondents viewed China as the primary security threat, a perception consistent across the political spectrum.⁴⁸ Moreover, the 2023 KINU survey also showed that 53.4% of respondents prefer the United States to maintain leadership in the region over China.

This overwhelming public support for active engagement in the Indo-Pacific, combined with concerns about China's growing assertiveness and a preference for U.S. leadership, suggests that domestic politics are unlikely to derail the Indo-Pacific Strategy. As the strategy gains further traction and demonstrates tangible benefits for South Korea, its continuation becomes increasingly likely, even under a different administration.

In essence, while a change in leadership may bring about nuanced adjustments, the underlying public sentiment and geopolitical realities point toward the enduring relevance and potential longevity of an Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Conclusion:

Toward a More Active Role in the Indo-Pacific

The United States and like-minded nations have enthusiastically welcomed South Korea's recent shift toward strategic clarity and unveiling of its Indo-Pacific Strategy. This pivot raises expectations for South Korea's expanded role in promoting regional peace, stability, and a rules-based international order. However, the strategy is still in its nascent stages and requires further refinement, particularly in outlining concrete steps for implementation.

South Korea, uniquely positioned as a rising provider of arms, nuclear energy, and 5G infrastructure, presents significant opportunities to strengthen regional partners and counterbalance China's influence. By actively participating in capacity-building initiatives, FONOPs, and defense technology collaboration, South Korea can contribute to a more secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Moreover, enhancing its military capabilities bolsters South Korea's national defense and reinforces the collective security of the United States and its allies. This collective strength is crucial for addressing the evolving landscape and countering potential threats from China.

As South Korea moves forward, translating its strategic vision into tangible actions is imperative. The successful implementation of its Indo-Pacific Strategy will solidify its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and pave the way for its emergence as an actual "global pivotal state." This is a critical juncture for South Korea to demonstrate its resolve and play a leading role in shaping the region's future.

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PART THREE

THE IMPERATIVE FOR COOPERATION

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CAN RIVALS COOPERATE? PROSPECTS FOR SINO-AMERICAN COOPERATION IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY DOMAIN

J. Scott Hauger, Chen Xue, and Jiahan Cao

Every day, I am faced with the challenges of our troubled and complex world. But none of them loom so large as climate change. If we fail to meet the challenge, all our other challenges will just become greater and threaten to swallow us.

— António Guterres, UN Secretary-General,
Austrian World Summit, May 15, 2018

Abstract

The complex interplay of rivalry and cooperation between the United States and China is starkly evident in environmental security. This chapter traces their evolving security cooperation from the 1970s to today, highlighting both promising instances of collaboration and persistent obstacles. Despite shared environmental concerns, deep-seated mistrust and diverging interests hinder sustained progress. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, the chapter offers concrete recommendations to overcome these challenges, emphasizing the critical importance of Sino-American cooperation in addressing this global threat.

Introduction

As wildfires rage across continents, seas rise to unprecedented levels, and extreme weather events become the norm, the escalating climate crisis has cast a long shadow over the geopolitical landscape, forcing even the most ardent rivals to confront the

imperative of cooperation. The United States and China, two global powers locked in a complex contest of competition and collaboration, exemplify this dilemma. Can these rivals, with their deep-seated mistrust and often diverging national interests, genuinely unite to address an existential threat that transcends geopolitical boundaries?

This question gained renewed urgency in November 2023, when U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and China Special Envoy for Climate Change Xie Zhenhua met at Sunnylands, California, in a significant effort to revitalize Sino-American cooperation on climate change.³ The Sunnylands meeting, building on previous dialogues and agreements, produced a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to work together to address the climate crisis. It outlined specific areas for enhanced cooperation, including reducing methane emissions, accelerating the transition to clean energy, and tackling deforestation. This meeting marked a pivotal moment in the ongoing effort to bridge the gap between these two competing nations on a critical global issue.

While the Sunnylands meeting represents a positive step, it also highlights the decade-long struggle for meaningful collaboration since the historic 2014 joint announcements by Presidents Xi and Obama, a watershed moment that declared climate change “...one of the greatest threats facing humanity” and emphasized the need for constructive collaboration for the common good.⁴ The path to cooperation has been fraught with challenges, marked by periods of progress and setbacks, as domestic politics, economic interests, and geopolitical tensions have continually shaped the trajectory of their engagement.

This chapter delves into the intricate history of Sino-American cooperation and competition on climate change, with a particular focus on the evolving security dynamics that have both propelled and hindered their collaborative efforts. By tracing the evolution of their engagement from the initial post-normalization period through

contemporary climate negotiations, we aim to shed light on the complex interplay between rivalry and cooperation in the face of an existential threat. We analyze the shifting nature of common threats, concerns about unconstrained competition, and the pursuit of relative gains, examining how these factors have shaped the trajectory of Sino-American climate relations. Ultimately, we assess the prospects for future collaboration and offer actionable recommendations for overcoming the existing barriers to a more robust partnership on climate change, a partnership crucial for the security and well-being of both nations and the world at large.

Sino-American Security Cooperation: A Shifting Landscape, 1979 to Present

The trajectory of Sino-American security cooperation over the past four decades reflects a complex interplay of shared interests, geopolitical rivalry, and changing global landscapes. The post-normalization period began with a strategic alignment against a common adversary, The Soviet Union, which fostered a quasi-alliance characterized by high-level exchanges, technology transfer, and covert operations. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and internal political events in China led to a shift in dynamics marked by increased tension and competition.

Quasi-Alliance: 1979-1989

A shared threat of a powerful Soviet Union in the 1970s, amplified by the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict and the looming presence of Soviet forces, forged a pragmatic quasi-alliance between the United States and China. This strategic alignment, lasting from U.S.-China normalization in 1979 until political unrest in China in 1989, manifested in three key areas.

First, high-level exchanges became a cornerstone of the relationship. Beginning with Secretary of Defense Harold Brown's

visit to Beijing in 1980, defense officials from both nations engaged in reciprocal visits, fostering dialogue and cooperation. Notably, Geng Biao, Secretary General of the Central Military Commission and Deputy Chief of Staff Liu Huaqing led the first high-level Chinese delegation to the United States in May 1980. U.S.-China security cooperation further strengthened after President Reagan's inauguration.

Second, technology transfer played a pivotal role. Initially focused on non-lethal weaponry and logistical assistance,⁵ the transfer expanded under Secretary Weinberger to include lethal weaponry such as HAWK missile systems and MK-48 torpedoes. Significant projects like the Peace Pearl Program, which aimed to modernize Chinese fighter jets with American avionics,⁶ exemplified the depth of this technological cooperation.

Third, covert security cooperation flourished. China facilitated the U.S. delivery of military aid to Afghan mujahedeen during the Soviet-Afghan War, underscoring the strategic alignment against a common adversary.

This decade of quasi-alliance marked a turning point in Sino-American relations, transitioning from decades of hostility to a pragmatic partnership. However, the end of the Cold War and domestic political shifts in China would soon reshape the dynamics of this relationship.

Post-Soviet Era:

A Period of Shifting Dynamics and Heightened Tensions

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the common enemy that had united the United States and China, fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape and ushering in a period of shifting dynamics and heightened tensions. Lingering U.S. economic sanctions and China's growing unease with American military interventions, such as the Gulf War, led China to prioritize

military modernization, significantly increasing defense spending throughout the 1990s.⁷

Tensions flared on multiple fronts. The Yinhe incident of 1993, involving a disputed inspection of a Chinese cargo ship suspected of carrying chemical weapons precursors, deepened mutual mistrust and stoked nationalist sentiment in China.⁸ Taiwan remained a contentious issue, with a 1995 visit by Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui to the United States triggering a crisis and prompting China to intensify military drills near the island. In response, the United States strengthened ties with Japan and deployed missile defense systems, further escalating tensions.

The decade was punctuated by additional military incidents that further strained relations. The accidental bombing of a Chinese embassy in Belgrade by a U. S. stealth bomber in 1999 and the EP-3 surveillance plane collision over the South China Sea in 2001 ignited diplomatic firestorms and public outrage in both countries, casting a shadow over any potential for renewed cooperation.

Despite these challenges, some cooperation persisted. China actively sought to join international security regimes with U.S. technical support, becoming a member of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) was established to enhance maritime safety and reduce the risk of unintended conflict at sea.

However, the underlying dynamics had fundamentally shifted. The absence of a shared threat and China's increasing military capabilities and assertive actions fueled the United States' concerns about relative gains and regional stability. This set the stage for a more competitive and uncertain relationship in the years to come.

*Reluctant Engagement and Strategic Competition:
2000-Present*

The post-9/11 era brought a brief period of cooperation between China and the United States, primarily focused on counter-terrorism efforts. However, this collaboration proved short-lived as China's rapid military modernization and increasingly self-confident regional actions reignited the United States' concerns and fueled a strategic rivalry.

While China promoted a narrative of "peaceful rise," its actions, including a quadrupling of military spending from 1999 and 2009, raised alarms in Washington. The Obama administration initially pursued engagement, but this approach was ultimately deemed unsustainable due to growing perceptions of China as a strategic competitor.

Under the Trump administration, U.S. policy toward China hardened significantly, emphasizing strategic competition and highlighting ideological differences.⁹ This shift increased tensions, a trade war, and a fundamental reorientation of bilateral relations.

The Biden administration has adopted a more nuanced approach, seeking to outcompete China while also exploring areas of potential cooperation, such as climate change.¹⁰ This involves strengthening regional alliances, maintaining open communication channels, and pursuing a multifaceted strategy that balances competition with engagement.

Despite these efforts, the security relationship remains strained, characterized by deep-seated mistrust and often diverging national interests. Nevertheless, cooperation on global challenges, such as climate change, offers a potential avenue for collaboration and a glimmer of hope for a more stable and productive relationship in the future.

Sino-U.S. Cooperation on Climate Change: A Shared Imperative

Despite the dominance of security concerns in recent years, a shared imperative has emerged in the Sino-American relationship: the urgent need to confront the global climate crisis. Both countries are major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, and the consequences of climate change pose significant threats to their economies, environments, and national security.

While both countries actively participate in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) Conferences of Parties (COP), their differing perspectives and priorities often lead to tension and disagreement.

The United States has historically emphasized "qualitative" obligations, focusing on emissions reporting, technology cooperation, and financial assistance to developing countries.¹¹ Conversely, China advocates for "common but differentiated responsibilities," arguing for leniency toward developing nations in emission reduction targets. This fundamental disagreement, highlighted by the United States' non-ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, has been a persistent source of friction in international climate negotiations.

However, the escalating climate crisis, with its far-reaching impacts on food and water security, human health, and economic stability, has intensified the need for cooperation. National climate assessments from both countries (NCCAR4 and NCA5) paint a stark picture of unprecedented and cascading climate impacts, underscoring the urgency for collaborative action despite the complexities of their relationship.

Analysis & Key Lessons

While the United States and China increasingly recognize climate change as a security threat, their paths to this realization and their

levels of urgency have differed markedly. The Obama era saw a significant push for international cooperation on climate change, while the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement marked a stark reversal. The Biden administration's renewed commitment has opened a window for continued collaboration, but deep-seated mistrust and geopolitical tensions remain significant obstacles.

Key takeaways from this analysis include:

- *DOMESTIC POLITICS MATTER*: Shifts in domestic politics can profoundly impact the trajectory of climate cooperation, as demonstrated by the contrasting approaches of different U.S. administrations.
- *SECURITIZATION IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD*: While framing climate change as a security issue can galvanize action, it can also exacerbate tensions and complicate negotiations by introducing geopolitical considerations.
- *SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT IS KEY*: Effective cooperation necessitates consistent high-level engagement, robust institutional mechanisms, and a willingness to find common ground despite divergent priorities.

This analysis underscores the delicate balance between cooperation and competition in Sino-American climate relations. While shared interests exist, navigating the complexities of geopolitical rivalry and differing national priorities remains a formidable challenge. The success of future collaboration hinges on sustained high-level engagement, robust institutional mechanisms, and a willingness to compromise for the greater good of the planet.

**Securitization of Climate Change in the
United States and China**

The securitization of climate change—framing it as a national security threat—has evolved differently in the United States and

China. In Washington, the Department of Defense (DOD) initially focused on research and mitigation. Still, figures like Sherri Goodman, who coined the term “threat multiplier,” played a crucial role in raising awareness of its broader security implications. This led to the inclusion of climate change in key policy documents, such as the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the 2015 National Security Strategy.¹²

In contrast, China’s initial approach to climate change was primarily through the lens of economic development.¹³ However, under Xi Jinping’s leadership and the establishment of the National Security Commission (NSC) in 2013, the focus shifted toward considering climate change as a national security concern. The 2014 Overall National Security Outlook (ONSO) explicitly identified ecological security as a critical component, with climate change as a prominent challenge.

These contrasting paths to securitization highlight the two nations’ differing priorities and perspectives. While the United States has primarily integrated climate change into its national security framework, China’s approach is more nuanced, balancing environmental concerns with economic development and political stability goals. This divergence in perspectives adds another layer of complexity to the potential for collaboration as the two nations grapple with the shared yet differently perceived threat of climate change.

Obama-Xi Era:

A Watershed Moment for Climate Collaboration

Under President Obama, the United States emerged as a global climate leader,¹⁴ prioritizing climate action as a national security issue. However, despite rapid economic development, China initially prioritized economic growth over environmental concerns, resisting the securitization of climate change and highlighting its status as a developing nation.

The 2009 Copenhagen climate talks epitomized this clash of perspectives, with China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao walking out amidst pressure for bolder emission reductions.¹⁵ However, President Xi Jinping's inauguration in 2013 marked a turning point. A consensus emerged between Presidents Xi and Obama, leading to the establishment of a joint working group on climate cooperation and landmark joint presidential statements in 2014 and 2015. These statements, pledging significant emission reductions by 2030, bolstered global confidence to action and catalyzed the Paris Agreement.

The Obama-Xi era witnessed substantial progress in U.S.-China climate cooperation, establishing various institutional frameworks, including the U.S.-China Climate Change Working Group, the U.S.-China Clean Energy Research Center, and the U.S.-China Climate-Smart/Low-Carbon Cities Summit. The two countries implemented policies promoting renewable energy, energy efficiency, and the phase-down of hydrofluorocarbons. Their collaboration on addressing aviation emissions also set an important precedent for international cooperation.

This period of convergence demonstrates the potential for Sino-American collaboration on climate change, even amidst a complex geopolitical landscape. The shared commitment of both leaders, coupled with robust institutional mechanisms, fostered unprecedented progress. However, this progress was fragile, as underlying tensions and differing priorities remained. The subsequent Trump era would test the resilience of this cooperation, highlighting the vulnerability of climate progress to shifting political winds.

Trump Era Reversal, Biden Era Renewal

President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017 signaled a stark reversal in U.S. climate policy. Rollbacks of domestic environmental regulations and removal of climate change

from the National Security Strategy marked a retreat from global climate leadership. This de-emphasis on climate action hindered U.S.-China cooperation, as institutional mechanisms were sidelined and collaboration on data sharing and technical assistance was curtailed.

In response to the United States' retreat, China turned to market-based solutions, promoting low-carbon technologies and seeking partnerships with individual U.S. states. However, the lack of federal engagement limited the scope and potential of these efforts.

President Biden's election in 2020 marked a significant policy shift, with a swift return to climate action. Rejoining the Paris Agreement, setting ambitious emission reduction targets, and investing heavily in clean energy signaled a renewed commitment to addressing the climate crisis. This, coupled with China's ambitious goals, created an opening for a cautious resumption of bilateral cooperation.

High-level dialogues between climate envoys John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua have led to joint statements and the establishment of working groups. Despite occasional setbacks due to geopolitical tensions, climate cooperation has persisted, culminating in the 2023 Sunnylands Statement reaffirming a commitment to climate leadership.

While the re-emphasis on climate change in the United States has facilitated this renewed cooperation, it remains fragile. Geopolitical rivalry and differing national priorities overshadow the relationship, highlighting the ongoing challenge of forging a lasting and effective partnership to address the global climate crisis.

Bilateral Military Cooperation in Addressing Climate Change: Navigating Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

While the United States and China acknowledge the climate crisis as a global challenge, military-to-military (mil-to-mil) cooperation

to address this threat remains underdeveloped. This is due to a confluence of factors, including the prioritization of relative gains in the broader political sphere and differing perceptions of climate change within their respective establishments.

The U.S. Department of Defense has explicitly identified climate change as an existential threat, integrating it into national security strategies and policies. In contrast, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) have traditionally viewed climate change primarily as a development issue, not a central security concern. This divergence in perspectives hinders the development of a shared understanding of the security implications of climate change and limits the scope for mil-to-mil cooperation.

Analysis:

Identifying Gaps and Potential Avenues

A significant gap exists in current Sino-American cooperation: the limited engagement of military sectors on climate change. While both nations' militaries have experience in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), collaboration on climate-specific security risks remains minimal. This is partly due to differing threat perceptions within the two militaries.

However, potential avenues for enhanced mil-to-mil cooperation exist. Building upon existing HADR cooperation, joint exercises and information sharing could focus on climate-related disasters like floods, droughts, and extreme weather events. The growing recognition of "ecological security" in China presents another opportunity for engagement, with the potential for mil-to-mil dialogues on climate security implications and joint mitigation strategies.

While confidence-building measures like China's participation in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) Exercise have faced setbacks, alternative avenues such as joint research projects on climate-related

security risks, information exchanges on climate modeling, and the development of shared early warning systems could be explored.

Overcoming Barriers to Cooperation

Realizing the potential for mil-to-mil cooperation requires addressing several barriers. Fostering a common understanding of climate change as a security threat is paramount and achievable through high-level dialogues, information exchange, and joint research. Overcoming political constraints is also crucial; mil-to-mil cooperation on climate change should be decoupled from broader geopolitical tensions. Identifying mutual interests, such as mitigating climate impacts on military installations and developing climate-resilient infrastructure, can create incentives for collaboration.

Enhancing U.S.-China mil-to-mil cooperation on climate change is undeniably challenging but also imperative. By building on existing areas of cooperation, fostering a shared understanding of the threat, and overcoming political obstacles, both countries can work together to address this existential crisis.

Discussion and Pathways Ahead

The preceding sections have examined the historical trajectory of U.S.-China mil-to-mil relations, the evolving perceptions of climate change as a security threat within both nations, and the existing barriers to cooperation. In this concluding section, we delve into the current discourse surrounding climate change as an existential threat and explore potential pathways for enhanced collaboration between the two nations' security sectors.

By analyzing the existing challenges and identifying potential areas for collaboration, this section aims to offer insights into how the United States and China can overcome their differences and work together to address the pressing issue of climate change. The goal is to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the

complex dynamics and propose actionable strategies for building a more cooperative and resilient framework for addressing this shared global challenge.

Discussion: Climate Change as an Existential Threat and the Potential for Sino-American Collaboration

The escalating recognition of climate change as an existential threat has galvanized national and international leaders to acknowledge its profound implications for global security. This shared understanding, reinforced by scientific consensus and political endorsement, presents a unique opportunity for cooperation between the United States and China, even amidst their complex and often contentious relationship.

Historically, rivals have united in the face of common threats, and the climate crisis offers a compelling case for such collaboration. However, the path to Sino-American cooperation in environmental security is contingent upon mutual recognition of the climate threat as a paramount national security concern. While progress has been made, as evidenced by joint statements and international agreements, political obstacles persist. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and China's occasional cancellation of bilateral talks underscore the prioritization of other security concerns over climate change. Nonetheless, the consistent return to negotiations signifies an acknowledgment of a significant common threat.

The defense ministries of both nations have largely mirrored their respective executive branches' stances on climate change. While formal security documents under Presidents Obama and Biden addressed the threat, they were conspicuously absent under the Trump administration. In China, adopting the Overall National Security Outlook (ONSO) signifies a gradual shift toward recognizing environmental security within the defense establishment.

Traditional security sector paradigms, focused on geopolitical rivalries and conventional warfare, have hindered the full integration of climate change as a priority threat. However, the disruptions caused by climate change are already reshaping the geopolitical landscape, creating overlaps with traditional security roles.¹⁶ The security sector's involvement in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, the implications of polar ice melting on Arctic navigation, rising sea levels affecting Pacific Island nations, and internal and cross-border migration all present opportunities for deeper cooperation in environmental security.

Pathways Ahead:

Fostering Sino-American Collaboration on Climate Change

To foster cooperation and address the existential threat of climate change, several strategic considerations must be addressed:

1. *STRENGTHEN EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP*

- *High-Level Engagement:* Continued high-level dialogues and summits between heads of state and relevant ministers should emphasize the urgency of climate change as a national security threat, fostering political will and commitment at the highest levels.
- *Policy Integration:* Both countries should explicitly integrate climate considerations into their national security strategies, defense policies, and military doctrines. This would signal a commitment to addressing climate change as a core security concern and guide future actions.
- *Public Messaging:* Leaders should consistently communicate the importance of climate action to the public and the military, fostering a broader understanding of the issue and building support for cooperative efforts.

2. *EXPAND MINISTRY-LEVEL DIALOGUES*

- *Dedicated Channels:* Create dedicated communication channels between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Chinese Ministry of National Defense to focus on environmental security issues, enabling direct and focused engagement on this critical topic.
- *Regular Meetings:* Hold meetings to discuss shared concerns, exchange information and best practices, and develop joint strategies for mitigating climate risks. These meetings should be structured and goal-oriented to ensure tangible outcomes.
- *Joint Working Groups:* Establish joint working groups to address specific areas of mutual interest, such as climate-related disaster response, environmental impact assessments of military activities, and the development of climate-resilient infrastructure. These working groups would enable focused collaboration and concrete action on specific issues.

3. *IMPLEMENT DOD/MND AND MAJOR COMMAND LEVEL DIALOGUES*

- *Operationalize Cooperation:* Translate high-level agreements into concrete actions at the operational level. This could involve joint training exercises focused on climate-related scenarios, collaborative research on the impact of climate disruptions on military operations, and information sharing on climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.
- *Build Trust:* Foster trust and understanding between military personnel through exchanges, joint exercises, and collaborative projects. Building interpersonal relationships and understanding different perspectives is

crucial for overcoming historical tensions and fostering a cooperative spirit.

4. *ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGES*

- *Expand Scope:* Go beyond traditional mil-to-mil exchanges to include experts from relevant civilian agencies, academia, and think tanks. This would facilitate a broader exchange of ideas and expertise on climate change and its security implications, bringing diverse perspectives and knowledge.
- *Focus on Climate Resilience:* Prioritize exchanges and training programs that build climate resilience in military infrastructure, operations, and supply chains. Sharing lessons learned from climate-related disasters, developing joint training modules on climate adaptation strategies, and conducting joint research on the impact of climate change on military readiness are all crucial aspects of this effort.

5. *EXPLORE JOINT RESEARCH*

- *Climate Modeling and Forecasting:* Collaborate on developing advanced climate models and forecasting tools to understand better the regional and global impacts of climate change on security. This would provide a more accurate assessment of risks and inform decision-making.
- *Vulnerability Assessments:* Conduct joint vulnerability assessments of critical infrastructure, military installations, and vulnerable populations to identify potential climate risks and develop appropriate mitigation measures. This would enhance preparedness and resilience to climate-related disasters.

- *Technology Development:* Explore opportunities for joint research and development of climate-friendly technologies, such as renewable energy sources for military bases, energy-efficient equipment, and sustainable supply chains. This would reduce the military's environmental footprint and contribute to broader climate mitigation efforts.

6. *INSULATE ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY FROM GEOPOLITICS*

- *Executive Agreement:* Establish a formal or informal agreement to protect climate cooperation from political tensions and ensure continuity even during strained relations. This would provide a stable foundation for long-term collaboration.
- *Independent Funding:* Consider establishing an independent funding mechanism for environmental security initiatives, ensuring that resources are not diverted due to other political priorities. This would guarantee the stability and sustainability of climate-related projects.
- *Track II Diplomacy:* Encourage Track II diplomacy efforts, such as dialogues and workshops between non-governmental experts and stakeholders, to foster a broader understanding of the issue and build support for cooperative solutions. These informal channels can complement official efforts and contribute to a more comprehensive approach.

*Challenges and Opportunities:
A Delicate Balance*

While these pathways offer a promising roadmap for fostering Sino-American cooperation on climate change, each pathway presents unique challenges and opportunities. Overcoming these challenges

will require sustained political will, diplomatic finesse, and a willingness to compromise. The potential benefits of successful cooperation are immense, including enhanced security, economic stability, and a healthier planet for future generations.

The complex and often contradictory nature of the Sino-American relations poses a significant challenge. Deep-seated mistrust, competing national interests, and divergent security paradigms can hinder meaningful and sustained cooperation. However, the urgency of the climate crisis demands a renewed commitment to finding common ground.

By embracing the pathways outlined in this chapter, the United States and China can leverage their combined strengths to mitigate the existential threat of climate change, paving the way for a more secure and sustainable future for both nations and the world. The path forward is fraught with challenges, but the stakes are too high to ignore the potential for collaboration in the face of this shared global threat.

Endnotes

- ¹ This essay is a collaborative effort of a retired American DKI APCSS professor and two DKI APCSS fellows from China (ASC 16-1 and CCM 17-1). We have endeavored to be both candid and respectful throughout, expressing our different national perspectives as we would in a seminar setting at DKI APCSS.
- ² The authors express their appreciation for the editorial contributions of Dr. James Minnich whose recommendations significantly improved the clarity and conciseness of our manuscript and enhanced its relevance for the security practitioner.
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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NEW ZEALAND'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE: A MODEL FOR CLIMATE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Andreea Mosila

*The health of the planet and the health of its people
are inextricably linked.*

— Dr. Margaret Chan, former Director-General
World Health Organization, 2015

Abstract

Amidst escalating global crises, New Zealand's exemplary management of the COVID-19 pandemic stands as an exemplar, offering a model for comprehensive security cooperation in the Pacific and beyond. The chapter examines New Zealand's pandemic response, drawing parallels with the climate crisis to highlight key strategies such as early action, transparent communication, and community engagement. These elements provide valuable insights for addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption. The chapter underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge, enhancing regional cooperation, and fostering resilience through public awareness and education. By adopting a holistic approach that prioritizes both human and environmental well-being, the Pacific region can develop effective and sustainable security strategies to address the complex, non-traditional threats of the future.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic's stark revelation of global health systems vulnerabilities underscored the importance of effective governance, decisive action, and transparent communication during crises. New Zealand's exceptional pandemic response, marked by

swift decision-making, robust testing, and open public messaging, emerged as a leading example. This chapter examines New Zealand's approach as a case study within a comprehensive security framework, recognizing the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and societal concerns. This study explores how these lessons can inform broader security strategies in the Pacific region and beyond by analyzing key elements of New Zealand's response—such as early lockdowns, widespread testing, and clear communication.

The parallels between the pandemic and the climate crisis are striking, as they both demand coordinated international efforts, strong governance, and open dialogue between scientists and policymakers. This chapter argues that New Zealand's pandemic response offers valuable insights into effective crisis management, communication, and community engagement, applicable to addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss. Adopting early action strategies, community engagement, and intersectoral cooperation can forge a more resilient and sustainable future.

Viewing New Zealand's response through the lens of comprehensive security—encompassing traditional security threats, health, environmental, and societal concerns—underscores the need for holistic approaches that transcend conventional paradigms. This chapter synthesizes insights from existing research on pandemic responses and climate disruption strategies in the Pacific region, focusing on how lessons from the former can inform and strengthen efforts to mitigate and adapt to the latter. By identifying gaps in the current literature, this study proposes a novel framework that enhances our understanding of comprehensive security cooperation, providing actionable insights and practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners working toward a more resilient and sustainable future in the Pacific.

COVID-19 in the Pacific: Contrasting Experiences and the Imperative of Regional Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the global community's profound unpreparedness for a health crisis of such magnitude. The virus's rapid spread, fueled by global interconnectedness, dense urban populations, and frequent travel, overwhelmed healthcare systems worldwide. Delayed responses, inadequate health infrastructure, and fragmented global health governance exacerbated the crisis, while the accompanying "infodemic"—the rapid spread of misinformation or disinformation about the virus—further hindered effective action.¹ Although many countries implemented lockdown and emergency measures, these often came at the cost of individual freedoms, raising concerns about the balance between public health and civil liberties.²

Despite these hard lessons, a 2023 investigative report revealed that the world remains alarmingly vulnerable to future pandemics.³ This lack of preparedness was evident in well-resourced countries like the United States, which, despite advanced healthcare, tragically led the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths.⁴ Similarly, the European Union struggled to mount a unified response due to competing national interests and a phenomenon dubbed "coronationalism"—a trend toward prioritizing national self-interest and protectionism during the pandemic, often at the expense of international cooperation.⁵ The absence of coordinated strategies and political will hampered global efforts to contain the virus and develop essential supplies.⁶

Conversely, the geographic isolation of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT) initially shielded them from the worst of the pandemic.⁷ However, the isolation later hindered access to essential medical supplies and vaccines, exposing the unique vulnerabilities of these island nations. New Zealand, uniquely positioned as a Pacific Island nation and a well-resourced country, leveraged its geographical advantage and decisive governance to manage the

crisis effectively. Early lockdowns, efficient contact tracing,⁸ and high public trust allowed New Zealand to minimize the pandemic's impact. Despite facing challenges typical of island nations, such as maintaining supply chains and mitigating the economic fallout from reduced tourism,⁹ New Zealand emerged as a regional leader, providing critical aid and public health expertise to neighboring Pacific nations. This contrast in pandemic experiences underscores the complex interplay between geography, governance, and international cooperation in responding to global health crises. It underscores the critical importance of regional cooperation in the Pacific, where shared vulnerabilities and limited resources necessitate collaborative approaches to preparedness, response, and recovery.

New Zealand's Pandemic Response: A Case Study in Effective Crisis Management

New Zealand's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is a notable public health crisis management success. Characterized by swift decision-making, transparent communication, and robust public health measures, New Zealand's approach offers valuable lessons for pandemic response and broader security cooperation.

The "go hard, go early" strategy was central to this success, implemented rapidly and decisively. This entailed immediate border closures, mandatory quarantines for incoming travelers, and a nationwide lockdown.¹⁰ These measures, enacted while many other countries hesitated, proved pivotal in mitigating the virus's early spread.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership played a crucial role. Her communication strategy, marked by empathy, clarity, and consistent messaging, fostered public trust and compliance.¹¹ Phrases like "the team of 5 million" resonated deeply, cultivating a sense of collective responsibility crucial for widespread adherence to pandemic measures.¹²

Beyond effective communication, skillful and rapid policymaking was vital. The “go hard, go early” strategy also encompassed strict border controls, comprehensive testing, and an efficient contact tracing system.¹³ These measures worked in tandem, enabling early case detection and rapid isolation of infected individuals, effectively preventing widespread community transmission.

While some attribute New Zealand’s success to its geographic isolation and small population,¹⁴ a comparison with the United States reveals that effective strategy, policy, and implementation were paramount. Despite vastly greater resources, the United States experienced significantly higher COVID-19 cases and deaths,¹⁵ demonstrating that even well-equipped nations can falter without a well-executed plan.¹⁶

New Zealand’s response had flaws, particularly regarding initial preparedness and post-lockdown challenges. However, the country’s ability to adapt quickly and temporarily eliminate the virus underscores the importance of flexible and dynamic policy frameworks that can evolve in response to unforeseen challenges.¹⁷ This agility and a strong emphasis on science-based decision-making and community engagement positioned New Zealand as a global exemplar in pandemic management.

Social Impacts and Māori-Led Prosocial Resistance

While lauded for its epidemiological success, New Zealand’s “go hard, go early” strategy had unintended social consequences. The stringent lockdown measures and border controls disproportionately affected marginalized communities like Pacific Islanders and low-income individuals, exacerbating social inequalities and tensions. These groups experienced increased discrimination, economic hardship, and limited access to resources, revealing the unequal burden of the pandemic.

However, the Māori community's response showcased a powerful counter-narrative of resilience and self-determination.¹⁸ Despite exclusion from initial government consultations, Māori leaders leveraged their cultural knowledge and community networks to safeguard their people. They established community checkpoints—where volunteers monitored and controlled access to their territories, drawing on traditional practices of care and protection—and implemented culturally relevant health messaging. Additionally, they provided essential services and spearheaded vaccination efforts, prioritizing the well-being of their communities. This proactive, culturally grounded approach effectively curbed the virus's spread within the Māori communities and underscored the importance of Indigenous knowledge and community-led initiatives in crisis management.¹⁹

The Māori response is a compelling example of how comprehensive security can be achieved by incorporating diverse perspectives and empowering communities. By recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and practices, governments can develop more equitable, effective, and resilient responses to future crises. This lesson is particularly relevant in the Pacific region, where Indigenous communities often possess unique knowledge and skills for navigating complex challenges like climate disruption.

Implications for Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Pacific

New Zealand's pandemic response is a compelling model of how swift action, transparent communication, and cultural sensitivity can effectively address global health crises. However, its broader implications for comprehensive security cooperation, particularly in the Pacific region, require further examination.

Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness

New Zealand's success highlights the critical need for robust health security frameworks and pandemic preparedness strategies at both domestic and regional levels. This includes sustained investment in public health systems, which mitigates health threats and yields significant economic returns.²⁰ The country's emphasis on early intervention, science-based policies, and international cooperation offers a valuable lesson for future outbreaks.

Crucially, New Zealand's experience demonstrates the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into pandemic planning. Integrating gender considerations ensures that policies address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women, who often bear a disproportionate burden during crises.²¹ Moreover, the success of Māori-led initiatives highlights the value of Indigenous knowledge and community engagement in achieving effective and culturally sensitive responses.

Beyond domestic preparedness, New Zealand's approach has implications for regional cooperation. Strengthening regional disease surveillance mechanisms, including data-sharing agreements and technology transfer, would enhance the Pacific region's ability to detect and respond to emerging health threats. The pandemic also exposed the need for greater collaboration on medical supplies and vaccine distribution, ensuring equitable access for all island nations. This necessitates a coordinated regional effort to pool resources, share information, and develop joint response plans.

By leveraging New Zealand's experience and fostering regional cooperation, the Pacific region can bolster its health security and pandemic preparedness, ensuring a more resilient and responsive approach to future health crises.

Climate Disruption: An Interconnected Challenge Demanding Integrated Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of health security and revealed the interconnectedness of health and environmental challenges. With its potential to exacerbate and create new health vulnerabilities, climate disruption necessitates an integrated security approach that prioritizes human and environmental well-being.

New Zealand's pandemic response offers valuable insights into how strategies for one crisis can inform responses to another. The principles of early action, transparent communication, and community engagement, which proved effective against COVID-19, are equally applicable to climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. For instance, the country's experience with contact tracing and testing could be adapted to develop early warning systems for climate-related disasters, enhancing preparedness and response capabilities.

New Zealand Leadership in the Pacific Region

New Zealand's geographic location and strong ties with PICTs position it as a potential leader in regional security cooperation. New Zealand can be pivotal in fostering a more secure and resilient Pacific region by sharing its expertise in pandemic management, health infrastructure development, and climate resilience. This leadership could manifest in collaborative efforts on disaster preparedness, resource sharing, and developing integrated health and environmental policies. By championing a holistic approach to security that encompasses human and planetary health, New Zealand can help the Pacific region navigate the complex challenges of climate disruption and build a more sustainable future.

Lessons from the Pandemic: A Blueprint for Climate Action

While the COVID-19 pandemic has consumed the global stage, the climate crisis is a more profound and enduring threat. Recognized by the United Nations as the defining security challenge of our time, climate disruption necessitates urgent attention and innovative solutions.²² Fortunately, lessons learned from successful pandemic responses, particularly from countries like New Zealand, offer valuable insights for mitigating and adapting to the climate crisis.²³

The parallels between the two crises are striking. Both are global in scale, complex in nature, and demand swift, coordinated action. They expose vulnerabilities in global systems—health in the case of the pandemic and environment in the case of climate disruption—necessitating comprehensive strategies that integrate science, policy, and public engagement.²⁴

New Zealand's lauded pandemic response, characterized by decisive leadership, scientific guidance, and community buy-in, provides a compelling model for addressing the climate crisis. The country's success underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that leverages scientific expertise, effective policymaking, international collaboration, and active community participation. Examining the successes and challenges of the pandemic response allows us to identify strategies and principles applicable to combating climate disruption. These include the importance of early intervention, evidence-based decision-making, transparent communication, and equitable resource distribution. They also highlight the need for global cooperation, technological innovation, and a focus on long-term sustainability.

New Zealand's pandemic strategies offer a valuable blueprint for addressing the climate crisis through several vital approaches:

1. *RAPID AND DECISIVE ACTION*: Just as New Zealand swiftly implemented stringent measures to control COVID-19,

addressing climate disruption requires similar urgency. Immediate actions to reduce emissions and implement adaptation strategies are crucial for mitigating the worst impacts.

2. *SCIENCE-LED POLICYMAKING*: Climate disruption policies must be grounded in robust scientific evidence and research. New Zealand's reliance on scientific guidance during the pandemic is a model for developing effective climate strategies.²⁵
3. *EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT*: Mobilizing public support and understanding is essential. This involves disseminating accurate scientific information, addressing public concerns, combating misinformation, and fostering a collective sense of responsibility.
4. *EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY*: Climate disruption policies must consider their disparate impacts on different communities, ensuring equitable access to resources and technologies for adaptation and mitigation, particularly for vulnerable populations.
5. *GLOBAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION*: Like the pandemic, climate disruption demands global cooperation. Sharing resources, research, and strategies is vital. New Zealand's active engagement in international dialogues and willingness to share its pandemic response experiences can be replicated in climate diplomacy.
6. *BUILDING RESILIENCE AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE*: Planning for economic recovery and future challenges necessitates developing resilient infrastructure and communities capable of withstanding climate-related adversities.²⁶ This involves investing in sustainable urban planning, agriculture, coastal defenses, and preparing for climate-induced migration.

Analyzing New Zealand's pandemic response reveals further insights into effectively mobilizing resources, coordinating cross-sector efforts, and galvanizing public support for transformative changes needed to address the climate crisis.

Moreover, the pandemic highlighted the interconnectedness of global health and environmental crises. Climate disruption and environmental degradation are increasingly recognized as exacerbating factors in the spread of infectious diseases.²⁷ New Zealand's emphasis on environmental sustainability and climate mitigation measures are integral to a comprehensive security strategy encompassing health and environmental stability.

The parallel between pandemic and climate crisis responses has profound implications for security cooperation, particularly in the Pacific region. The lessons from New Zealand's pandemic management can guide strategies for climate resilience, fostering joint efforts in disaster preparedness, resource sharing, and collective emergency responses.

By learning from New Zealand's experience and integrating health preparedness with environmental sustainability, the Pacific region can develop more holistic and sustainable solutions for future challenges. This integral approach will enhance comprehensive security cooperation and build a more resilient and secure future facing current and emerging global threats.

Policy Recommendations and Implications for Enhanced Regional Security

Enhancing security cooperation in the Pacific region necessitates adopting response models, such as New Zealand's "go hard, go early" approach, which emphasizes rapid and decisive action and serves as a template for other nations. Building upon New Zealand's experience, PICTs must strengthen regional ties and align their health and environmental security goals. This involves coordinating

pandemic responses and addressing broader security concerns like climate disruption and disaster preparedness.

*Establishing a Pacific Health and
Environmental Security Partnership*

A dedicated Pacific Health and Environmental Security Partnership (PHESP) could establish a robust regional surveillance and response system. This concept draws inspiration from the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies (APSED), a framework developed by World Health Organization (WHO) member states in the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia regions to enhance capacities for managing emerging infectious diseases and public health emergencies.²⁸

Modeled after New Zealand's effective COVID-19 management, a PHSEP would prioritize early detection, efficient contact tracing, and rapid response mechanisms. A governing body comprising representatives from participating countries, including New Zealand, would oversee operations, fostering resource sharing, data exchange, and joint training exercises to enhance preparedness for future health crises.

The PHESP would address immediate health threats and contribute to broader security goals. Strengthening regional cooperation and information sharing would enhance the region's capacity to respond to environmental challenges, including climate disruption and natural disasters. Ultimately, the PHESP could foster a more resilient and secure Pacific community.

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into Security Strategies

Integrating Indigenous knowledge into regional security policies is paramount for fostering effective, culturally sensitive, sustainable solutions. Successful initiatives like Canada's Indigenous Guardians program exemplify the significance of Indigenous stewardship in environmental management.²⁹

In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi and Co-Management Agreements have paved the way for incorporating Māori perspectives into governance and environmental management. These agreements often entail co-management arrangements for natural resources, recognizing Māori as partners in decision-making. The landmark recognition of the Whanganui River and Te Urewera National Park as legal entities, aligning with Māori beliefs, further underscores the profound value of Indigenous perspectives in safeguarding the environment.³⁰

To ensure culturally sensitive and inclusive policies, the Pacific region must acknowledge and respect the invaluable insights that Indigenous communities hold regarding environmental management and health. Establishing advisory panels comprising Indigenous representatives can provide crucial input on policy development, ensuring that policies align with and respect Indigenous cultures and traditions.³¹

The region can tap into a wealth of wisdom accumulated over generations by integrating Indigenous knowledge and practices into security strategies. This approach offers unique insights into health and environmental challenges, fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among Indigenous communities, and leads to more effective, equitable, and sustainable solutions for the Pacific region.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation Through Capacity Building

Enhancing regional cooperation in the Pacific involves bolstering the capacity of PICTs to manage crises sustainably. Leveraging its experience in crisis management, environmental conservation, and sustainable development, New Zealand is well-positioned to spearhead capacity-building initiatives. This can be achieved through knowledge and resource sharing in critical areas:

- *EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE*: Given their vulnerability to natural disasters, New Zealand's expertise in

disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, and emergency response coordination can significantly benefit PICTs. This could encompass training programs, technical assistance, and joint exercises to bolster preparedness and response capabilities.

- *PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS:* New Zealand can leverage its robust public health infrastructure, including its healthcare system, laboratories, and epidemiological expertise, to support the development of similar capacities in PICTs. This may involve sharing best practices, providing technical assistance, and facilitating knowledge exchange.
- *ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY:* New Zealand's experience in environmental management, encompassing its commitment to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and marine conservation, can be shared with PICTs. This would support their efforts to protect unique ecosystems and biodiversity through technical advice, promoting sustainable practices, and facilitating access to green technologies.
- *CLIMATE DISRUPTION ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION:* Given their disproportionate vulnerability to climate disruption, PICTs can significantly benefit from New Zealand's experience developing and implementing adaptation and mitigation strategies. This could involve knowledge sharing, technical assistance, and support for climate-resilient infrastructure and livelihoods.
- *GOVERNANCE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT:* New Zealand's expertise in developing effective policies and governance structures for crisis management can strengthen institutional capacity and decision-making processes in PICTs. This could entail training, mentorship, and technical assistance in

policy analysis, risk assessment, and stakeholder engagement.

By sharing expertise and resources, New Zealand can empower PICTs to build resilience and effectively manage crises, fostering a more secure and sustainable regional future. A potential model is the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which facilitates regional cooperation in disaster risk reduction and response through capacity building and resource sharing.³² New Zealand could lead similar initiatives, emphasizing community-based resilience-building approaches to ensure local populations are actively engaged and empowered in their security and well-being.

*Fostering a Culture of Resilience:
Public Awareness and Education in the Pacific*

Enhancing regional cooperation in the Pacific necessitates bolstering PICT's capacity to manage crises sustainably. Leveraging its experience in crisis management, environmental conservation, and sustainable development, New Zealand is well-positioned to spearhead capacity-building initiatives. This can be achieved through knowledge and resource sharing in critical areas.

Enhancing public awareness and education about the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and security issues is paramount for building resilience in the Pacific region. The success of the HIV/AIDS Global Awareness campaign exemplifies the transformative power of sustained public education in driving behavioral change.

Pacific regional campaigns should prioritize informing the public about the following:

- *PREVENTATIVE MEASURES*: Emphasize the importance of hygiene, vaccination, and healthy lifestyle choices for individual and community well-being, highlighting their role

in mitigating health risks and enhancing resilience to future crises.

- *SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES*: Promote eco-friendly behaviors such as reducing waste, conserving water, and supporting renewable energy sources. These actions can mitigate environmental degradation, directly impacting human health and well-being.
- *INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE*: Highlight the value of traditional ecological knowledge and practices in environmental conservation and sustainable resource management. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives can provide culturally relevant and practical solutions to local challenges.

By leveraging diverse media platforms, incorporating culturally relevant messaging, and actively engaging local communities, these campaigns can ensure broad accessibility and resonate with diverse audiences across the Pacific. A multifaceted approach that combines traditional and modern communication channels, collaborates with community leaders and organizations, and tailors messaging to specific cultural contexts will most effectively foster a culture of resilience in the Pacific region.

*Integrating Pandemic Lessons into Climate Action:
A Holistic Approach for the Pacific*

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly revealed the interconnectedness of health and environmental crises. Effective communication, community engagement, and reliance on scientific expertise, central to successful pandemic management, are equally crucial for addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption.

These strategies must be integrated into broader policy frameworks to ensure that lessons learned from the pandemic inform

and strengthen climate disruption adaptation and resilience efforts. Adopting a cooperative approach that draws upon successful models like New Zealand's pandemic response, which emphasized early action, clear communication, and community buy-in, can provide a roadmap for effective climate action. Additionally, integrating diverse cultural perspectives, including Indigenous knowledge and practice, can offer unique insights and solutions tailored to Pacific communities' specific needs and vulnerabilities.

By embracing a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and social systems, the Pacific region can develop a comprehensive and effective strategy for addressing complex, non-traditional security threats. This approach, grounded in theoretical insights and practical experiences from the pandemic response, offers a promising path to building a more resilient and sustainable regional future. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and community empowerment in creating a future where human and environmental well-being are prioritized and protected.

From Pandemic to Climate Crisis: Lessons for a Resilient Pacific Future

New Zealand's exemplary management of the COVID-19 pandemic is a model for effective, compassionate, and science-based governance, providing invaluable lessons for health and environmental security cooperation both within the Pacific region and globally. The nation's swift implementation of comprehensive public health measures, transparent communication to foster public trust, and agile response to the evolving crisis underscores its leadership in navigating complex security challenges.

While New Zealand's response was largely successful, it also revealed areas for improvement, notably the insufficient integration of Indigenous knowledge and cultural values into government planning. This highlights the critical importance of inclusivity and a

more holistic approach to crisis management and policymaking, ensuring that diverse perspectives and traditional knowledge systems are valued and incorporated into decision-making processes.

Despite this, New Zealand’s experience—characterized by preparedness, community engagement, and scientific guidance—offers valuable lessons for addressing non-traditional security threats like climate disruption. It underscores the need for a cooperative, interdisciplinary strategy that extends beyond conventional security framework paradigms, encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

As the Pacific region confronts the unique challenges posed by climate disruption, the lessons gleaned from New Zealand’s pandemic response provide a roadmap for developing resilient, inclusive, and sustainable security strategies. By embracing a holistic approach that incorporates diverse perspectives and prioritizes the well-being of people and the environment, the region can better anticipate, prepare for, and mitigate future crises. This approach not only safeguards human health but also protects the delicate ecosystems and cultural heritage of the Pacific, ensuring a more secure and sustainable future for all.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**THE GLOBAL BATTLE FOR INDUSTRIAL DOMINANCE:
CHINA, AMERICA, AND EUROPE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Srini Sitaraman

*The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence;
it is to act with yesterday's logic.*

– Peter Drucker, *Managing in Turbulent Times*, 1980

Abstract

The resurgence of industrial policy is reshaping the global economic landscape. Driven by geopolitical competition, technological disruption, and the need for national resilience, countries are adopting diverse strategies to secure their economic futures. This chapter examines the evolving industrial policies of China, the United States, and Europe, highlighting their distinct approaches and the implications for global trade, innovation, and technological leadership. From China's state-led model to the U.S. focus on targeted investments and Europe's "de-risking" strategy, the competition for industrial dominance is intensifying. The chapter also explores the role of international collaborations, such as the Quad and AUKUS, in shaping a new era of industrial policy.

**Strategic Industrial Policy:
A New Three-Way Global Race**

The global economic landscape is undergoing a profound transformation. Nations can no longer rely solely on the invisible hand of the market to determine their economic futures. The resurgence of industrial policy, particularly strategic industrial policy, signals a shift in global economic governance, driven by geopolitical rivalry, technological disruptions, and the pressing need for national resilience. What was once considered a relic of past

economic strategies has re-emerged with renewed vigor, marking a significant departure from the laissez-faire approach that dominated recent decades.¹ This shift raises critical questions about the role of the state in shaping economic outcomes and national security priorities. What defines industrial policy, and how does it differ from its strategic counterpart?

At its core, industrial policy refers to targeted government interventions designed to stimulate specific sectors of the economy.² This can include directing funding toward specific research and development (R&D), allocating resources to key industries, and providing incentives—such as subsidies, tax breaks, and land grants³—to drive growth. Governments actively reshape regulations, transforming the “sectoral structure of production” to prioritize industries deemed vital for national economic development or technological advancement.⁴

Strategic industrial policy, however, goes a step further. It represents a deliberate set of policies aimed at cultivating “national champions”—industries considered essential not only for economic competitiveness but also for broader social outcomes and national security.⁵ This strategic approach focuses on fortifying critical sectors such as technology, defense, and energy, ensuring they are robust, resilient, and capable of enhancing a nation’s strategic positioning on the global stage.

This chapter will explore the driving forces behind the resurgence of strategic industrial policy, analyze the varying approaches taken by major economic powers, and assess the broader implications for the future of global economic governance.

Catalysts for the Resurgence of Industrial Policy

The resurgence of industrial policy is not a fleeting trend but a fundamental shift, driven by a confluence of powerful forces reshaping the global order.⁶ Key catalysts have exposed

vulnerabilities, heightened competition, and created new imperatives for national action:

1. *GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION*: The rise of China as an economic and technological powerhouse has upended the global order. Coupled with escalating military conflicts and geopolitical tensions, this shift has shattered the illusion of a purely cooperative international system, compelling nations to secure their strategic industries and reduce dependencies on potential adversaries.⁷
2. *SUPPLY CHAIN FRAGILITY*: The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of global supply chains, as severe shortages of essential goods—from medical equipment to microchips—forced nations to confront the risks of overreliance on foreign production.⁸ This experience has spurred a push for greater domestic manufacturing capacity and regionalized production networks.
3. *TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTIONS*: Rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, biotechnology, robotics, electric vehicles, and renewable energy are redefining economic and military power.⁹ Nations are increasingly using industrial policy to accelerate domestic innovation, capture emerging markets, and ensure they do not fall behind in this technological race.
4. *CLIMATE CHANGE IMPERATIVE*: The urgent need to transition to a low-carbon economy has further propelled the revival of industrial policy. Governments are actively supporting green technologies, fostering sustainable manufacturing practices, and promoting renewable energy to mitigate climate risks and secure a competitive edge in the burgeoning green economy.¹⁰

These dynamics have triggered a strategic contest among China, the United States, and Europe, as each seeks to secure a leadership position in critical sectors that will define global trade, technology, and economic stability. This chapter will examine how these major powers are adapting their industrial strategies to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global landscape and the implications of their approaches for international cooperation and competition.

Diverging Paths: Industrial Policy in a Multipolar World

The renewed emphasis on industrial policy has reshaped global competition, with China, the United States, and Europe charting distinct courses to assert their influence in key strategic sectors. This intensifying race, driven by evolving geopolitical dynamics and economic priorities, has significant consequences for international trade, innovation, and the development of emerging technologies.

China's State-Led Approach

A strong, state-led model, exemplified by its ambitious “Made in China 2025” initiative, defines China’s industrial policy.¹¹ Launched in 2015, this plan aims to elevate China to a global manufacturing superpower by prioritizing ten strategic sectors, including advanced information technology, robotics, aerospace, and new energy vehicles.¹² Beijing’s strategy relies on substantial government subsidies, targeted R&D investments, and the development of “national champions”—state-supported enterprises designed to dominate domestic and international markets.¹³

While this approach has been successful in rapidly advancing China’s technological capabilities, it has also raised concerns about unfair competition and market distortions. Critics argue that China’s reliance on subsidies and other state interventions creates an uneven playing field, disadvantaging foreign competitors and prompting calls for tighter trade regulations and export controls.

Europe's De-risking Strategy

The European Union (EU) is taking a different path, emphasizing “de-risking” to minimize strategic vulnerabilities and reduce dependencies. This strategy involves diversifying supply chains, enhancing technological sovereignty, and strengthening domestic industries.¹⁴ While the EU acknowledges the critical importance of green technologies and digital innovation, its primary objective is to mitigate risks stemming from overreliance on China.

This approach, championed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, seeks to decouple Europe’s critical supply chains from China and safeguard key industries against aggressive competition.¹⁵ Europe, like the rest of the world, has become increasingly concerned about the “strong push to make China less dependent on the world and the world more dependent on China.”¹⁶ By promoting technological independence and encouraging regional collaboration, Europe aims to build a more resilient economic ecosystem that can withstand external pressures.

America's Targeted Investment Strategy

The United States has adopted a strategy characterized by targeted investments in sectors deemed vital for national security and economic competitiveness.¹⁷ This approach focuses on identifying areas where private industry may lack the necessary competitive edge and deploying state resources to stimulate investment and innovation. Recent legislative efforts, such as the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, reflect this strategy, providing significant funding to boost domestic semiconductor production and clean energy technologies.

Washington’s approach seeks to harness the strengths of its private sector while addressing market inefficiencies and bolstering strategic industries.¹⁸ By incentivizing domestic production and R&D in key areas, the United States aims to minimize reliance on foreign supply chains, assert technological leadership, and maintain

its competitive position in the global marketplace.¹⁹ This focus on strategic industrial policy echoes approaches adopted by nations throughout history, demonstrating the enduring relevance of government intervention in shaping economic outcomes.

The Evolution of Industrial Policy: From Mercantilism to the Modern Era

Throughout history, nations have sought to shape their economic destinies and secure their place in the global order. Industrial policy, the strategic use of government intervention to guide economic development, has been a constant tool in this pursuit, evolving alongside the changing dynamics of the global landscape.

Early Examples

Early examples of industrial policy can be traced back to the mercantilist policies of European powers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Seeking to maximize exports and accumulate wealth, nations like Britain and France implemented policies such as the Navigation Acts, which restricted colonial trade to benefit the mother country, and chartered companies like the French East India Company, which enjoyed state-granted monopolies and subsidies.²⁰ In the 19th century, the United States employed similar tactics to protect its nascent industries, using tariffs to shield domestic manufacturers and land grants to encourage railroad construction, fostering growth in sectors like steel and manufacturing. These early interventions laid the foundation for future industrial policy practices, which would take on new urgency and complexity in the 20th century.

The Cold War and the Space Race

The 20th century witnessed a resurgence of industrial policy, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. The Cold War intensified this trend as the United States and the Soviet Union fiercely competed for technological supremacy. This rivalry fueled

advancements not only in space research and weapons development but also in fields like nuclear energy, aerospace, and computing. The United States established institutions like the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) during World War II, and later the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to drive innovation and maintain its technological edge.

A key turning point in this era was the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik I in 1957.²¹ This event, which triggered the "Space Race," underscored the strategic importance of science and technology and prompted the United States to invest heavily in research and education. This "Sputnik moment" not only fueled the Space Race but also spurred a broader wave of investment in science and technology education in the United States. It serves as a potent reminder of how external challenges can catalyze national action and drive industrial policy shifts, much similar to what China's technological rise is doing today.

Post-War Industrialization

Following the Cold War, nations continued to employ industrial policy to achieve various economic and strategic goals. Japan's remarkable economic rise was fueled by a strategic approach that nurtured key industries like electronics and automobiles. This involved a focus on export-led growth, significant investments in R&D, and a close collaboration between the government and the private sector, often orchestrated by its Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI).²² This model, often referred to as "developmental state capitalism," proved highly successful due to factors such as targeted investments, export promotion, and strong state capacity.²³ However, it is important to note that this model also has potential limitations, including the risk of government overreach or cronyism. This model was subsequently adopted by other East Asian economies, including South Korea and Taiwan, with similar success.

However, not all industrial policies have been successful. Import-substitution strategies, prevalent in many Latin American and African countries during the mid-20th century, often led to inefficient industries and hindered economic growth.²⁴ For example, Argentina's attempts to achieve self-sufficiency through import substitution resulted in high costs, limited innovation, and, ultimately, economic stagnation. Other countries, such as Chile, Brazil, and the Gulf States, also employed industrial policies to develop their natural resource sectors and heavy industries. However, the success of these policies varied depending on factors such as trade openness and the effectiveness of government interventions. The varying outcomes of these industrial policies underscore the importance of careful planning, effective implementation, and adaptability to changing global circumstances.

The Modern Context

Industrial policy aims have evolved over time, reflecting changing global dynamics and national priorities. Today, industrial policy is increasingly driven by the need to compete in a multipolar world, secure critical technologies, and enhance national resilience in the face of global challenges. Much like the "Sputnik moment" spurred U.S. action during the Cold War; China's technological rise presents a new challenge. However, the United States faces a unique obstacle this time: its deep entanglement in China's manufacturing ecosystem, which could hinder its ability to respond effectively. This entanglement makes it difficult for the United States to decouple from China's supply chains or impose restrictions without significant economic consequences.

This challenge, along with other contemporary factors, is shaping the new era of industrial policy competition. While industrial policy offers a powerful tool for nations to achieve strategic goals, it also carries potential risks, such as the potential for government overreach, market distortions, and trade conflicts.²⁵ Navigating these complexities will require careful planning,

effective implementation, and a commitment to international cooperation.

Protectionism and Industrial Policy: A Delicate Balance

While free market principles advocate minimal government intervention, the reality is that states often play an active role in shaping their economies. However, excessive protectionism, such as high tariffs or trade barriers, can distort markets, stifle competition, and ultimately hinder economic growth. Finding the right balance between supporting strategic industries and maintaining an open and competitive market is a key challenge for policymakers in the 21st century.

China's Protectionist Approach

China has been a master of utilizing protectionist measures to fuel its economic rise. While often justified under the guise of “infant industry protection,” China has employed a range of tactics to shield its domestic industries from international competition and gain an unfair advantage in the global markets.²⁶ These tactics include:

- *HIGH TARIFFS* on imported goods, making them more expensive and less competitive compared to domestic products.
- *NON-TARIFF BARRIERS*, such as complex regulations and product standards that are difficult for foreign companies to meet.
- *FORCED TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER*, where foreign companies are required to share their technology with Chinese partners in order to access the Chinese market.
- *SUBSIDIES* and preferential treatment for domestic firms, giving them an artificial advantage over their foreign competitors.

- *CURRENCY MANIPULATION* to keep its exports artificially cheap, making them more attractive to buyers in other countries.

These measures have allowed Chinese companies to thrive in a wide range of sectors, from steel and manufacturing to high-tech industries like electronics and renewable energy.

Impact on Global Trade and Economic Order

China's protectionist policies have had a profound impact on the global economic order, contributing to several challenges:

- *TRADE IMBALANCE*: China's large trade surplus with many countries has led to concerns about deindustrialization and job losses in those nations.
- *LACK OF RECIPROCITY*: Foreign companies often face significant barriers to entering the Chinese market, while Chinese companies enjoy relatively open access to markets abroad. This lack of reciprocity has fueled frustration and calls for a more level playing field.
- *MARKET DISTORTIONS*: China's subsidies and other support for its domestic industries have distorted global markets, making it difficult for companies in other countries to compete fairly.

As U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan has noted, China's "non-market economy" poses significant challenges to the international economic order.²⁷ Beijing's continued use of subsidies and protectionist measures undermines fair competition and creates an uneven playing field.

The Geopolitical Dimension

China's protectionism is not merely an economic strategy; it is a tool for achieving geopolitical goals. By dominating key industries and controlling critical supply chains, China aims to increase its global

influence and leverage. This strategy has fueled anxieties among other nations, who are increasingly wary of their dependence on China and the potential vulnerabilities it creates. China's pursuit of technological dominance, as outlined in its "Made in China 2025" plan, has further heightened these concerns, sparking global competition for industrial leadership.²⁸

Finding the Right Balance

While protectionism can be a tempting tool for governments seeking to promote domestic industries, its effectiveness is often limited in a globalized economy. Excessive protectionism can lead to retaliation and trade wars, harming economic growth, and it often stifles domestic innovation.²⁹ The challenge for policymakers is to find the right balance between supporting strategic industries and maintaining an open and competitive market. This involves using targeted measures to support key industries while avoiding broad-based protectionism, working with allies and partners to address unfair trade practices and promote a level playing field, and investing in education, infrastructure, and innovation to enhance competitiveness and reduce reliance on protectionist measures.

In a world of intensifying geopolitical competition, the delicate balance between protectionism and industrial policy will continue to be a critical issue for nations navigating the complexities of the 21st-century economy.

China's Industrial Policy: A Strategic Evolution for Global Power

China's industrial policy has undergone a dramatic transformation since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Initially focused on central planning and state control, it evolved into a sophisticated strategy for technological dominance and global economic leadership.

Early Stages (1949-1978)

In the early decades under Mao Zedong, China's industrial policy was characterized by a Soviet-style command economy.³⁰ The state controlled all the major industries, with a focus on heavy industries like steel and manufacturing, often at the expense of consumer goods. This approach, coupled with political campaigns like the Great Leap Forward, which aimed for unrealistic production targets, and the Cultural Revolution, which disrupted education and economic activity, led to significant inefficiencies, misallocation of resources, and, ultimately, limited economic progress. The lack of market mechanisms and incentives stifled innovation and hindered productivity. This period highlighted the limitations of a purely state-controlled approach to industrial development, demonstrating the need for a more balanced approach that incorporates market forces. This realization paved the way for the transformative reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

Reform and Opening (1978-2006)

Following Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping initiated a period of economic reform and opening up. China gradually transitioned toward a more market-oriented system, allowing for private enterprise, foreign investment, and greater economic reform.³¹ While industrial policy was less formalized during this era, the government still played a significant role in guiding economic development. For instance, it established Special Economic Zones to attract foreign investment and technology, providing tax incentives and streamlined regulations to entice foreign businesses. This led to significant growth in sectors like electronics and telecommunications, with companies like Huawei and ZTE emerging as global players. The government also provided subsidies and tax breaks to key industries, such as electronics and textiles, and promoted export-oriented growth through currency policies and trade agreements.

This period saw remarkable economic expansion, averaging nearly 10% annual GDP growth, and lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, demonstrating the power of market-oriented reforms combined with strategic government support.³² However, it also brought challenges like widening income inequality between rural and urban areas, severe environmental degradation due to rapid industrialization, and a growing dependence on foreign technology in critical sectors.

The Rise of Strategic Industrial Policy (2006-Present)

Since 2006, China's industrial policy has taken a more strategic and assertive turn, driven by the need to compete in a globalized economy and achieve technological independence. This shift is characterized by a focus on innovation, the development of "national champions," and the pursuit of dominance in key high-tech sectors.

This new era was marked by initiatives such as the *Medium and Long Term Program of Science and Technology* (MLP) in 2006, which emphasized "indigenous innovation" and funded major projects in strategic sectors like biotechnology and renewable energy.³³ As leading scholar Barry Naughton argues, China began investing in industrial policies on a "massive and unprecedented scale" after 2010.³⁴ This period saw the emergence of key initiatives like the "*Decision on Accelerating Strategic Emerging Industries*" in 2010,³⁵ which aimed to promote the growth of seven strategic sectors, and, most notably, the "Made in China 2025" plan in 2015. "Made in China 2025" laid out a bold vision for China to become a global leader in ten key high-tech sectors, including advanced information technology, robotics, aerospace, and new energy vehicles, by achieving self-sufficiency in core technologies and capturing significant global market share.³⁶

More recently, China has adopted the "dual circulation" strategy, which aims to reduce reliance on foreign technology and

markets while strengthening domestic demands and innovation.³⁷ This approach, driven by concerns about geopolitical tensions and potential decoupling from Western economies, involves boosting domestic consumption, promoting indigenous innovation, and developing self-reliant supply chains. This strategy reflects China's growing confidence in its own capabilities and its desire to shape the global economic order on its own terms.

Impact and Implications

China's industrial policy has been instrumental in its rapid economic growth and technological advancement, transforming the nation into a global manufacturing powerhouse and a major player in high-tech industries. However, it has also raised concerns about unfair competition, market distortions, and intellectual property (IP) theft. Critics argue that China's state-led approach creates an uneven playing field, giving its companies an unfair advantage through subsidies, preferential treatment, and forced technology transfer.³⁸ These concerns have led to trade disputes, such as the U.S.-China trade war, and efforts by other countries to diversify their supply chains and reduce their reliance on China. The international community is increasingly grappling with how to respond to China's assertive industrial policies and maintain a level playing field in the global economy.

Made in China 2025: Ambitions and Anxieties in the Global Tech Race

When China unveiled its "Made in China 2025" plan, it signaled a bold ambition: to become the world's leading technological superpower. This comprehensive strategy, launched in 2015, aims to rapidly enhance China's capabilities across ten key high-tech sectors, marking a shift from low-cost manufacturing to high-value-added production. The implications for the global economic landscape are profound, as "Made in China 2025" has sparked

intense competition and raised concerns about China's growing economic and geopolitical influence.

Key Goals and Objectives

The core objectives of "Made in China 2025" are to:³⁹

- *ACHIEVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY*: Reduce dependence on foreign technology and achieve self-reliance in critical sectors.
- *DOMINATE KEY INDUSTRIES*: Establish leadership in high-tech industries, such as advanced information technology, robotics, aerospace, and new energy vehicles.
- *CAPTURE GLOBAL MARKET SHARES*: Increase domestic production of core components and materials to over 70% and secure a significant share of the global market.
- *UPGRADE MANUFACTURING CAPABILITIES*: Move up the value chain from low-cost, labor-intensive manufacturing to high-value, technology-driven production.
- *PROMOTE INNOVATION*: Foster innovation and technological breakthroughs to drive economic growth and national strength.

These objectives reflect China's ambition to not only become a global manufacturing powerhouse, but also to lead in the development and application of advanced technologies. By achieving these goals, China aims to secure its long-term economic prosperity, enhance its geopolitical influence, and shape the future global order.

"Made in China 2025" and the "Dual Circulation" Strategy

"Made in China 2025" is closely aligned with China's broader "dual-circulation" strategy,⁴⁰ which seeks to boost domestic consumption and promote indigenous innovation while maintaining engagement in global trade.⁴¹ This strategy reflects a shift toward

greater self-reliance and a desire to reduce vulnerabilities to external pressures, particularly amid rising geopolitical tensions and potential decoupling from Western economies. By strengthening its domestic market and technological capabilities, China aims to create a more resilient and independent economy that is less susceptible to external shocks.

International Response and Concerns

The initiative has raised significant concerns globally, with other nations viewing it as a challenge to fair competition and the principles of global trade. These concerns stem from a variety of factors:

- *UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES*: Concerns about subsidies, market access restrictions, and compulsory joint ventures that disadvantage foreign companies.
- *INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY THEFT AND CYBER ESPIONAGE*: Allegation of IP theft, industrial espionage, and aggressive technology transfer requirements, which have heightened tensions.
- *CURRENCY MANIPULATION AND MARKET DISTORTIONS*: Fears that China's policies are designed to support state-backed companies in dominating global markets, from electric vehicles to semiconductors.⁴²

To counter these practices, several countries have implemented export control measures, tightened regulations on foreign investment, and invested in domestic industries to enhance their competitiveness. The United States, for example, launched a trade war with China, imposing tariffs on billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods and increased scrutiny of Chinese investments in sensitive technologies. However, countering China's strategy while maintaining international cooperation and open markets remains a significant challenge.

Implications for the Future

“Made in China 2025” has significantly impacted the global economic landscape, accelerating the competition for technological dominance and prompting other countries to re-evaluate their industrial policies. The long-term implications of this initiative will depend on how effectively other nations can respond and whether China can achieve its ambitious goals while addressing the concerns of the international community. The success or failure of “Made in China 2025” will have profound consequences for the future of global trade, innovation, and geopolitical power.

**Countering China:
New Strategies for Industrial Competitiveness**

Global industrial competition is at a critical juncture. Nations are confronting the challenge of China’s dominance in key sectors, particularly technological innovation and manufacturing. China’s comprehensive control over raw materials and finished goods enables it to command entire supply chains, prompting a worldwide reassessment of industrial strategies. The challenge is magnified by growing technological dependence on China, vulnerabilities in global supply chains, and the erosion of manufacturing capabilities in many developed countries.

Responding to the Challenge

The United States and Europe have initiated various strategies to strengthen their industrial competitiveness and counterbalance China’s influence. These efforts focus on substantial investments to bolster domestic industries, particularly high-priority sectors.

1. *THE U.S. APPROACH.* The United States is adopting a targeted investment strategy to reclaim leadership in critical sectors. Key initiatives include:
 - *CHIPS and Science Act:* This act allocates billions of dollars to support domestic semiconductor productions,

aiming to revitalize the U.S. semiconductor industry and reduce reliance on foreign suppliers.

- *Inflation Reduction Act*: This act incentivizes the development of clean energy technologies and seeks to reduce reliance on China for critical minerals, fostering a more sustainable and secure energy future.
- *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*: This act invests in infrastructure projects essential for a modern manufacturing sector, including transportation, energy, and communications networks.

These measures aim to revitalize domestic industries, create well-paying jobs, and build more resilient supply chain networks.

2. *THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY*: Europe is focused on “de-risking” its economy by reducing dependence on Chinese manufacturing and promoting strategic autonomy. This involves:

- *Diversifying Supply Chains*: Reducing reliance on China by seeking alternative sources for critical materials and components.
- *Investing in Critical Technologies*: Supporting R&D in key technologies, such as AI, quantum computing, and biotechnology.
- *Strengthening Local Industries*: Promoting the growth of domestic industries through investments, subsidies, and regulatory reforms.
- *Prioritizing Green Technologies*: Integrating sustainability and green technologies into its industrial policy to achieve long-term economic resilience and competitiveness.

The Power of Collaboration

Beyond domestic initiatives, the United States and Europe recognize the need for deeper cooperation with allies and partners. This collaborative approach, often called “friend-shoring” or “ally-shoring,” involves creating more diversified and secure supply chains by partnering with nations that share common values or have strategic defense alliances.

Initiatives such as the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and United States) and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) exemplify these collaborative efforts. These partnerships aim to:

- *STRENGTHEN SUPPLY CHAIN RESILIENCE* by diversifying sources and reducing dependence on single suppliers.
- *ENHANCE TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION* through joint R&D, technology sharing, and the development of common standards.
- *COLLECTIVELY COUNTER CHINA’S* expanding influence by presenting a collective commitment and promoting alternative models of economic development.

The Road Ahead

The race for industrial leadership is intensifying. The future of the global economy hinges on how effectively nations navigate this complex and competitive landscape. Success will require a combination of strategic investments, robust international collaboration, and a relentless commitment to innovation. By adopting these approaches, countries can enhance their competitiveness, build more resilient economies, and help shape a future where technological leadership is shared among a diverse and cooperative group of nations.

The Quad: Shaping a Democratic and Resilient Technological Future

In an era of intensifying geopolitical competition and rapid technological advancements, the Quad, has emerged as a vital partnership. Bringing together Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, the Quad seeks to lead a technological future grounded in democratic values and a rules-based order.

A Foundation for Technological Cooperation

At the inaugural Quad Leaders' Summit in March 2021, the member nations articulated a shared vision for a "free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific." This vision emphasized building resilient and diverse technology supply chains, promoting open and interoperable standards, and driving innovation in crucial areas such as cybersecurity, advanced communications, and clean energy.

The Quad's collaborative efforts are guided by four core principles: security, transparency, autonomy, and integrity.⁴³ These principles are crucial in the context of competing with China,⁴⁴ whose state-led model often prioritizes control and opacity over openness and transparency.

Core Principles in Action

The Quad's dedication to these principles is reflected in various initiatives. For example, the Quad has:

- *ESTABLISHED A CRITICAL AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP* to coordinate joint efforts in key areas.
- *LAUNCHED INITIATIVES TO SECURE SUPPLY CHAINS* for critical materials, such as rare earth elements, by diversifying sourcing and investing in new extraction and processing technologies.
- *PROMOTED THE ADOPTION OF OPEN AND INTEROPERABLE TECHNOLOGY* standards like Open RAN to counter China's

dominance in 5G technology and ensure a more competitive and secure telecommunications landscape.

- *INCREASED R&D COLLABORATION* in areas such as AI, quantum computing, and biotechnological edge and foster innovation.

These efforts are aimed at strengthening resilience, diversifying technological capabilities, and bolstering security in the Indo-Pacific region.

Evolving Cooperation and Strategic Focus

Since the revitalized Quad summit in 2021, leaders have continued to meet regularly, deepening their cooperation and expanding their agenda. Key areas of progress include joint investments in critical technologies, initiatives to counter disinformation and cyber threats, and efforts to promote sustainable development in climate action.

Shaping a Secure and Responsible Technological Future

The Quad's collaborative approach extends beyond merely fostering innovation; it is about shaping a technological future grounded in responsibility, transparency, and shared democratic values. In an era increasingly defined by technological competition, the Quad is a crucial bulwark against authoritarian influence, championing a secure and equitable digital environment. By upholding these principles, the Quad advances innovation and reinforces a rules-based order, ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

AUKUS: A Trilateral Partnership for Technological and Industrial Strength

On September 15, 2001, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the formation of AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership focused on advanced defense capabilities and strategic industrial collaboration.⁴⁵ This initiative reflects the growing importance of technology in the 21st-century security

landscape and the need for closer cooperation among allies to maintain a competitive edge, particularly in the face of China's rising military power and assertive posture in the Indo-Pacific.

*Pillar I:
Enhancing Defense Capabilities*

AUKUS Pillar I centers on enhancing the defense capabilities of the three partner nations.⁴⁶ This includes cooperation in several key areas:

- *NUCLEAR-POWERED SUBMARINES*: Assisting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, a significant step in strengthening its naval capabilities.
- *HYPERSONIC AND COUNTER-HYPERSONIC CAPABILITIES*: Developing advanced hypersonic and counter-hypersonic weapons systems to address evolving threats.
- *CYBERSECURITY*: Enhancing collaboration on cybersecurity to protect critical infrastructure and defend against cyberattacks.
- *ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND QUANTUM TECHNOLOGIES*: Developing and deploying cutting-edge technologies in AI and quantum computing for defense applications.

These initiatives ensure technological superiority and interoperability among the AUKUS partners, allowing them to respond effectively to shared security challenges in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

*Pillar II:
Strategic Industrial Collaboration*

AUKUS Pillar II broadens the scope to include strategic industrial policy, recognizing that a robust defense sector requires a resilient and collaborative industrial base.⁴⁷ This approach acknowledges that no country, except perhaps China, can independently manage

the entire supply chain for advanced defense systems. Pillar II emphasized the need for:

- *RELIABLE PROCUREMENT*: Securing access to essential raw materials and components, reducing reliance on potentially adversarial nations for critical supplies.
- *SKILLED WORKFORCE*: Developing a capable, well-trained workforce to support advanced manufacturing and technological innovation, ensuring that the AUKUS partners have the human capital necessary to compete in the 21st-century economy.
- *MANUFACTURING CAPACITY*: Expanding domestic manufacturing capabilities to produce critical defense platforms, reducing dependence on foreign suppliers and strengthening national resilience.
- *LOGISTICAL INFRASTRUCTURE*: Building efficient systems for stockpiling, delivering, and maintaining advanced technologies will ensure that the AUKUS partners can effectively deploy and sustain their defense capabilities.

By fostering collaboration among governments and private industry across the three nations, AUKUS aims to create a sustainable and secure ecosystem for developing and producing critical defense technologies. This collaboration will involve joint R&D projects, technology sharing, and the harmonization of regulations and standards.

The Role of Strategic Industrial Policy

AUKUS highlights the growing importance of strategic industrial policy in a world of intensifying geopolitical competition. It recognizes that governments must actively support key industries, foster innovation, and build resilient supply chains to maintain national security and economic competitiveness. This involves

significant investments in R&D, workforce training, and infrastructure development.

AUKUS and the Quad: Complementary Frameworks

AUKUS complements other strategic partnerships, such as the Quad, in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region. While AUKUS focuses specifically on defense technology and industrial collaboration among its three members, the Quad has a broader agenda that includes economic cooperation, climate action, and regional stability. Both initiatives, however, share a commitment to countering China's growing influence and upholding a rules-based international order.

In a rapidly changing global security environment, AUKUS exemplifies a new model of strategic cooperation. By pooling resources, sharing technological expertise, and coordinating industrial policies, the AUKUS partners aim to enhance their collective defense capabilities and maintain a competitive edge in critical technologies. This partnership underscores the growing importance of international collaboration in navigating the complexities of the 21st century and ensuring security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Strengthening Defense Through Partnership: The U.S. Approach to Industrial Collaboration

In an era of growing geopolitical complexity, the United States recognizes that a strong and resilient defense industrial base is essential for national security. This understanding has driven a shift toward deeper collaboration with allies and partners, exemplified by initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS and targeted policies like the National Defense Industrial Strategy (NIDS) and the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR).⁴⁸

The National Defense Industrial Strategy

A cornerstone of the U.S. approach, the NIDS seeks to build a “modern, resilient defense industrial ecosystem” capable of deterring adversaries and meeting the demands of evolving security threats.⁴⁹ The strategy focuses on four key areas:

1. *RESILIENT SUPPLY CHAINS*: Ensuring reliable access to essential products, services, and technologies, delivered with speed, efficiently, and at the necessary scale to support defense requirements. This involves diversifying supply sources, reducing reliance on single suppliers, and promoting secure and sustainable supply chains.
2. *WORKFORCE READINESS*: Cultivating a highly skilled workforce capable of supporting advanced manufacturing and high-tech industries, ensuring long-term industrial strength and competitiveness of the U.S. defense industrial base. This involves investing in education and training programs, apprenticeships, and initiatives to attract and retain top talent in critical fields.
3. *FLEXIBLE ACQUISITION*: Developing agile and adaptable acquisition strategies that balance cost, efficiency, and scalability to meet diverse and evolving needs of the defense sector. This includes streamlining acquisition processes, promoting innovation, and leveraging new technologies to improve efficiency and responsiveness.
4. *ECONOMIC DETERRENCE*: Bolstering economic security through fair and effective market mechanisms that strengthen the defense industrial ecosystem within the United States and its allies.⁵⁰ This involves promoting competition, preventing market distortions, and ensuring a level playing field for businesses operating in the defense sector.

To achieve these objectives, NIDS emphasizes the importance of public-private partnerships, risk-sharing mechanisms and technological innovation, encouraging the industry to invest in critical sectors and enhance resilience.⁵¹

Expanding the Network:

The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience

The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR) extends U.S. defense industrial base policy to include close cooperation with allies and partner nations in the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions.⁵² PIPIR aims to “accelerate defense industrial base (DIB) cooperation” by:⁵³

- *REDUCING PRODUCTION BARRIERS*: Streamlining regulations and processes to facilitate seamless cross-border collaboration in the development and production of defense technologies.
- *CREATING NEW SUSTAINMENT HUBS*: Establishing regional centers for maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) of critical equipment, ensuring operational readiness and reducing reliance on distant facilities.
- *ADDRESSING SUPPLY CHAIN CONSTRAINTS*: Collaborating to identify and mitigate vulnerabilities in defense supply chains, enhancing overall resilience and reducing dependence on potentially adversarial nations.

The Regional Sustainment Framework

A key component of PIPIR is the Regional Sustainment Framework (RSF), designed to optimize regional MRO capabilities.⁵⁴ Rather than rely solely on U.S.-based facilities, the RSF leverages the capabilities of partner countries, enabling more efficient and cost-effective sustainment of defense equipment. This approach strengthens the collective defense industrial network and promotes greater interoperability and cooperation among allies.

The Shangri-La Dialogue and Statement of Principles

At the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin introduced a Statement of Principles for Indo-Pacific Defense Industrial Base Collaboration.⁵⁵ Endorsed by multiple countries, this statement outlines shared commitments to:

- *STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE*: Enhancing the collective ability to withstand disruptions and sustain critical defense capabilities.
- *ENHANCE WORKFORCE READINESS*: Building a skilled workforce to support advanced defense industries and maintain industrial strength.
- *PROMOTE DEFENSE INNOVATION*: Encouraging collaboration on R&D to ensure a technological edge and drive innovation.

The Strategic Importance of Industrial Collaboration

These initiatives reflect a growing acknowledgment that the United States and its allies cannot rely solely on isolated, national-level solutions. These frameworks foster a more resilient and agile defense network by pooling resources, sharing technological expertise, and coordinating industrial policies. This strategic collaboration ensures allied nations maintain a competitive edge in critical defense technologies while promoting stability and security across the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

**Revitalizing American Manufacturing:
A National Strategy for the 21st Century**

The United States is actively pursuing a comprehensive strategy to revitalize its manufacturing sector, recognizing that a strong domestic industrial base is essential for economic prosperity and national security. This effort acknowledges the need to invest in innovation, build a skilled workforce, and enhance the resilience of supply chains in the face of growing global competition.

Aligning with National Security Priorities

The focus on manufacturing aligns directly with the priorities outlined in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), which underscores the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign policy. The NSS emphasizes the importance of a strong domestic industrial base for national security,⁵⁶ highlighting the need to invest in American workers and industries, rebuild supply chains, and lead the technological revolution. The National Strategy for Advanced Manufacturing serves as a roadmap for achieving these objectives and securing U.S. leadership in this critical sector.

Key Goals and Initiatives

The National Strategy for Advanced Manufacturing is built on three core goals:⁵⁷

- *DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING ADVANCED MANUFACTURING TECHNOLOGIES:* This involves promoting the adoption of cutting-edge technologies—such as automation, robotics, AI, and advanced materials—to enhance productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness. The strategy outlines 12 key objectives in this area, encompassing initiatives such as accelerating innovation in microelectronics and semiconductors, developing innovative materials and processing technologies, and leading the future of smart manufacturing.
- *GROWING THE ADVANCED MANUFACTURING WORKFORCE:* Recognizing that a skilled workforce is essential for success in advanced manufacturing, this goal focuses on developing a highly trained workforce capable of meeting the demands of modern industries. The strategy emphasizes expanding and diversifying the talent pool, promoting advanced manufacturing education and training, and strengthening connections between employers and educational organizations.

- *BUILDING RESILIENCE INTO MANUFACTURING SUPPLY CHAINS AND ECOSYSTEMS*: This goal emphasizes the importance of strong and resilient supply chains that can withstand disruptions and ensure access to critical materials and components. The strategy includes objectives focused on enhancing supply chain interconnections, reducing vulnerabilities, and strengthening and revitalizing advanced manufacturing ecosystems.

Investing in American Manufacturing

The U.S. government has demonstrated its commitment to this strategy through significant legislative actions and investments:⁵⁸

- *BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND JOBS ACT (IIJA)*: This landmark legislation provides funding for infrastructure projects crucial for a modern manufacturing sector.
- *INFLATION REDUCTION ACT*: This act aims to lower consumer costs and boost clean energy technology manufacturing, creating new opportunities for American businesses and workers.
- *CHIPS AND SCIENCE ACT*: This act seeks to revitalize the U.S. semiconductor industry by investing \$50 billion in R&D and providing incentives for domestic semiconductor production.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the United States has launched initiatives to support advanced manufacturing, including establishing 12 tech hubs across the nation to serve as centers for innovation and collaboration.⁶⁰ These hubs aim to unite businesses, universities, and government agencies to foster the development of critical technologies, create jobs in innovative industries, and strengthen U.S. economic competitiveness.

Fostering Public-Private Collaboration

The National Strategy for Advanced Manufacturing recognizes the importance of collaboration between the public and private sectors. By encouraging partnerships between government, industry, and academia, the strategy aims to create a more dynamic and innovative manufacturing ecosystem. This collaborative approach will help to accelerate the development and adoption of advanced technologies, ensure that workforce training programs align with the needs of industry, and promote the sharing of knowledge and resources.

Securing Economic Growth and Industrial Resilience

Through these initiatives, the United States aims to create a more competitive, innovation-driven manufacturing sector that can lead in the global market. By investing in advanced technologies, developing a skilled workforce, and strengthening supply chains, the United States seeks to enhance its manufacturing capabilities and secure its position as a global leader in this critical sector.

Conclusion:

Shaping the Future of Industrial Policy

The 21st century has ushered in a new era of industrial policy, one defined by intensifying geopolitical competition, rapid technological advancements, and the urgent need for national resilience. This era demands a more strategic and nuanced approach, where governments actively shape their economies to achieve not only economic prosperity but also national security and geopolitical influence.

The rise of China as a technological and economic powerhouse has been a key catalyst for this change. China's aggressive industrial policies and growing geopolitical ambitions have compelled other nations, particularly the United States and Europe, to re-evaluate their strategies. They are now pursuing a combination of domestic

investments, international collaboration, and targeted measures to counter China's influence and maintain their competitive edge.

This new era of industrial policy is characterized by several key trends:

- *THE RISE OF STRATEGIC INDUSTRIES:* Governments are prioritizing support for industries deemed critical for national security and economic competitiveness, such as semiconductors, AI, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing.
- *THE IMPORTANCE OF RESILIENCE:* Recent geopolitical events have exposed the vulnerabilities of global supply chains, leading nations to prioritize resilience and diversification to reduce their dependence on single suppliers and ensure access to critical goods.
- *THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION:* While competition is intensifying, there is a growing recognition that international cooperation is essential to address shared challenges and promote a stable global economic order. Initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS exemplify this trend, fostering collaboration among like-minded nations.
- *THE BLURRING OF ECONOMIC AND SECURITY CONCERNS:* The lines between economic and security policy are becoming increasingly blurred, as industrial policy is now seen as a tool for achieving both economic and geopolitical objectives.

This new era presents both challenges and opportunities. Nations must navigate a complex landscape, balancing the need to support strategic industries with the importance of maintaining open markets and international cooperation. The choices made today will have far-reaching consequences, shaping the global economic and geopolitical landscape for decades to come.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HEALING THE PAST: U.S.-LAO RELATIONS AND HEALTH COOPERATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Peter M. Haymond

Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.

— Helen Keller, early 1920s

Abstract

The arrival of U.S. COVID-19 vaccines in Laos in 2021 marked a pivotal shift in a relationship once marred by conflict. This chapter examines how sustained U.S. health cooperation over two decades, culminating in the pandemic response, has fostered trust and transformed the U.S.-Lao dynamic. By prioritizing Laos' needs, providing unconditional aid, and collaborating on health initiatives, the United States has become a valued partner, exemplified by the significant improvement in public perception. This case study serves as a model for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia, highlighting the effectiveness of non-transactional partnerships in fostering lasting relationships and promoting regional stability and prosperity.

A New Era of Partnership: From Fear to Hope

On July 16, 2021, a wave of excitement swept across social media in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos). Despite its limited healthcare infrastructure, the small Southeast Asian nation had successfully navigated the initial 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting only around 3,500 confirmed cases and less than ten confirmed deaths among its 7.5 million citizens.¹ However, 35% of those cases had been recorded in the previous two weeks, and the threat of new variants and concerns about vaccine efficacy cast a long shadow of uncertainty.

The arrival of a million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine from the United States marked a turning point. This single-dose regime promised to simplify the vaccination process, particularly for remote communities. This pivotal moment offered a glimmer of hope and a chance to examine how Laos had prepared for the pandemic, the challenges it faced, and the path to recovery that lay ahead.

The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane broadcasted the vaccine arrival on Facebook Live, showcasing a collaborative spirit between the two nations. The response was unprecedented. Thousands of comments flooded the embassy's Facebook page, revealing a profound shift in public sentiment. One comment, in particular, poignantly captured this transformation: *"In the past, when we heard American planes, we ran and hid. Now, when we hear American planes, we stand quietly, full of hope."*²

This powerful statement encapsulates the complex history between Laos and the United States, marred by conflict and mistrust. It also highlights the transformative potential of this newfound partnership, signaling a shift from fear to hope. To understand the full significance of this moment, we must briefly delve into the historical context that has shaped the relationship between Laos and the United States.

Historical Context:

From the Secret War to a Partnership Forged in Health

The U.S. covert support (1964-1973) to the Lao royal government in its civil war with the eventually victorious Communist forces left deep-seated mistrust toward the United States and a devastating legacy of unexploded ordinance that produced thousands of post-war civilian casualties. However, in recent decades, the United States has made a concerted effort to rebuild relations with Laos, emphasizing partnership and mutual respect.

Health cooperation has been a cornerstone of this effort. Initiatives led by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) have bolstered Laos' capacity for disease surveillance and response. Consistent engagement over nearly 20 years, centered on addressing Laos' self-identified needs, has gradually fostered greater trust and paved the way for a stronger partnership, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Case Study for U.S. Engagement in Southeast Asia

The evolving U.S.-Lao relationship offers valuable insights into a broader strategy for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. This approach posits that prioritizing assistance in addressing the self-determined needs of Southeast Asian countries in times of both crisis and stability, instead of focusing on competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), can establish the United States as a preferred partner across the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity for the United States to showcase this approach. The United States provided critical assistance and vaccines to Laos, saving lives and strengthening bilateral ties. This act of solidarity in a crisis underscored the value of dependable partnership. This analysis is grounded in the principles of cooperative security and mutual interdependence, which emphasize long-term trust-building relationships over transactional, competitive engagement.

My first-hand experience as the U.S. Ambassador to Lao PDR during the pandemic provides a unique perspective on the impact of U.S. health assistance on the ground. This experience and a broader understanding of U.S. foreign policy objectives inform the analysis presented in this chapter, offering insights into how sustained engagement based on mutual respect and shared interests can foster lasting partnerships in the region.

Looking Ahead: Sustainable Partnership for Mutual Benefit

To secure or maintain a position as a preferred partner in Southeast Asia, the United States must remain committed to long-term engagement with Laos and other Southeast Asian countries and convince them of that commitment. By prioritizing partner needs over time, the United States can foster enduring relationships that transcend geopolitical rivalries and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. This approach benefits both the United States and Southeast Asia, promoting a more secure and collaborative future for the entire region.

Early Cooperation Efforts

In recent decades, the United States has sought to demonstrate respect and partnership with Laos, even amid initial Lao reluctance and suspicion. This has manifested most clearly in health cooperation.

Beyond addressing the legacies of war, such as recovering missing soldiers and clearing unexploded ordinance, health emerged as a key area of collaboration. The U.S. Navy Advanced Medical Research Unit Two (NAMRU-2) signed an initial memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Lao Ministry of Health in 1994 to “promote health security through capacity building.”³ This was followed by the establishment of a U.S. CDC office in Vientiane in 2006.⁴

Global avian flu outbreaks catalyzed the CDC’s presence in Laos. CDC support focused on enhancing Laos’ capacity to monitor and treat various influenza strains, including novel ones that often emerge in Southeast Asia. With robust U.S. technical support and a committed effort by the Lao government, Laos became, in 2011, the first low-income country to build the policy base needed to move from simply administering donated influenza vaccines to a capability for national procurement and delivery of the vaccine.⁵

Health Engagement as a Bridge to Stronger Ties

In 2009, the CDC launched Laos' Field Epidemiology Training (FET) program.⁶ This initiative provided advanced, practical training to Lao epidemiologists, who were then deployed across the country, forming the first line of defense against infectious disease outbreaks. The FET program has proved to be a crucial capacity-building effort for pandemic preparedness, with a particularly significant impact during the COVID-19 crisis.

The CDC's commitment to strengthening Laos' capacity to identify and report emerging viruses was instrumental in paving the way for the return of USAID to Laos in 2011 after a 36-year hiatus. USAID's initial focus on virus surveillance and pandemic preparedness evolved into a broader development program, culminating in the official opening of a country office in 2016.⁷

These early health initiatives served as a bridge, fostering trust and laying the groundwork for a broader partnership between the United States and Laos. By addressing Laos' critical health needs and demonstrating a sustained commitment to its well-being without reference to any competitor, the United States gradually overcame historical barriers and established itself as a reliable partner. This foundation of trust proved invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling a swift and effective collaborative response.

Health Cooperation and COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the United States was the first to assist Laos publicly,⁸ donating personal protective equipment in early February 2020. This swift response set the stage for a robust collaboration involving USAID, CDC, and the U.S. DoD medical arm. Their combined efforts resulted in over \$16 million in COVID-19 aid to Laos,⁹ encompassing material donations and financial support through the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), not counting millions of donated vaccine doses.¹⁰ These efforts were complemented by the

tireless work of FET-graduated Lao epidemiologists who spearheaded disease surveillance efforts nationwide.

The impact of this collaboration on U.S.-Lao relations has been significant. Expressions of gratitude to the U.S. ambassador for COVID-related and other health assistance became commonplace in high-level meetings and provincial visits. However, the lasting impression went beyond mere appreciation for help during a crisis. The Lao government and people recognized that the United States had not opportunistically targeted the health sector simply to compete with China. Instead, the United States had amplified its already longstanding support for Laos' health sector in response to an urgent need.

This shift in perception is reflected in Gallup's annual poll of international attitudes toward various countries' leadership. In the 2022 survey (of 2021 attitudes), Laos showed the most significant increase in positive views of the United States among all Asian countries polled.¹¹ These numbers decreased slightly in the 2023 survey and then rebounded in the 2024 survey. The approval rate remains notably higher than pre-pandemic levels, indicating a sustained improvement in how the United States is viewed in Laos.¹²

Lessons From Laos for ASEAN Partnerships

The U.S.-Lao relationship exemplifies how persistent efforts at partnership, such as in the health sector, can gradually overcome profound mistrust and strengthen bilateral ties. Despite Laos' close political and ideological relations with China, the United States has successfully cultivated a more cooperative relationship by focusing on providing Laos with additional options for development rather than trying to pull Laos away from PRC influence. This increased engagement began well before the public U.S. "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, underscoring the importance of sustained, long-term commitment to building trust and cooperation.

The U.S.-Lao experience offers valuable insights into how the United States can also effectively engage with other Southeast Asian nations. By fostering trust and cooperation through sustained, needs-based partnerships, the United States can strengthen its position in the region and provide a viable alternative, or at least a complement, to PRC influence. The following sections explore these lessons in more detail, highlighting the importance of long-term commitment, collaboration, and respect for the self-determination of partner nations.

The U.S. Health Engagement in Southeast Asia: A Legacy of Partnership

The United States has been a committed public health partner in Southeast Asia for decades. The CDC's FET program, initiated in Thailand in the 1980s, then expanded to other Southeast Asian states, equipping local experts with essential disease detection and response skills. The United States has also invested in laboratory capacity and infectious disease surveillance systems, particularly in response to avian influenza outbreaks. These efforts, often conducted in collaboration with the WHO and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), have demonstrated the United States' commitment to regional health security.

Beyond Crisis Response: The Value of Sustained Engagement

While providing aid during crises is crucial and appreciated, lasting partnerships are forged through sustained engagement. This involves proactively helping build national capacity before crises occur, assisting during emergencies, and supporting recovery and further development afterward. This approach is particularly important for partners where trust is initially lacking, as it demonstrates a genuine and sustained U.S. commitment to their well-being and development that goes beyond immediate crises.

The U.S.-Lao experience highlights the importance of focusing on the partner's needs and priorities rather than solely on geopolitical competition. This approach can and should be applied beyond health cooperation to other areas, such as combating transnational crime, addressing climate change disruption, and fostering economic development. By consistently showing up and focusing on the partner's wants and needs, the United States can build trust and foster collaborative partnerships that transcend short-term instrumentality.

The U.S. and PRC COVID Assistance Contrasts

China also dedicated substantial resources to pandemic assistance and held a significant early advantage, shipping COVID-19 vaccines to Southeast Asian neighbors more than six months before the United States. This initial swiftness earned China considerable goodwill in the region. Surveys conducted during and soon after the pandemic showed that most Southeast Asian countries, excluding Vietnam, regarded China as the primary provider of pandemic aid,¹³ even in cases where the United States was the major vaccine donor.¹⁴ This perception persisted despite U.S. vaccines being widely regarded as more effective.¹⁵

This narrative of rapid response and substantial assistance contrasted with the initial slowness of the U.S. vaccine rollout in the region. While the United States eventually surpassed China in the number of vaccines delivered to Southeast Asian countries, with a significantly higher proportion being donated, this initial lag in vaccine distribution allowed China to solidify its own image as a reliable partner in times of crisis.

Comparative Analysis: U.S. vs. PRC Pandemic Assistance Strategies

China's narrative surrounding its pandemic assistance has centered on the message: "We were there with vaccines when you needed us

most; the United States was not.”¹⁶ This refrain, and the logistical advantage of Chinese vaccines not requiring ultra-cold storage, initially resonated strongly within Southeast Asia. However, the actual impact of the PRC’s “vaccine diplomacy” on the region’s overall perception has been more complex and mixed.¹⁷

While the PRC’s early vaccine delivery certainly garnered goodwill, its continued aggression in the South China Sea during the pandemic undermined those initial soft power gains. Additionally, reports of the PRC’s transactional approach to aid, including attaching political strings to assistance and prioritizing its citizens living in other countries for vaccination in some instances, have raised concerns about its true motives and reliability.¹⁸ The dissonance between the PRC’s soft power messaging and hard power actions has tempered the initial positive impact of its vaccine diplomacy.

This transactional approach is characteristic of the PRC’s broader foreign policy, offering investment and trade incentives to countries that align with its policies and imposing economic penalties on those that challenge or criticize it. The pattern of China penalizing partners’ policy choices is evident in its interactions with numerous countries, with prominent examples including Lithuania,¹⁹ Australia,²⁰ South Korea,²¹ the Philippines,²² and Norway.²³

The threat of economic coercion for perceived slights or disagreements creates an environment of caution and self-censorship among China’s partners. While this strategy may be effective in the short term for deterring partner actions that China deems unfavorable, it ultimately undermines the foundation and goodwill necessary for sustained and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Public Perception and Soft Power Dynamics

While China's early vaccine diplomacy garnered attention, the United States initially lagged in vaccine distribution abroad, instead prioritizing domestic supply. While understandable, this approach was criticized in Southeast Asia and other developing regions. However, by the end of 2021, the United States had significantly ramped up its vaccine donation efforts, nearly doubling China's vaccine deliveries to Southeast Asian countries.²⁴

The overall impact of U.S. COVID assistance on Southeast Asian perceptions of the United States has been positive, though not decisive in any competitive sense. The 2024 edition of the annual "State of Southeast Asia" survey by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute actually indicated for the first time a slight preference among surveyed countries for China as a strategic partner if forced to choose.²⁵ However, this result requires nuanced interpretation.

Firstly, the same survey showed Southeast Asian respondents overwhelmingly prefer not to align exclusively with either power, highlighting the region's desire to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid becoming overly reliant on a single partner.²⁶ Secondly, the survey also found that respondents trust the United States much more than China to uphold the system of international law that has led to global peace and prosperity.²⁷

The survey results suggest that while some Southeast Asian nations perceive China as a more robust economic and political force in their region, the United States maintains a significant soft power advantage regarding trust and perceived commitment to the rules-based international order.

The Importance of Non-Transactional Partnerships

The contrasting approaches of the United States and China during the pandemic underscore the importance of non-transactional partnerships in fostering genuine trust and sustainable cooperation.

While the PRC's transactional model frequently involves quid pro quo arrangements and economic leverage may yield short-term gains, it can also foster resentment among partners who feel pressured to comply with Chinese demands.

Conversely, the U.S. commitment to providing aid without political conditions, as demonstrated in its COVID-19 response in Laos, cultivates a more equitable and respectful partnership. This approach is both ethically considerate and should prove strategically advantageous in the long run. By prioritizing mutual respect and shared interests, the United States builds trust and goodwill that can endure political fluctuations and lay the foundation for deeper collaboration across multiple sectors.

In the context of U.S.-Lao relations, health cooperation has been pivotal in building trust and moving beyond the legacy of war. The pandemic served as a litmus test, showcasing the United States as a reliable and invested partner in Laos' well-being. This approach resonates with the broader U.S. engagement strategy in Southeast Asia, where health cooperation has been one consistent and integral component of multifaceted partnerships. By emphasizing mutual respect, shared interests, and the self-determined needs of partner countries, the United States can forge resilient relationships that withstand the challenges of time and contribute to a more stable and prosperous Southeast Asia.

Conclusion: Charting a Path to Enduring Partnerships in an Era of Strategic Competition

China's reintegration into the global economy has brought many economic benefits worldwide. However, its attempts to reshape the international order and exert dominance in East Asia challenge the rules-based system that has long fostered peace and prosperity.

China's geographical proximity, economic influence, and transactional diplomacy give it undeniable advantages in Southeast Asia. Yet, this same strength also presents opportunities for the

United States, as the desire to counterbalance China's growing influence creates a demand for alternative partners. The United States, with its reputation for reliability and resolve and many longstanding partnerships in the region, is well-positioned to meet this demand.

To further enhance its appeal, the United States must prioritize addressing the needs and concerns of its partners through sustained engagement that does not appear transaction-based. By working to foster collaborative rather than hierarchical partnerships, United States efforts will better resonate with Southeast Asian nations that seek a partner who respects their autonomy and sovereignty.

This requires consistent engagement with governments and people in the region, demonstrating a commitment beyond mere competition with China. Such an approach not only strengthens ties with Southeast Asian nations but can also potentially influence China's behavior over time, encouraging it to adopt more collaborative and less coercive practices than at present.

While a complete realignment of Southeast Asia toward the United States is unlikely, given China's proximity and economic power and widespread desire in the region to avoid dependence on any superpower, sustained U.S. engagement can profoundly shape the geopolitical landscape. It can solidify relationships with countries wary of the PRC's assertiveness while fostering cooperation even with those more closely aligned with Beijing. This requires a long-term commitment to consistently demonstrate the value of partnership and offer attractive alternatives to the PRC's model, as exemplified by the evolving U.S.-Lao relationship.

Ultimately, the United States can most effectively navigate the complexities of great power competition in Southeast Asia by leveraging its strengths in building genuine partnerships based on mutual respect, shared interests, and demonstrated commitment to the region's well-being and prosperity.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEYOND CENTRALITY:

ASEAN'S PATH TO REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

SCOTT D. McDONALD

Anyone who fights for the future, lives in it today.

– Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, 1969

Abstract

In the face of escalating great power competition, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can solidify its regional leadership by leveraging its established centrality and the unfulfilled promises of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework. This chapter argues that ASEAN can proactively shape the Indo-Pacific security landscape through concrete actions and by fostering a network of cooperative initiatives known as Communities of Common Interest (CCI). By initiating these CCIs, ASEAN can incentivize great power engagement on its own terms, reinforcing shared norms and values. This approach will solidify ASEAN's centrality and elevate it to an actual leadership position in the region.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Cold War's bipolar order ushered in a new era for Southeast Asia, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Amidst the shifting landscape, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), composed of relatively small powers, emerged as a key player in regional peace and security. Leveraging its convening power, ASEAN established itself as a vital forum for regional dialogue, attracting major powers and solidifying its role in managing the economic and security developments in its own region.¹ Through initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, ASEAN brought

regional and global powers into forums, highlighting its central role in the region.

Building on this success, ASEAN pursued deeper integration, expanding its membership and ratifying the ASEAN Charter in 2008. This new foundational document established a framework for greater regional integration across political, security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.² During the early 2000s, ASEAN leveraged relative regional stability, backstopped by a dominant United States (U.S.), to build a soft normative order.³ However, its consensus-based decision-making model and recent internal divisions suggest it may have trouble leading the region.⁴

The concept of ASEAN centrality gained prominence with the introduction of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework in 2017. However, the escalating great power competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has raised questions about ASEAN's continued relevance and autonomy in shaping its destiny. To secure its future and that of Southeast Asia, ASEAN must transition from a position of centrality to embrace proactive leadership.

This chapter begins by examining the regional environment, focusing on the intersection of ASEAN, U.S., and PRC aspirations for the region. The following section will explore the need for and challenges to ASEAN regional leadership. Subsequently, the chapter will examine the concept of Communities of Common Interest (CCI) as a tool for operationalizing and securing ASEAN leadership in the region. This section will leverage the concept of cross-cutting cleavages to explore how focused minilateralism can be leveraged by ASEAN to manage competing interests while establishing itself as the leader of regional cooperation and security.

ASEAN in a Dynamic Indo-Pacific

As highlighted in the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions are among the most dynamic

globally, experiencing constant geopolitical and geostrategic shifts.⁵ Faced with a distracted United States and an increasingly aggressive China, ASEAN's relative regional influence has waned.

The past decade and a half have brought ASEAN a more complex strategic environment. The Obama administration's "Pivot to the Pacific" signaled a U.S. intent to challenge China's pursuit of regional dominance, leading to heightened competition and leaving ASEAN member states caught in the middle. The escalating rivalry has disrupted ASEAN's role as the primary platform for addressing regional issues.

However, ASEAN can find some solace in the growing recognition among scholars and practitioners that the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions form a single, interconnected region.⁶ The challenge for ASEAN is to leverage this interconnectedness to maintain its central and strategic role in shaping and managing this evolving landscape.

*United States:
Engaged yet Aloof*

ASEAN has long valued the presence of the United States in the region, especially for security purposes. Evelyn Goh argues that, following the end of the Cold War, "many Southeast Asian states proved to be more concerned about potential United States withdrawal than anything else."⁷ However, maintaining U.S. engagement within ASEAN-led structures has proven challenging. While ASEAN's inclusive approach has encouraged U.S. participation, global commitments and domestic priorities have often diverted American attention. ASEAN has repeatedly felt slighted by cancellations of U.S. participation in ASEAN forums due to external distractions or domestic concerns. Furthermore, perceived U.S. hesitancy in supporting regional allies, as seen in the Second Thomas Shoal incident, has raised doubts about the U.S.

commitment to regional security and its ability to counterbalance a rising China.⁸

The 2017 introduction of the FOIP framework initially held promise, seemingly aligning with ASEAN's values and emphasizing cooperation. For a time, FOIP seemed to be a move toward cooperative order building that agreed with ASEAN values and represented a U.S. commitment to an ASEAN-led security order rather than security competition. However, FOIP failed to materialize into a comprehensive strategy, as the United States quickly shifted focus toward security competition with China. This shift is evident in the U.S. embrace of minilateral initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS. The Quad, an informal strategic forum that includes the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, has seen a growing emphasis on security and prominence in the regional approach of the United States, raising concerns in ASEAN about exclusion from critical discussions. The 2021 establishment of AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States focused on enhancing military capabilities to counter China, has further sidelined ASEAN.⁹

While not explicitly directed against ASEAN, the Quad and AUKUS have fostered a perception that the United States prioritizes alternative frameworks over ASEAN-led mechanisms. This risks undermining ASEAN's centrality and influence in shaping the regional security landscape.¹⁰

*People's Republic of China:
Asserting Dominance*

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has become increasingly assertive in global governance, seeking to "reform the international system and global governance, and increase the representation and say of China and other developing countries."¹¹ In December 2014, he noted that China could no longer be "spectators and followers,

but should participate and lead, make China's voice heard, and inject more Chinese elements into the international rules.¹² It has established alternative frameworks, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, posing a challenge to the U.S.-led regional order.¹³

China strategically promotes a new regional and global order with Beijing at its core, as exemplified by the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. While framed as cooperative, this initiative primarily emphasizes bilateral agreements between Beijing and individual partners.

In the South China Sea, China's assertiveness has laid bare its ambition to reshape the regional order to its advantage, often conflicting with ASEAN's interests. Its actions prioritize Sino-centrism, even within seemingly cooperative frameworks like the proposed "Community of Common Destiny."¹⁴ Elizabeth Buensuceso recounts how China even attempted to get the phrase "community of common destiny" included in several East Asia Summit Leadership statements in 2017, leveraging an ASEAN-centered forum to further its vision of a Beijing-led region.¹⁵

In fact, China has skillfully manipulated ASEAN dialogues to its benefit. For example, it prevents discussions on the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) from hindering its strategic and economic agendas by relegating the issue to lower-level fora.¹⁶ While China keeps COC negotiations alive to prevent the internationalization of the disputes,¹⁷ its goal is not to complete the COC; rather, China aims to ensure the regional order aligns with its strategic objectives. The COC is little more than a game to keep other states distracted.¹⁸

Another tactic China employs is to divide ASEAN and prevent unified opposition. By leveraging its influence over individual member states, China creates "an effective veto over ASEAN policy, undermining the organization's centrality and unity."¹⁹

The broader threat to ASEAN centrality lies in China's attempt to create a hierarchical order centered on Beijing, where individual ASEAN member states function as mere components of that system. Xi Jinping's promotion of the "community of common destiny" as the region's guiding philosophy reflects this ambition to establish a Sino-centric rather than ASEAN-centric order.²⁰

The Unfulfilled Promise of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Initially, FOIP strengthened ASEAN's central role in the region, garnering endorsements from the United States and its allies. However, despite initial enthusiasm, FOIP never fully materialized into a robust U.S. policy with concrete implementation in the region.

Following President Trump's 2017 speech in Da Nang, which introduced the FOIP vision,²¹ it became evident that there was no detailed strategy to support the rhetoric. FOIP initially resembled a catchy slogan rather than a well-defined policy. However, the U.S. policy community sought input from regional leaders to align FOIP with their countries' values, following an ASEAN-style consultative approach.²² Only after establishing a platform with regional support were the tenets of FOIP formally articulated.

Despite the effort to ensure the policy aligned with regional sentiment, FOIP lacked a clear implementation plan. Subsequent remarks by U.S. officials primarily focused on countering China's economic influence in the region through dollar diplomacy, neglecting to articulate how U.S. policy would foster an open, values-based environment and promote cooperation with partners.²³ Instead of centering ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific, the focus remained on great power competition.

Although the U.S. Department of Defense introduced "Partnerships for a Purpose" in June 2019, suggesting collaboration with regional states on shared interests,²⁴ this concept seems to have faded. The Biden Administration, though continuing to embrace

FOIP as a framework, has not elevated it to a central policy priority, leaving its potential unrealized.

ASEAN Leadership: Embracing Proactivity Amidst Internal Complexities

ASEAN faces a geopolitical environment where great powers act unilaterally, pursuing their own security interests, and can no longer rely on the goodwill of external actors to maintain its regional role. The United States, while not seeking to displace ASEAN, will shape the region according to its interests if a security architecture is not established. Meanwhile, China increasingly disregards regional states' sovereignty, actively pushing for a hierarchical, Sino-centric order.

To remain relevant and influential, ASEAN must evolve beyond its traditional role of centrality and embrace proactive leadership. The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" states that "it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability, and prosperity for the peoples in Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific."²⁵ However, ASEAN's mechanisms remain broadly consultative, relying heavily on forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS).²⁶ Whereas the United States forms multilateral organizations, such as the Quad and AUKUS, without ASEAN, and China actively builds a Sino-centric order, ASEAN must transcend mere discourse and take concrete steps to lead.

Challenges to Leadership

As ASEAN has become a more recognized and important regional actor, its internal divisions and requirement for consensus have been barriers to leadership. The organization was founded in part to protect the independence of the member states. Consequently, ASEAN states take pride in their sovereignty and are loath to cede

power to organizations. This principle also constrains joint action when questions of political systems and state responsibilities come into play. For example, ASEAN has been unwilling to comment on Myanmar's actions toward its Rohingya minority as it would violate their principle of non-intervention. Moreover, the member states vary significantly in economic development, political systems, and strategic priorities. This diversity can lead to divergent interests on specific issues. For instance, economically advanced members like Singapore and Malaysia may prioritize trade liberalization, while developing nations like Cambodia and Laos may focus on infrastructure development and poverty reduction. Divisions such as these have made common economic policies problematic.

Beyond internal differences, ASEAN may be most hamstrung by its organic processes, particularly the commitment that all organizational matters be decided by consensus. Pongsudhirak, for example, suggests that this insistence on unanimity has undermined the prospects for an ASEAN economic community and is also preventing ASEAN from effectively leading the region it calls home.²⁷

This tradition is, in part, an attempt to protect members from outside actors by projecting the appearance of unity.²⁸ However, leadership requires being decisive when time does not exist to build a consensus.²⁹ Moreover, given the nature of the member states, not all will have the same interest or capacity in all areas. ASEAN must find a way to mitigate these facts and design a role for the organization that enables it to remain central and steer regional policy while understanding that its current paradigm does not allow it to move at the pace of crises.

A Path to Leadership

ASEAN's established convening power provides a strong foundation for shifting the organization to leadership. The ARF remains the only regional institution with a comprehensive security

mandate encompassing all the major powers with an interest in the region's security.³⁰ By operationalizing its leadership potential, ASEAN can regain the initiative in shaping regional security and attract external actors who seek engagement based on mutual respect.

Although ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making is often considered a constraint, it can be reframed as a standard that enables action rather than a method that prevents it. By establishing a norm of enabling action within the framework of its foundational principles, as outlined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC),³¹ ASEAN can make decisions that benefit the organization, its members, and its people without requiring absolute unanimity. Unity will be maintained by upholding the TAC principles, not from every state agreeing with every action of the organization.

While recognizing that ASEAN as an organization may only move when all members are ready, ASEAN needs to realize that it still benefits by casting itself in the role of regional enabler for the interests of its members, even when consensus is elusive. The organization can serve as a regional enabler, fostering cooperation and leadership among its members, as long as the principles of non-interference and sovereignty are upheld.

ASEAN must recognize that action is required to realize its vision. That action can be by ASEAN when consensus can be reached, but it will, at times, be carried out by individual states in areas where they have comparative advantages. At that point, all members must maintain the centrality and leadership of ASEAN as an institution by ensuring those actions are discussed and taken within ASEAN's framework, reinforcing the organization's centrality and leadership. Recognizing that not all states have the same interests or capacities, ASEAN should adopt a flexible approach to integration, focusing on areas where initiatives can be tailored to serve specific interests.

Building trust and reducing miscalculations are crucial for maintaining regional peace, and ASEAN's forums play a vital role.³² However, concrete action is equally necessary. ASEAN must become a catalyst for regional action, designing initiatives that individual states can lead and integrating external powers into the ASEAN framework on its terms. This approach will solidify ASEAN's leadership and shape a regional order that reflects its values and interests.

Communities of Common Interest: ASEAN Takes the Lead

The United States is falling short of ASEAN's leadership expectations, while China's leadership vision threatens ASEAN's independence. Consequently, it is time for ASEAN to implement several initiatives to shape the region according to its interests. To do so, it should revive the concept of small, issue-based minilateral initiatives within its existing fora by establishing Communities of Common Interest (CCI) around specific issues that align with the needs of the organization and its member states. By doing so, ASEAN can enmesh external powers in a web of mutually beneficial cooperative endeavors, incentivizing them to align with ASEAN's regional leadership. This approach positions ASEAN as a regional leader and fosters a broader cooperative community reinforcing regional peace and security.

Cross-Cutting Cleavages: Security in Differences

Establishing numerous small CCIs allows ASEAN to avoid the need for universal support for each initiative. Instead, it can leverage the political science concept of cross-cutting cleavages, which suggests that when differences between subgroups do not align but are cross-cutting, security and cooperation are enhanced.

Cleavages are differences between groups of individuals that have the potential to divide and lead to conflict.³³ However, Edward Alsworth Ross argues that when these cleavages do not coincide but run in multiple directions, each new cleavage serves to narrow the cross clefts and, rather than tear the society apart, sews it together.³⁴ Relatedly, in his study of the early United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the average citizen had many interests, manifested in a number of associations with other citizens.³⁵ Moreover, as they become enmeshed in these associations and find benefits in them, individuals establish an interest in maintaining the system.³⁶ When these associations are cross-cutting, and an individual's interactions touch many other individuals who also have different associations, it reduces the potential cleavages on which a community can be divided into distinct groups.

While individuals A and B might disagree with C on issue X, A and C agree on issue Y. In other words, the cleavages between these individuals are cross-cutting across issues. Buensuceso echoed this situation in relaying an inside joke of the ASEAN community, "so-and-so is my friend in Agenda Item 3 but my worst enemy in Agenda Item 5, which may not be a joke after all when you examine the debates and negotiations we carried out in our daily lives here."³⁷ In other words, no two cleavages—or few—are between the same groups. Since there is never a completely clear line between two blocks, disagreements tend to be mitigated, conflict limited, and stability obtained.

Research supports the hypothesis that cross-cutting cleavages moderate social conflict.³⁸ Given the existing diversity of interests and actors in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging cross-cutting cleavages could be an effective method for ensuring regional security while building a more cooperative and prosperous environment.

Establishing a Regime of Cooperation

ASEAN can combine its status as a convening authority for the region and the stability offered by cross-cutting cleavages to create a foundation for a series of CCIs. These initiatives will showcase ASEAN's leadership and external actors in a web of relations and focus the future of the region on working through ASEAN institutions. In doing so, ASEAN can establish the values-based order promised by FOIP and establish itself as a leader at the center of the Indo-Pacific.

This approach builds on existing concepts such as middle-power coalitions and the "Partnership for a Purpose" under FOIP but with the added advantage of ASEAN's legitimacy and convening power.³⁹ To ensure CCIs are structured to promote ASEAN's regional leadership, they should be built on the following four principles:

- *ASEAN LEADERSHIP*: Each CCI should be led by an ASEAN member state.
- *INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGE*: Each CCI should be tied to an existing ASEAN forum for discussions, coordination, and implementation.
- *ACTION-ORIENTED*: Each CCI should focus on concrete actions, not just discussions.
- *EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT*: While not mandatory, each CCI should strive to include at least one external partner to tie extra-regional interests into the ASEAN system.

Practical Applications: CCIs in Action

To truly operationalize its leadership, ASEAN needs to move beyond theoretical frameworks and embrace concrete action. The following examples highlight how CCIs can be applied to address specific regional challenges, demonstrating ASEAN's ability to lead

and foster collaboration. When implemented, these CCIs can be tangible proof of ASEAN's commitment to proactive leadership, creating a network of cooperative initiatives that benefit the entire region.

Trafficking in Persons (CCI-TIP)

Combatting trafficking in persons is already a priority for ASEAN and a perfect issue for establishing the framework for organizing CCIs. A CCI-TIP could be organized around joint maritime and coastal patrols, including officer exchanges and ship-riders, to integrate efforts to eradicate this illicit trade. Justification can be found in the ASEAN Convention on the Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) and cooperation and training enhanced through the Jakarta Centre of Law Enforcement Cooperation. The CCI could be managed and coordinated by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) to formally tie the CCI to ASEAN. This CCI would also benefit from the expertise and resources of extra-regional partners with a vested interest in curbing human trafficking. For example, Australia is already linked with ASEAN partners through funding, joint management, and participation in the Jakarta Centre.⁴⁰

Maritime Security (CCI-MarSec)

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific specifically identifies maritime cooperation as an area it seeks to promote.⁴¹ A CCI-MarSec could build on existing initiatives like the "Eyes in the Sky" program. This could involve including joint maritime patrols, allowing for ship-riders from littoral states, and ensuring they are structured to include appropriate arrest authorities. Although legal and bureaucratic challenges exist, a commitment to cooperation can pave the way for innovative solutions that enable multinational participation.

Disaster Response (CCI-DR)

Despite establishing the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), ASEAN's response to disasters has been hampered by consensus requirements. A CCI-DR could focus on establishing a more agile coordination mechanism to identify and deploy resources from public, private, and civil society capabilities during emergencies. AHA Centre could serve as a central hub to communicate, coordinate, and deconflict with providers from all sectors of society to rapidly coordinate the delivery of required capabilities to a disaster site. Private and civil groups are not bound by government bureaucracies and procedures or tied to expensive taxpayer funding. By bringing in disaster response experts regionally and extra-regionally, ASEAN can prove a leader in coordination and turn the AHA Centre into the Indo-Pacific's disaster response hub. This model was being experimented with by regional partners during a 2018 workshop in Taiwan, but further development was interrupted by the pandemic.⁴² With a CCI-DR, ASEAN can pick up this initiative and turn it into an example for the region to follow.

CCI-Economics

Despite some success in cutting trade tariffs, ASEAN faces challenges in economic liberalization due to lingering tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and dissimilar member state priorities.⁴³ Rather than rely on expansive regional trade pacts, which are the product of prolonged bureaucratic deal-making rather than strong leadership, ASEAN should initiate a series of targeted economic CCIs focused on specific goods. For instance, member states could unilaterally offer zero tariffs on certain goods to any state willing to reciprocate. This would accelerate liberalization, avoid lengthy negotiations, and demonstrate leadership. These CCIs would be open to all, including extra-regional states, and could be discussed in ASEAN forums like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) meetings.

By unilaterally instituting broad, single-issue liberalization measures, ASEAN breaks out of complex negotiations with individual partners and makes itself the torch bearer of the future. External states that want the best deal with ASEAN must now accede to ASEAN's terms or risk falling behind other states that do. This allows ASEAN to build momentum with one initiative after the other and become the *de facto* norm setter for liberalized trade.

Expanding the Network of CCIs

The key is establishing a network of cross-cutting interest groups represented by ASEAN-led CCIs. This approach fosters familiarity, builds trust, spreads norms, and encourages external powers to act cooperatively within an ASEAN-led framework. As Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff argue, it is of central importance that the benefits of cooperation outweigh the incentives to act unilaterally. This is achieved through frequent repetition of interaction, the development of greater communication and transparency between states, and the construction of institutions, which enable cooperative patterns.⁴⁴

If ASEAN acts first and creates the conditions through which its members and external actors agree to act in concert, they encourage integration and cooperation on their terms. Basing each initiative in an ASEAN-led fora ensures that when external states want to engage with a CCI, they do so through ASEAN, even if not every member of ASEAN is willing to participate in the initiative. The more CCIs ASEAN states can create, the more linkages they build, each strengthening its role as the hub for regional engagement and knitting a quilt of cross-cutting cleavages that reduces the potential for conflict and promotes the participants' shared interests. This, in turn, empowers ASEAN to lead in shaping its and the region's future.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has struggled to become more than a platform for discussions about the region. However, it has long been constrained by external actors seeking to use the region for their own ends. While it has attempted to engage these powers, ASEAN has lacked the necessary influence to shape its regional interactions. The United States, despite its welcome presence, has been inconsistent in its focus, often prioritizing its own initiatives. Meanwhile, China envisions a Sino-centric order that diverges from ASEAN's values-based approach.

Positioned between these competing visions and at the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ASEAN has a unique opportunity to lead. By leveraging the Communities of Common Interest concept, ASEAN can transform its fora into essential mechanisms for shaping the region while engaging external actors on its own terms. This is not simply a matter of revitalizing ASEAN's fora; rather, it requires linking them to concrete actions that enhance regional cooperation by addressing critical security and economic challenges. In doing so, ASEAN can evolve from a facilitator of collaboration to a leader, transforming the region into a peaceful and prosperous zone of interaction and trade and contributing to the broader prosperity of the Indo-Pacific.

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PART FOUR

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND SECURITY

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BALANCING ACT: SHAPING U.S. POLICY IN THE FACE OF CHINA'S NUCLEAR EXPANSION

Bill Wieninger

To say that the Chinese are unwilling to talk about nuclear weapons anywhere is wrong, but what we need now is to open the discourse between Washington and Beijing on these matters.

— Rose Gottemoeller, former Deputy Secretary General of NATO

Abstract

China's rapid nuclear arsenal expansion, with hundreds of new missile silos and projections of matching the U.S. arsenal by 2030, poses a critical challenge to U.S. deterrence strategy. This chapter explores the lessons from the Cold War and the Russia-Ukraine war, emphasizing the importance of a secure second-strike capability. It assesses China's potential motivations and offers policy recommendations for the United States, including strengthening conventional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and reinforcing alliances like the Quad and AUKUS to counter the growing threat from Beijing.

Introduction

Tensions between the United States and the regime of Xi Jinping in Beijing have risen significantly in recent years, with the possibility of an armed conflict at all-time highs. More ominously, in 2021, open-source images revealed construction by the People's Republic of China (PRC) of at least three large nuclear missile silo complexes with hundreds of new missile silos.¹ In 2024, the well-regarded SIPRI institute predicted that the PRC arsenal might well equal that of the U.S. by 2030.² Given these and other developments, it is

critical to understand how these changes affect US deterrence vis-a-vis the PRC.

This chapter will examine the lessons on nuclear deterrence and armed conflict avoidance from the Cold War. I will then assess possible motivations for the expansion of the PRC arsenal, although, given its opacity, this can be uncertain. In the third part of the chapter, I will dive into lessons learned from the current Ukrainian-Russian war regarding nuclear weapons utility and the efficacy of deterrence. Finally, I will conclude with a consideration of deterrence and defense policies the United States should consider in light of these developments.

Nuclear Weapons and the Cold War

Since 1945, the role and impact of nuclear weapons on global conflict and peace have been extensively analyzed in scholarly literature. While the logic of nuclear deterrence holds significant appeal to policymakers and scholars, the complexities of its application—particularly the lessons from the Cold War—are often misunderstood. In my 2004 doctoral study on nuclear deterrence, I concluded that the overall effects of nuclear weapons on conflict within the international system remain ambiguous. Although nuclear arsenals may reduce the likelihood of war, the possibility of conflict between nuclear-armed states persists. Two decades later, this assessment remains unchanged.

Early in the nuclear age, strategists recognized that a secure second-strike capability was paramount for nuclear deterrence to foster stability. A nuclear-armed state (Nuclear Weapon State, or NWS) must have a force structure that guarantees its ability to retaliate after a nuclear attack, inflicting unacceptable levels of destruction on the aggressor. While experts differ on the exact magnitude of the necessary retaliatory force, the principle of second-strike capability is widely accepted. For the United States during the Cold War, this meant the ability to destroy approximately 30% of

an adversary's industrial infrastructure. For the PRC, until recently, it involved the capacity to obliterate 5–10 major cities of an opponent. There is an ongoing debate about other nuclear force structure options—such as escalation ladders, damage mitigation posture, or “escalate-to-deescalate” strategies—but the second-strike capability is universally regarded as indispensable for deterrence. The 1983 U.S. wargame “Proud Prophet” further underscored this reality—regardless of how nuclear war begins, the outcome is total Armageddon, as declassified results revealed in 2012.³

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 stands as the most perilous confrontation between nuclear-armed states in history. At that time, the United States possessed overwhelming nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, with the capability to launch approximately 3,000 warheads, whereas the Soviet Union could retaliate with only 30.⁴ Despite this imbalance, the Soviet Union's secure second-strike capability ensured that nuclear war was not a feasible option for either side. As President Kennedy's National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, famously stated, “The largest single factor that might have led to a nuclear war—the readiness of one leader or the other to regard that outcome as remotely acceptable—simply did not exist in October 1962.”⁵ The risk of inadvertent escalation through miscalculation, as outlined by Scott Sagan,⁶ was present, but leaders on both sides were committed to avoiding nuclear war.

Following this near miss, U.S. and Soviet leaders took deliberate steps to avoid similar crises. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved to be a unique event; no subsequent nuclear standoff approached the same level of danger. With the Cold War's conclusion in late 1991, the allure of nuclear weapons appeared to diminish. In the 33 years following, while North Korea developed a nuclear capability and India and Pakistan modestly expanded their arsenals, the United States and Soviet Union (later Russia) *dramatically* reduced theirs.⁷

Additionally, four nations—Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and South Africa—voluntarily gave up their nuclear weapons.

During this period, the United States and its allies focused on addressing the perceived threat of “undeterrable” rogue states and non-state actors, such as terrorists, who might obtain nuclear weapons. This concern spurred U.S. investment in ballistic missile defense (BMD), costing hundreds of billions of dollars.⁸ While BMD systems offer some protection, they can be easily overwhelmed by a peer competitor with large arsenals. Ironically, these U.S. investments may have motivated Russia and China to expand their capabilities, as we will explore in subsequent sections.

One significant development during and after the Cold War was the emergence of the “nuclear taboo,” a term popularized by Nina Tannenwald in her 2008 study. Tannenwald argued that there is a strong global aversion to the use of nuclear weapons, driven by the more repugnance associated with their indiscriminate and catastrophic destruction.⁹ This “taboo” appears to have influenced nuclear decision-making during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In mid-2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to refrain from using nuclear weapons, suggesting that such an act would severely damage China’s global standing due to the taboo’s strength and China’s close relationship with Russia.¹⁰ While it would be overly optimistic to assume the nuclear taboo alone can prevent nuclear conflict, its persistence suggests it remains a critical consideration in modern nuclear strategy.

China’s Expanding Nuclear Arsenal

Turning now to the developments in China’s nuclear weapons posture, China first deployed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) capable of reaching the continental United States in the mid-1970s. Until the identification in 2021 of hundreds of new missile silos under construction, assessments held that China

possessed only a few dozen ICBMs and adhered to a policy of “minimum deterrence.” By 2021, China’s ICBMs had increased from roughly two dozen at the end of the Cold War to around eight dozen.¹¹ This growth likely reflected China’s concern that the maturation of U.S. BMD systems could negate its second-strike capability unless it expanded its missile force to overwhelm U.S. defenses. Indeed, the Clinton administration’s 1999 BMD plan aimed to defend against up to 20 incoming missiles—the approximate number of Chinese ICBMs capable of striking the United States at that time.¹²

In addition to increasing the number of missiles, China has been developing alternative delivery systems to ensure its second-strike capability. Two systems of note are maneuverable hypersonic missiles—capable of traveling more than five times the speed of sound—and a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS). While these systems do not provide a significant military advantage beyond overcoming U.S. BMD systems, they are considerably more expensive to develop and deploy. The Soviet Union considered building a FOBS during the Cold War but concluded that fielding more ballistic missiles was a more cost-effective way to overwhelm U.S. missile defense systems.¹³

The discovery of China’s dramatic missile silo construction in 2021 likely signals a broader shift in its nuclear strategy. Since then, analysts increasingly predict that China aims to build a nuclear arsenal on par with the United States, a conclusion supported by the 2024 SIPRI report. Notably, such a large arsenal is not required to ensure a secure second-strike capability. This raises the question: why is China expanding its nuclear forces so dramatically?

Tong Zhao, a well-regarded scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argues that this buildup is driven by President Xi Jinping’s decision to elevate the political importance of nuclear weapons in China’s strategy. Xi appears to believe that a larger arsenal will influence U.S. policy in ways that benefit

Beijing.¹⁴ This perspective may be partially informed by the work of Georgetown University’s Matt Kroenig, who argued in his 2018 book that U.S. numerical superiority in nuclear weapons has provided a bargaining advantage in international relations and reduces the expected costs of war.¹⁵ While many scholars challenge Kroenig’s conclusions regarding the bargaining advantage,¹⁶ his excellent reputation in U.S. defense circles may give his ideas considerable weight in Chinese strategic thinking. Additionally, there are notable references in Chinese-language discussions that suggest a belief in the importance of greater numbers driving their nuclear buildup.¹⁷

In terms of reducing the expected costs of war, the U.S.’s long-standing Launch on Warning (LoW) posture, combined with its highly accurate delivery systems, enables it to preemptively launch a “damage mitigating” first strike. In such a scenario, the United States could destroy much of an adversary’s nuclear arsenal if its leadership became convinced that nuclear war was inevitable. It is possible that Beijing, observing this capability, has concluded it must mimic the U.S. nuclear posture to achieve similar “damage-mitigating” potential. While transparency in Chinese decision-making is limited, the rapid expansion of its nuclear capabilities is consistent with this interpretation.

Even if China is not currently pursuing a LoW or damage-mitigation strategy, the forces it seems to be building will grant it a de facto LoW capability, allowing for a potential policy shift at any time. As China builds a posture that mirrors the United States, the global environment becomes far more precarious. In a future crisis, three major nuclear powers—the United States, Russia, and China—could each have both the capability and the potential incentive to launch a first strike under the pressure of high-stakes confrontation. The risks and consequences of such a reality are starkly illustrated in Annie Jacobsen’s book *Nuclear War*.¹⁸

Lessons from Russia's War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine offers several critical lessons for nuclear deterrence. First, Russia's "escalate to deescalate" strategy appears fundamentally flawed. Before 2022, many in the United States believed that Russia adhered to this strategy, whereby it would use tactical nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict with the United States to signal resolve and compel de-escalation. This assumption was often used to justify expanding the U.S. tactical nuclear arsenal, allowing for a proportional response in kind. However, nearly three years into the war, Russia has suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties and issued numerous nuclear threats, and yet has refrained from using nuclear weapons.

One key reason for this restraint is the persistence of the nuclear taboo, as previously mentioned. More importantly, any Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons would either be so limited as to undermine the intended show of resolve or so significant as to trigger unacceptable reputational and escalation costs. Furthermore, the practical tradeoffs of using nuclear weapons on the battlefield render them unattractive for most conventional military operations.

Another important lesson from the Ukraine conflict is that escalation from conventional warfare to nuclear use appears to be more difficult than previously assumed. In international relations scholarship, war is typically defined as occurring when at least 1,000 battle-related deaths occur within 12 months.¹⁹ To date, there are only two instances in which nuclear-armed states were directly involved in conflicts with each other: the 1969 Ussuri River Crisis between China and the Soviet Union and the 1999 Kargil Conflict between India and Pakistan. In both cases, the death toll barely exceeded the 1,000-death threshold, leading some analysts to conclude that nuclear states could engage in "limited wars" without triggering nuclear escalation.²⁰

However, the war in Ukraine presents a different scenario. Although the United States, France, and the United Kingdom do not

have soldiers on the ground, their weapons and logistical support have been critical in preventing Ukraine's defeat. Russia, meanwhile, has framed the conflict as a broader struggle against the West, led by the United States.²¹ Despite this framing—and the fact that Western-supplied arms have contributed to the deaths of 100,000 to 150,000 Russian soldiers as of Jul 2024—nuclear escalation has not occurred.²² The West has been cautious in its support, aiming to avoid provoking Russia, yet several so-called “red lines” have been crossed without resulting in nuclear retaliation.

The war in Ukraine thus suggests that the combination of the nuclear taboo, the low utility of nuclear weapons on the battlefield, and the existence of secure second-strike capabilities on all sides may allow major wars between nuclear-armed states to occur without escalating to nuclear exchanges. This insight holds significant implications for U.S. policy and strategy regarding China. It indicates that even in high-stakes conflict, the threshold for nuclear use may be higher than previously assumed, providing a degree of reassurance as tensions with Beijing continue to evolve.

U.S. Policy and Deterrence in the Indo-Asia Pacific

Most analysts agree that China is a revisionist power with a strong desire to alter several aspects of the global status quo, particularly concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea—two of the most volatile flashpoints in the region. The United States has been grappling with how to maintain the status quo in the face of these challenges. As a scholar of nuclear weapons, I am both alarmed and reassured by the mutual possession of nuclear arsenals in these scenarios. Alarm stems from the risk of escalation to nuclear conflict and its corresponding catastrophic consequences. At the same time, reassurance comes from the fact that leaders in Washington and Beijing are likely acutely aware of this risk and, therefore, exercise caution to avoid open conflict.

The war in Ukraine complicates this logic. It is the largest war in Europe since World War II and has inflicted far higher casualties on a nuclear-armed state than any previous conflict. Although the Korean and Vietnam Wars saw the United States suffer significant casualties from opponents supplied by a nuclear-armed power, those numbers were less than a third of what Russia experienced in Ukraine. Additionally, the Cold War proxy wars were fought thousands of miles away from the U.S. and Soviet Union's respective borders. In contrast, Ukraine is a land war fought directly on Russia's borders and is now inside Russian territory. This uncharted terrain raises concerns that China might interpret the situation differently, potentially concluding that the risk of nuclear escalation is not insurmountable and opting to launch a conventional war to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific.

Given this possibility, the United States must strengthen its conventional deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. A logical approach would involve increasing defense spending on capabilities designed to defeat key Chinese military strategies, such as an amphibious assault on Taiwan. Weapons like very long-range anti-ship missiles could be critical in deterring such actions. These weapons significantly impacted a series of U.S.-China war game scenarios conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).²³ Additionally, the United States should continue reinforcing its international partnerships with allies and like-minded nations in the region through frameworks like the Quad—a strategic partnership between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—and AUKUS, a security pact between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia focused on enhancing military capabilities, including nuclear-powered submarines, to counter growing threats. Such alliances greatly amplify the scope of economic and military power China must contend with, further discouraging attempts to alter the status quo.

In terms of nuclear posture, debates will continue over whether the United States requires expanded capabilities, such as additional tactical nuclear weapons or intermediate-range nuclear missiles. While I will not delve into those specific debates here, one point is clear: as a peer competitor with the world's second-largest economy, China can achieve nuclear parity if it chooses to do so. Therefore, the United States should avoid entering an arms race for numerical superiority. While it is imperative that China does not surpass the United States in nuclear strength, whether this is Beijing's intent remains uncertain. Some may worry that the combined Russian and Chinese deployed nuclear warheads significantly outnumber U.S. nuclear forces, but as National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan noted in June 2024, "the United States does not need to increase our nuclear forces to outnumber the combined total of our competitors in order to successfully deter them."²⁴ For now, the U.S. nuclear arsenal appears sufficient.

The most critical priority is maintaining a secure second-strike capability. The U.S.'s existing nuclear Triad ensures this, and while modernization programs for each leg of the Triad are costly, they are, unfortunately, necessary. The United States must remain vigilant for any developments in BMD systems by Russia or China, as such advances could necessitate further investment to safeguard the credibility of the U.S. second-strike capability.

The catastrophic destruction of nuclear war makes it an irrational choice, but as Sagan notes, miscalculations *can* still occur. This does not mean that they will or must happen, and we can act now to significantly reduce the risk of miscalculation. The clearest way to do this is by establishing dedicated lines of communication and holding regular meetings between top officials from all sides. Crises will inevitably arise in the future, and navigating them will be far easier if we do our homework now.

The end of the Cold War in 1990 brought widespread hope that the era of living under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation had

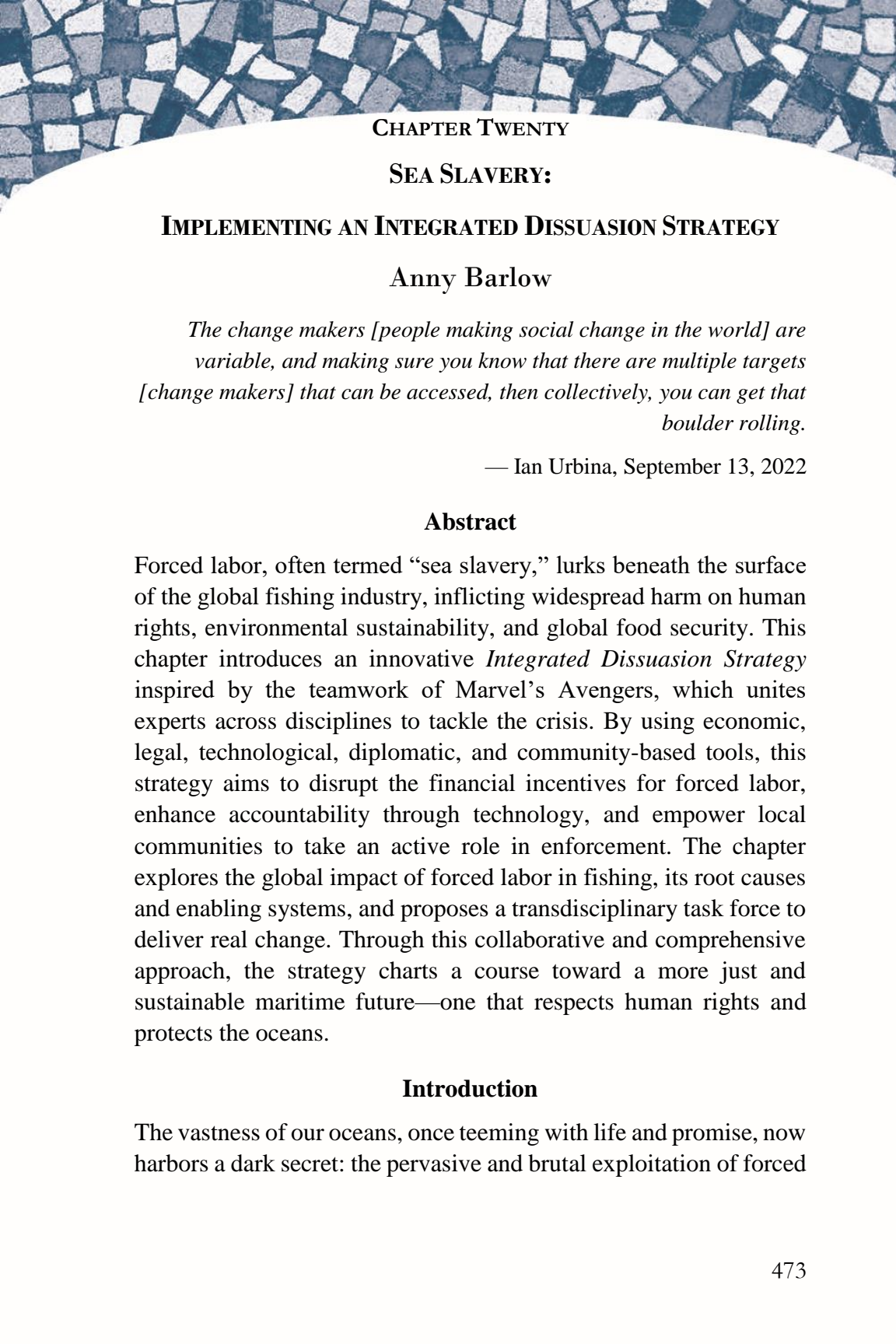
passed. For several decades, that hope seemed justified. However, China's nuclear build-up and the war in Ukraine have drawn us back into a world where nuclear deterrence once again looms large. Although this reality is unsettling, history shows that we have successfully navigated such dangers before—and we can do so again in the decades to come.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

SEA SLAVERY:

IMPLEMENTING AN INTEGRATED DISSUASION STRATEGY

Anny Barlow

The change makers [people making social change in the world] are variable, and making sure you know that there are multiple targets [change makers] that can be accessed, then collectively, you can get that boulder rolling.

— Ian Urbina, September 13, 2022

Abstract

Forced labor, often termed “sea slavery,” lurks beneath the surface of the global fishing industry, inflicting widespread harm on human rights, environmental sustainability, and global food security. This chapter introduces an innovative *Integrated Dissuasion Strategy* inspired by the teamwork of Marvel’s Avengers, which unites experts across disciplines to tackle the crisis. By using economic, legal, technological, diplomatic, and community-based tools, this strategy aims to disrupt the financial incentives for forced labor, enhance accountability through technology, and empower local communities to take an active role in enforcement. The chapter explores the global impact of forced labor in fishing, its root causes and enabling systems, and proposes a transdisciplinary task force to deliver real change. Through this collaborative and comprehensive approach, the strategy charts a course toward a more just and sustainable maritime future—one that respects human rights and protects the oceans.

Introduction

The vastness of our oceans, once teeming with life and promise, now harbors a dark secret: the pervasive and brutal exploitation of forced

labor, often termed “sea slavery.” This hidden crisis inflicts devastating consequences on human rights, environmental sustainability, and food security—ranging from abuse and degradation to economic instability and the undermining of global food systems. The plight of sea slaves, hidden from view on distant vessels, underscores the urgent need for innovative solutions to combat this complex problem.

To address this multifaceted problem, this chapter proposes a novel approach akin to the collaborative power of Marvel Comics’ Avengers Team: an *integrated dissuasion strategy*. Just as the Avengers unite their unique superpowers to confront threats beyond the capabilities of any single hero, the integrated dissuasion strategy harnesses the collective competencies of diverse stakeholders and tools to dismantle the systems that enable sea slavery. Conceptually inspired by integrated deterrence principles commonly used in defense strategies, this approach emphasizes using all available tools—economic, legal, technological, diplomatic, and community-based—to discourage and prevent unwanted behavior. Specifically tailored to the unique challenges of the fishing industry, the strategy focuses on disrupting the economic incentives for forced labor, enhancing accountability through technology, fostering international collaboration, and empowering local communities to play an active role in enforcement and self-determination.

This chapter will first explore the global impact of forced labor in fishing, investigating its economic, environmental, and social consequences. It will then analyze the root causes and enabling systems of this exploitation, examining both micro-level and macro-level factors that contribute to the problem. By critically examining diverse perspectives from various professional backgrounds—from food security and economic stability to environmental sustainability and social justice—this research aims to illuminate novel opportunities for combating this issue.¹ Key findings from this research emphasize the importance of strategic collaboration and

interdisciplinary problem characterization for effective governance, increased awareness, and enhanced capacity building.²

Finally, this chapter will unveil the core of the integrated dissuasion strategy: the proposed formation of transdisciplinary task forces mirroring the Avengers' collaborative model. These task forces, comprised of diverse professionals—our “superheroes”—will leverage their unique skills and expertise—their “superpowers” to bridge knowledge gaps, address systemic barriers, and implement innovative solutions. Through examples of successful integrated efforts and a proposed global network of these task forces, we will demonstrate the potential to overcome barriers, drive impactful change, and contribute to a future where our oceans are characterized by security, equity, and sustainability.³

The Global Impact of Forced Labor in Fishing

The fishing industry is not merely an economic sector; it is a lifeline. Providing livelihoods for millions worldwide and contributing significantly to global food security, this industry employs nearly 60 million people and generates an estimated \$164 billion annually.⁴ Seafood represents a vital source of protein for a significant portion of the global population, accounting for roughly 17% of animal protein consumed globally.⁵ In some communities, it constitutes over 50% of their dietary protein intake.⁶ This makes the industry a cornerstone of global food systems, providing essential nutrition and driving economic growth, particularly in coastal communities and developing nations.

A Crisis of Exploitation: The Dark Underbelly of the Fishing Industry

Beneath the surface of this vital industry lies a sinister reality: forced labor, or “sea slavery,” where the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that a staggering 128,000 fishers are trapped in abhorrent conditions, enduring abuse, violence, and exploitation.⁷

Lured by false promises of decent work and wages, individuals—often from marginalized and vulnerable communities—find themselves imprisoned on fishing vessels, stripped of their freedom and fundamental human rights.

This practice casts a long shadow, with devastating consequences for global supply chains, food security, economic stability, environmental sustainability, and human well-being. Forced labor in fishing is not just a moral outrage; it is a systemic problem with far-reaching repercussions. The exploitation of fishers through forced labor and its often-associated counterpart—illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing—inflict significant damage, with IUU fishing alone estimated to steal up to an astounding \$23 billion annually from the global economy.⁸ This illicit activity undercuts legitimate fishing operations, deprives governments of revenue, and jeopardizes the livelihoods of millions dependent on healthy and sustainable fisheries.

Coastal communities, where fishing is often a primary source of income and food, bear the brunt of this economic devastation. Forced labor and IUU fishing deplete fish stocks, disrupt markets, and siphon off revenue, exploiting impoverished communities and fueling social injustice. This situation is especially devastating in places like Southeast Asia, where more than 200 million people depend on the fishing industry, as it further deepens existing inequalities and social vulnerabilities.

The environmental consequences are equally dire. Unsustainable fishing practices exploit marine resources and cause habitat degradation, imperiling entire ecosystems and threatening the delicate balance of the ocean's biodiversity—intricately connected to its role as a carbon sink. Climate change exacerbates this environmental degradation, jeopardizing the livelihoods of coastal communities and the planet's health.

*The Case of Supriyanto:
A Human Tragedy Unveiled*

The domino effects of forced labor in offshore commercial fisheries are difficult to fully grasp without understanding the lived experiences of those trapped within the system.⁹ The tragic story of Supriyanto, an Indonesian fisherman, is a harrowing illustration of the human cost of these exploitative practices.¹⁰

Supriyanto, like many others, was lured to the sea by the promise of a better life for himself and his family. Following the success of one fishing stint, he accepted a second opportunity to continue providing for his loved ones. However, his dream swiftly turned into a nightmare. This second contract promised a monthly wage of \$350, but upon boarding a Taiwanese longliner, Supriyanto learned that \$100 would be withheld each month, ostensibly as a security deposit against absconding. This was in addition to a series of unfounded fees gradually levied upon him. In his first two months of grueling labor, he received a mere \$100 in total.

The exploitation did not end there. Photographic and video evidence revealed horrific physical abuse inflicted upon Supriyanto by the captain and crew. These abuses ultimately led to his tragic death onboard the vessel a mere four months into his employment. His withheld wages never reached his family, who were left grieving for their loved ones while grappling with the financial hardships that followed.

Supriyanto's story is not unique. Many fishers are subjected to similar cycles of deception, exploitation, and abuse. The promises of decent wages and steady employment turn out to be empty, replaced by a grim reality of forced labor, violence, and deprivation.¹¹ Fishers are forced to work grueling hours under hazardous conditions, often with little to no rest or compensation.¹² They endure physical and verbal abuse and deprivation of food and water and are sometimes even coerced into taking drugs to enhance

productivity.¹³ In the worst cases, as in Supriyanto's, they may lose their lives.

The consequences of sea slavery extend far beyond the individual victims. Families are left without their primary breadwinners, communities are deprived of vital economic contributions, and the psychological trauma inflicted on survivors can have lasting effects. The ripple effects of this exploitation reach far beyond the fishing vessel, impacting entire communities and contributing to cycles of poverty and inequality.

Supriyanto's story tragically reminds us of the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to combating forced labor in the fishing industry. It is a call to action for governments, industry stakeholders, and civil society to work together to dismantle the systems perpetuating this human rights abuse.

Blurred Lines and Interconnected Challenges

The challenges of forced labor in fishing are not isolated; they are intricately linked to other transnational crimes. Forced labor operations often rely on organized criminal networks involved in human trafficking, drug smuggling, small arms trafficking, and other illicit activities.¹⁴ These networks exploit the vulnerabilities of marginalized populations, perpetuate human rights abuses, and undermine the rule of law.

Moreover, the lines between forced labor and IUU fishing are often blurred. While legally distinct, these two issues are frequently conflated due to their intertwined nature, operating within the same shadowy operational environment and exacerbating each other's harmful impacts. This interconnectedness presents a significant challenge for governance and enforcement efforts, as each issue is governed by separate legal definitions, regulations, and policies.

For instance, as Greg Poling, Director of the Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center

for Strategic and International Studies, aptly pointed out, “You get fined for illegally fishing; you get arrested for modern-day slavery.”¹⁵ This highlights the disparity in how these issues are addressed despite their frequent co-occurrence. While the U.S. Congress recently updated the legal definition of IUU fishing to include forced labor,¹⁶ this change is not universally recognized and does not alter existing international laws.

Therefore, a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach is crucial to effectively address these interconnected challenges. By recognizing the complex interplay between forced labor, IUU fishing, and broader socioeconomic factors, we can develop integrated solutions that target the root causes and enabling systems of exploitation and promote a more just and sustainable fishing industry. Fragmented efforts must be replaced with a holistic strategy that leverages all available tools—economic, legal, technological, and social—to effectively combat forced labor in fishing. The integrated dissuasion approach, which we will explore in depth in the following sections, offers a promising framework for achieving this goal.

Strategic Economic Pressure: Disrupting the Profitability of Forced Labor

The persistence of forced labor in the commercial fishing industry is rooted in a complex web of economic factors that create fertile ground for exploitation. We must first understand the economic forces at play to unravel this web and dismantle the systems that perpetuate it.

Micro-Level Factors: A Race to the Bottom

At the heart of the issue are the harsh realities individual fishing vessels face. The “race to the bottom” drives overfishing and a decline in fish stocks exacerbated by the instability of our climate.¹⁷

To maintain their catch, vessels must venture farther, confront harsher conditions, and stay out longer, resulting in soaring operational costs and squeezed profit margins. Labor rights are compromised to cut costs, including slashed wages, neglected safety measures, and inhumane working conditions.¹⁸

The relentless climb in fuel prices intensifies this downward spiral. As the lifeblood of fishing vessels becomes increasingly expensive, profit margins dwindle, and the temptation to exploit labor intensifies. The need to pay for fuel becomes a perverse justification for underpaying or even enslaving workers, perpetuating a vicious cycle where human suffering fuels the industry's unsustainable practices.

Labor shortages further compound these pressures. The demanding and often dangerous nature of fishing work has made attracting and retaining skilled crew members increasingly tricky. This scarcity of labor creates an environment where unscrupulous recruiters can prey on vulnerable individuals, luring them with false promises of decent wages and working conditions, only to trap them in a cycle of debt bondage and exploitation.¹⁹

*Macro-Level Forces:
A Global Hunger for Seafood*

While these micro-level pressures create a breeding ground for exploitation at the vessel level, they are amplified and perpetuated by larger economic forces that operate on a global scale. While sustaining the industry and providing livelihoods for millions, the world's insatiable appetite for seafood also looms large.²⁰ This ever-growing demand puts immense pressure on the industry to increase production, often at the expense of ethical labor practices. As companies compete to meet this demand, labor costs are frequently the first casualty. Companies undercut each other on price by slashing wages, ignoring safety regulations, and turning a blind eye to forced labor.

The intricate and often opaque nature of global seafood supply chains further exacerbates the problem. Fish caught in one corner of the world can be processed, packaged, and sold thousands of miles away, obscuring their origins and making it difficult to trace their journey from sea to plate. This lack of transparency allows forced labor to thrive in the shadows, hidden from consumers' and regulators' scrutiny, leading to a lack of accountability. Fish become commodities, detached from the human cost of their production.

Furthermore, the high potential for profit in the fishing industry and the low risk of accountability for labor violations create a perverse incentive structure that rewards exploitation. In many parts of the world, weak enforcement and lax regulations mean that the cost of doing business ethically can seem prohibitively high compared to the potential profits from forced labor. This creates a moral hazard, incentivizing companies to cut corners on labor standards to maximize their bottom line. The risk to perpetrators' profitability must be increased by making it bad for businesses to engage in bad behavior.

Tools for Disrupting Business Continuity

To break the cycle of exploitation, the integrated dissuasion strategy deploys a range of economic tools aimed at disrupting the low-risk, high-reward financial incentives that drive forced labor. One potent lever is the imposition of sanctions and market restrictions. Governments and international bodies can wield this tool to target vessels and companies implicated in forced labor, barring them from accessing lucrative markets and inflicting significant financial penalties. A prime example of this approach is the European Union's (EU) 2015 threat to Thailand, a major seafood exporter. Facing the prospect of a "red card," which would effectively halt their seafood exports to the EU market, Thai authorities were compelled to enact sweeping reforms to their fishery laws, showcasing the power of economic leverage to effect change at the national level.²¹

Legal and compliance pressures can also create significant financial disincentives for bad actors. Utilizing existing legal frameworks, such as the U.S. Tariff Act's Withhold Release Orders (WROs), can block the importation of goods suspected of being produced with forced labor while an investigation is launched, effectively shutting down revenue streams for exploitative companies. In addition, investigations by financial authorities into illicit financial flows associated with forced labor expose and disrupt the intricate networks that sustain these practices, making it harder for bad actors to profit from their crimes. However, legal and compliance pressure hinges on the increased capacity of security personnel to hold bad actors accountable.

Finally, we would be remiss not to address the ineffective economic lever that misguides consumers into believing they have power through their wallets. Research indicates that this approach undermines efforts to end exploitative labor practices, creating opportunities for greenwashing and providing a false sense of consumer empowerment. So-called "eco-labels" and sustainable certifications often serve as better marketing tools than labor protection tools, obscuring exploitation and allowing it to persist.²²

Challenges and Solutions:

Navigating the Complexities of Economic Dissuasion

While strategic economic pressure offers a potent weapon against forced labor in the fishing industry, its effective implementation is far from straightforward. It demands careful navigation through a complex landscape of political, economic, and social realities. From securing the political will necessary for enforcement to ensuring that sanctions do not inadvertently harm vulnerable communities, the path to a just and sustainable fishing industry is paved with challenges. However, by understanding these hurdles and proactively seeking solutions, we can harness the power of economic pressure to dismantle the systems that perpetuate sea slavery.

One of the primary obstacles is the lack of political will to build enforcement capacity, particularly in developing nations where forced labor is most prevalent. Governments may be reluctant to act against powerful fishing interests or lack the resources and infrastructure to effectively monitor and enforce labor laws at sea. This gap between policy and practice can undermine the impact of economic measures and allow exploitative practices to persist.

Overcoming this challenge is two-fold. First, international cooperation and capacity-building efforts are crucial. By sharing best practices, providing technical assistance, and fostering collaboration between nations, we can strengthen the ability of governments to enforce labor standards and hold bad actors accountable. Second, public awareness campaigns are crucial in applying pressure on our governing leaders, ensuring they prioritize resource allocation and take concrete steps. As U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, “I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it.”²³ Even when leaders support reform, they often need public demand to act with urgency.

The global seafood industry poses another significant challenge with its intricate and often opaque supply chains. Fish caught in one part of the world can be processed, packaged, and sold thousands of miles away, making it difficult to trace their origins and verify that they were harvested ethically. This lack of transparency allows forced labor to thrive in the shadows, hidden from the scrutiny of consumers and regulators.

To tackle this issue, we need to invest in technological solutions that enhance transparency and traceability, thereby enhancing accountability. Blockchain technology, for example, can create immutable records of transactions that track the movement of fish from the point of capture to the point of sale. Once adopted as an industry norm, this technology will incentivize vessels and companies to engage in fair labor practices.

While economic pressure can be a powerful tool, it can also have unintended consequences. Sanctions and market restrictions, while targeting bad actors, can inadvertently harm small-scale fishers and communities who rely on the fishing industry for their livelihoods. These vulnerable groups may be caught in the crossfire, losing their income and facing economic hardship. To mitigate this uneven impact, targeted measures must be designed to focus on the actors and practices responsible for forced labor. Additionally, investing in alternative livelihood programs for coastal communities can help to reduce their dependence on the fishing industry and create more resilient local economies.

Lessons from Varied Efforts: The Need for Integration

Despite growing awareness and various efforts to combat forced labor in fishing, the problem persists. This is partly due to the fragmented nature of current approaches, which often operate in silos and lack coordination.

A multitude of stakeholders—including governments, nongovernmental organizations, academics, and industry actors—are working to address forced labor in fishing. However, these efforts are often isolated, with limited group collaboration and information sharing. This fragmentation hinders progress, as it prevents the development of comprehensive strategies that address the underlying causes of the problem.

Research has identified a lack of awareness among practitioners about the plethora of existing tools and other professional reimits.²⁴ This lack of communication and coordination results in missed opportunities for collaboration and synergistic solutions. To overcome these challenges, a more integrated approach is needed to unite diverse actors and leverage their collective expertise to create a unified and effective strategy.

The integrated dissuasion approach recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the complex problem of forced labor in fishing. It calls for a multifaceted strategy that addresses the underlying causes of the issue at multiple levels—from strengthening enforcement and enhancing accountability to empowering communities and promoting fair labor practices. By embracing this holistic approach, we can move closer to a future where forced labor is eradicated from the fishing industry and the oceans become a source of prosperity and well-being for all.

The Avengers Assembled: A Transdisciplinary Task Force

Addressing the complex and multifaceted challenge of forced labor in fishing requires a new paradigm of collaboration. The proposed solution draws inspiration from the collaborative power of Marvel Comics' Avengers Team, where diverse heroes unite their unique abilities—superpowers—to overcome threats no single hero could conquer alone. In forced labor, this translates into a *transdisciplinary task force* that brings experts from various fields to leverage their collective knowledge and skills. This task force would be a multifaceted team, each member playing a crucial role:

- *ECONOMIC STRATEGISTS*: Seasoned in trade policy, market access restrictions, and financial investigations, these experts would design and implement strategies that target the financial underpinnings of forced labor, making it less profitable and more risky for those who engage in it.
- *TECHNOLOGISTS*: Specialists in satellite monitoring, artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML), blockchain, and other cutting-edge technologies at the forefront of innovation develop tools for surveillance, traceability, and enforcement. Their expertise is invaluable in creating systems that expose and deter illegal practices, incentivize

good practices, and bring much-needed transparency to the fishing industry.

- *LEGAL EXPERTS*: Well-versed in international fisheries, human rights, and labor laws, these experts would play a critical role in identifying legal standards, advocating for and writing policy reforms, and pursuing legal action against perpetrators. Their expertise would ensure that the fight against forced labor is grounded in a robust legal framework.
- *COMMUNITY LIAISONS*: With a deep understanding of local fishing communities and their unique cultural contexts, these individuals would build trust, foster collaboration, and empower communities to participate actively in designing solutions. Their work would be essential, ensuring that strategies are grounded in the realities of the lived experience of the victims of forced labor.

By integrating these diverse perspectives and skill sets, the task force can develop a comprehensive and effective strategy to combat forced labor from multiple angles, working in tandem toward the same goals. The research reveals that a practical pathway forward necessitates working across disciplines, sectors, jurisdictions, and professional responsibilities. This transdisciplinary approach is crucial for identifying gaps in knowledge and coverage, realizing novel solutions and innovative tools, and effectively addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of forced labor in fishing.

Each individual in this field possesses a unique skill set, a core competency akin to a superpower. By uniting these diverse “superpowers,” the task force can create a synergistic effect where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as the Avengers combine their strengths to overcome formidable foes, this transdisciplinary team can also leverage its collective expertise to dismantle the intricate web enabling forced labor and forge a path toward a more just and sustainable maritime future.

Technological Solutions and Community Empowerment: Enhancing Transparency and Strengthening Enforcement

Technological innovation and community empowerment are key pillars of the integrated dissuasion strategy. These tools complement economic and legal measures, offering powerful mechanisms for enhancing transparency, strengthening enforcement, and disrupting the systems that enable forced labor.

Technological Solutions: Illuminating the Shadows

Technology is crucial in combating forced labor and IUU fishing by providing the tools needed to monitor vast ocean spaces, track vessel activity, expose illicit practices, and incentivize sustainable practices. Satellites equipped with optical imaging capabilities can scan the seas for suspicious activity. At the same time, AI and machine learning algorithms can analyze vast amounts of data, identifying patterns and anomalies indicative of forced labor.²⁵ On-board cameras and acoustic sensors can provide real-time monitoring of vessel activities, while drones offer aerial surveillance. Even simple tools like smartphones and applications can be used by fishers to document abuses and report them to authorities anonymously.

Blockchain technology holds immense potential for enhancing transparency in seafood supply chains “from hook to plate.” By creating immutable records of transactions that track the movement of fish from the point of capture to the point of sale, blockchain can help to verify the origin and legality of seafood products, ensuring that they are not tainted by forced labor.

However, despite the promise of these technologies, their widespread adoption faces significant challenges. Lack of funding and resources, particularly in developing nations, limits access to basic and advanced technologies. Inadequate internet connectivity in coastal areas hinders real-time information sharing and

collaboration among enforcement agencies. Outdated data management systems and the lack of standardized platforms and international cooperation agreements further complicate global data-sharing efforts.

To overcome these obstacles, it is crucial to prioritize investment in foundational infrastructure, such as internet connectivity and digital information systems. Establishing real-time digital information-sharing platforms and fostering international collaboration around data sovereignty and privacy concerns are also essential. Moreover, continuous capacity-building initiatives are needed to empower coastal communities and enforcement agencies to effectively utilize these rapidly evolving technologies. Streamlining data sharing between regional and global efforts is key to maximizing the impact of technology while alleviating the burden on resource-stretched agencies.

The Power of Local Community Support

Technology alone is not enough to combat forced labor effectively. Local fishing communities have an intimate understanding of how forced labor manifests in their areas—the factors that attract victims to false opportunities, the methods used to lure them, and potential points for proactive intervention. Collaborating with these communities in designing solutions is crucial for effectively addressing this issue.

Empowering local communities to act as stewards of their resources is equally important. With their intimate knowledge of their marine environment and fishing practices, local fishers can be invaluable partners in monitoring and reporting suspicious activity. Initiatives like the Philippines' Bantay Dagat program have demonstrated the effectiveness of empowering fishers to act as watchdogs.²⁶ While success stories vary based on how each location implements the program, some areas have seen positive outcomes, including successful apprehensions of illegal fishers and an

enhanced sense of ownership and responsibility for marine resources.

Alongside knowledge sharing and community-based monitoring, creating market alternatives that connect ethical fishers directly with retailers and consumers can incentivize sustainable and fair labor practices. By increasing the income of fishers who adhere to ethical standards and ensuring transparency in the supply chain, we can create a powerful market-driven incentive for reform.

Investing in youth education, workforce training, and diversifying income sources for coastal communities is another crucial aspect of community empowerment. By creating access to livelihood alternatives, we can reduce reliance on fishing and form resilient communities less vulnerable to exploitation.

By combining technological innovation with community empowerment, we can create a synergistic effect that strengthens the fight against forced labor in the fishing industry. These two pillars of the integrated dissuasion strategy add to a powerful and comprehensive approach to safeguarding human rights, protecting the environment, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of our oceans.

Potential Intervention Points: Disrupting Exploitation at its Source

While addressing the economic and legal drivers of forced labor is essential, the integrated dissuasion strategy goes further by seeking unconventional intervention points throughout the system. These targeted interventions aim to disrupt the exploitation cycle before it begins, protecting vulnerable workers and preventing them from falling prey to predatory practices.

One promising approach is to mandate pre-departure briefings to fishers before they embark on their voyages and check-in debriefings while employed. These briefings, led by labor union

representatives or fish worker groups, would educate fishers about their rights, the potential risks of exploitation, and the red flags that might signal a deceptive recruitment process. This proactive intervention could empower fishers with knowledge and tools to make informed decisions and avoid falling victim to traffickers and unscrupulous employers.

Another potential intervention point lies in the digital realm. Social media platforms, like Facebook, are often used by migrant workers to seek employment opportunities. Unfortunately, these platforms can also be exploited by traffickers to lure unsuspected victims to forced labor. By partnering with social media companies, we can develop algorithms that flag suspicious job advertisements and promote awareness about the warning signs of exploitation. This could help to empower migrant workers to distinguish between legitimate job offers and those that lead to debt bondage and forced labor.

These are just a few examples of the potential intervention points that a transdisciplinary task force could explore. By bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise, the task force can identify and implement innovative solutions that disrupt the exploitation cycle at its source, protect vulnerable workers, and create a more just and equitable fishing industry.

There are numerous possibilities for intervention, and a transdisciplinary task force is uniquely positioned to identify and implement the most effective strategies. By thinking outside the box and exploring unconventional approaches, we can create a multi-layered defense against forced labor that protects workers at every stage.

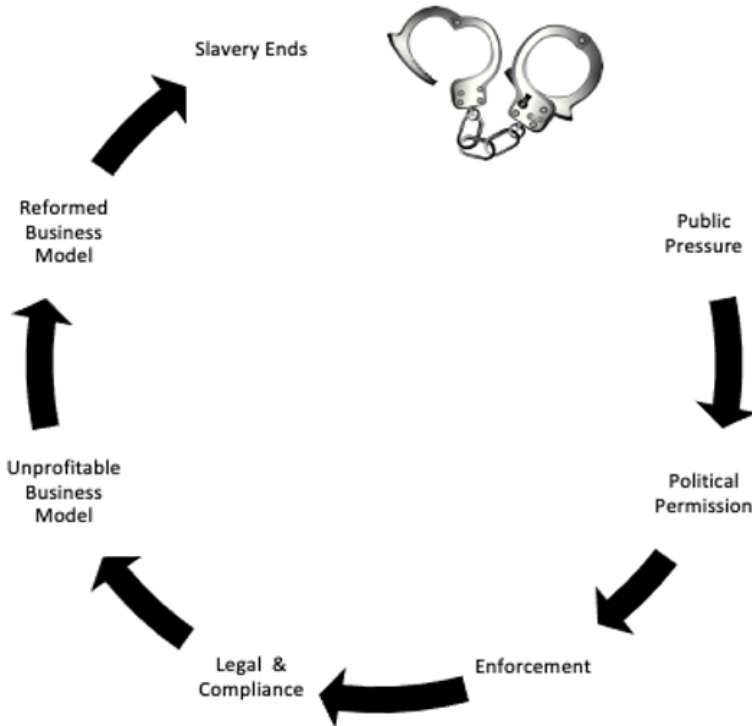


FIGURE 20.1: A PATHWAY FOR COMBATING FORCED LABOR IN THE OFFSHORE COMMERCIAL FISHING INDUSTRY

Source: Anny Barlow

The Transdisciplinary Task Force: A Unified Approach

To eradicate forced labor in the fishing industry, a paradigm shift is required—one that moves beyond fragmented efforts and embraces a unified, multi-pronged approach. This approach recognizes that accountability is key to driving the necessary business reform. International treaties already identify businesses as “duty bearers,” responsible for upholding social and environmental well-being. However, to motivate genuine change, the risk of unethical practices must outweigh the profitability.

Existing legal and compliance frameworks, such as anti-money laundering regulations and import controls, offer promising tools to achieve this. However, their full potential can only be realized through consistent enforcement at both national and international levels, supported by increased political will, resource allocation, and focused implementation both on water and land. Figure 20.1 illustrates a clear pathway to combating forced labor in the offshore commercial fishing industry. By holding bad actors accountable and increasing non-compliance risks, businesses will be incentivized to reform their practices.

However, the challenge lies in the hidden nature of forced labor at sea. Unlike land-based slavery of the past, sea slavery is often out of sight and out of mind, perpetuating indifference among the general public. To overcome this, a collaborative and comprehensive approach is essential.

Building on the earlier introduction of the transdisciplinary task force, this model—akin to Marvel’s Avengers—illustrates how diverse experts can combine their core competencies—superpowers—to combat forced labor from multiple angles. As shown in Figure 20.2, this task force facilitates collaboration across institutions with diverse professional mandates, aligning efforts to synchronize actions, raise awareness, build capacity, better characterize the problem, and improve governance structures, all while considering unintended consequences.

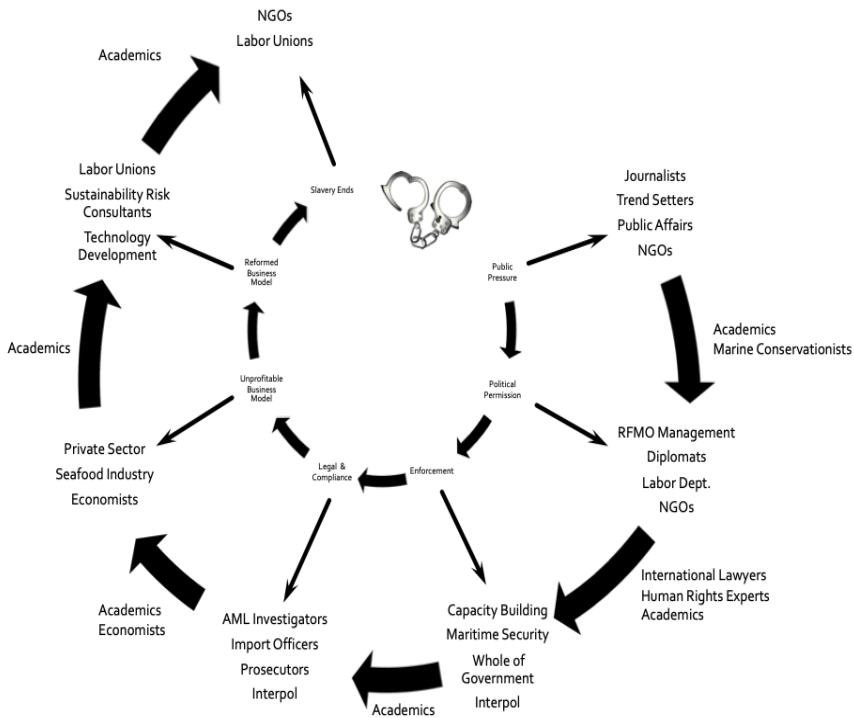


FIGURE 20.2: AN EXTENDED VERSION OF FIGURE 20.1 INCORPORATING PROFESSIONAL MANDATES CAPABLE OF CONTRIBUTING EFFORT TO EACH SEGMENT OF THE DEPICTED PATHWAY

Note: (a) those positioned adjacent to the outer arrows facilitate transitions between stages outlined in the pathway, and (b) “academics” encompass researchers from various institutions who help at every stage of the pathway.

Source: Anny Barlow

Examples of Successful Integrated Efforts

Successful integration of efforts has been demonstrated on both small and large scales. One superhero interviewed for this study shared an anecdote of the successful integration of applied effort in Indonesia—the harbormaster at Manado Port invited labor inspectors to establish a desk at the harbor to audit labor conditions

on incoming and outgoing vessels during joint inspections.²⁷ This collaboration between the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries and the Ministry of Manpower has led to more effective enforcement measures.

On a national level, the U.S. government’s recent presidential memorandum emphasizes the importance of government messaging with non-governmental voices to combat forced labor.²⁸ This led to the Collaborative Accelerator for Lawful Maritime Conditions in Seafood (CALM-CS) initiative, exemplifying a coordinated effort involving civil society and the private sector.²⁹

Global Network Proposed

Given the transnational nature of forced labor in fishing, a global network of transdisciplinary task forces—modeled after the aforementioned Avenger’s Team—is proposed. This network would operate at four governance levels: international, regional, national, and local. Such a structure ensures international coordination while allowing localized, on-the-ground focus for tailored intervention. Figure 20.3 illustrates this structure, which creates alignment across these governance levels, ensuring that the integrated dissuasion strategy is applied effectively at all scales.

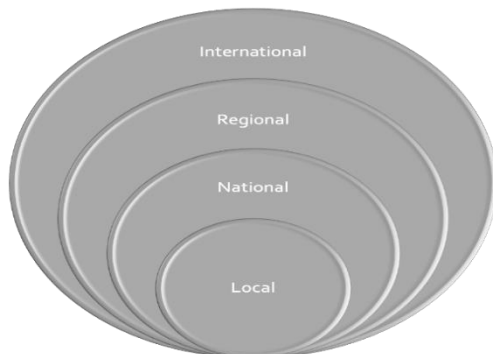


FIGURE 20.3: PROPOSED GOVERNANCE LEVELS OF A TRANSDISCIPLINARY TASK FORCE NETWORK WORKING IN STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Source: Anny Barlow

By creating alignment across these governance levels, the proposed network can effectively address the complexities of forced labor at multiple scales and improve collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

1. *INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE*: This overarching body would strategize transnational objectives, set global standards, and facilitate coordination between regional task forces. It would also play a crucial role in advocating for international agreements and policies to combat forced labor, as well as mobilizing resources and support for initiatives at lower levels.
2. *REGIONAL TASK FORCES*: These teams would focus on specific geographic areas, addressing the unique challenges and dynamics of forced labor in their respective regions. They would work closely with national task forces to implement regional strategies, share information, and coordinate enforcement efforts across borders while working with the international task force to provide regional feedback.
3. *NATIONAL TASK FORCES*: These bodies would develop, implement, and enforce national laws and regulations related to forced labor in fishing. They would play a vital role in coordinating with local task forces, incorporating local concerns while providing them with support and resources, and ensuring that local initiatives align with national priorities.
4. *LOCAL TASK FORCES*: These grassroots teams, often comprising fishers, community leaders, and local NGOs, would be at the forefront of the fight against forced labor. They would possess intimate knowledge of local fishing practices, vulnerabilities, and potential intervention points.

Their role would be crucial in monitoring and reporting suspicious activity, raising awareness within their communities, and providing support to victims of exploitation while informing the national task force of local concerns.

The SAFE Seas project, implemented in Indonesia and the Philippines, serves as a model for this approach, demonstrating the positive impact of top-down coordination and bottom-up information sharing.³⁰ By scaling this approach through a global network, we can leverage the collective power of diverse stakeholders to address forced labor across multiple levels. This unified, multi-level effort ensures the transdisciplinary approach reaches all areas, promising a secure, equitable, and sustainable maritime future.

Key Pillars for the Integrated Dissuasion Strategy

The integrated dissuasion strategy encompasses three key pillars designed to dismantle the economic incentives for forced labor, increase transparency, and empower those most affected:

1. *STRATEGIC ECONOMIC PRESSURE*. Economic incentives are crucial in driving forced labor. By disrupting the profitability of these practices, we can create powerful disincentives for those involved in exploitation. This can be achieved through:
 - *Targeted Sanctions and Market Restrictions*: Governments and international bodies can impose these measures on vessels and companies implicated in forced labor, restricting their access to lucrative markets and imposing significant financial penalties. The EU's 2015 threat of a "red card" to Thailand, which successfully prompted fishery reforms, illustrates the effectiveness of this approach.

- *Legal Compliance and Enforcement:* Existing legal frameworks, such as the U.S. Tariff Act's Withhold Release Orders (WROs), can be utilized to detain goods suspected of being produced with forced labor and launch an investigation. Financial investigations can expose illicit financial flows, further disrupting the operations of bad actors.
 - *Consumer Awareness and Action:* Targeted campaigns can generate public pressure about the prevalence of forced labor in the seafood industry, enhancing the political will to allocate resources effectively. Thus, holding more offenders accountable increases their risks and disincentivizes their behavior.
2. *TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS.* Technological innovation is critical to enhancing transparency and traceability within the fishing industry, making it harder for forced labor to remain hidden. The following technologies can be leveraged:
- *Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS):* By expanding the use of VMS to track vessel movements, monitor fishing activities, and detect suspicious behavior, we can improve surveillance and identify potential cases of forced labor.
 - *Blockchain Traceability:* Implement blockchain-based traceability systems to create transparent and tamper-proof records of the seafood supply chain, from catch to consumer. This can help identify products not associated with forced labor and incentivize companies to comply with regulations.
 - *AI/ML Powered Risk Assessments:* Use artificial intelligence and machine learning to analyze data and identify patterns that could indicate high-risk vessels or

companies. This can help target enforcement efforts and prioritize interventions.

3. *COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT*: Empowering local communities is crucial to combating forced labor in fishing. By leveraging the knowledge and expertise of local fishers and their communities, we can create a powerful network of advocates and watchdogs:

- *Local Monitoring and Enforcement*: Empower local fishing communities to actively participate in monitoring and reporting concerning events. This can be achieved through training programs, establishing community watch groups, and creating safe channels for reporting abuse. Ensuring internet connectivity in these communities is paramount to this end.
- *Build Trusted Relationships*: Engaging in open, respectful dialogue and listening to communities' experiences is essential. Establishing partnerships that prioritize their input and involvement in solution development fosters trust and encourages stakeholders to share their experiences, fostering better problem characterization.
- *Alternative Livelihoods*: Invest in programs that diversify income sources for coastal communities, reducing their reliance on fishing and creating more resilient livelihoods. This can reduce the vulnerability of individuals to forced labor and strengthen the economic well-being of communities.

The integrated dissuasion strategy employs these three pillars—strategic economic pressure, technological solutions, and community empowerment—to dismantle the complex systems that perpetuate forced labor in the fishing industry. This multi-pronged approach recognizes that no single tool can solve this problem alone.

It is about creating a powerful synergy where empowered communities become trusted resources, technology enhances transparency and accountability, and increased accountability and economic pressure create incentives for change. By working together, we can create a safer, more equitable, and sustainable future for the fishing industry.

Conclusion: Charting a Course Toward a Just and Sustainable Maritime Future

Forced labor in commercial fishing is a transboundary crisis with profound implications for human rights, environmental sustainability, and global food security. Its devastating consequences extend far beyond the individual victims, affecting entire communities, economies, and ecosystems.

The integrated dissuasion strategy presented in this chapter offers a holistic and promising framework for effectively combating this insidious practice. This strategy leverages a multi-pronged approach by recognizing the interconnected nature of forced labor, illegal fishing, and broader socioeconomic factors. It combines:

- Strategic economic pressure to disrupt the financial incentives driving exploitation.
- Technological innovation to enhance transparency and traceability, making it harder for forced labor to remain hidden.
- Community empowerment to engage local stakeholders as active participants in monitoring, reporting, and preventing abuse.

The proposed global network of transdisciplinary task forces serves as a model for unifying efforts across governance levels and professions, ensuring that local realities inform international actions and vice versa. This approach not only builds capacity and

strengthens enforcement but also fosters collaboration among stakeholders who share responsibility for eradicating forced labor.

Achieving a maritime future characterized by security, equity, and sustainability is not merely a lofty aspiration; it is an urgent imperative. Governments, industry leaders, non-governmental organizations, researchers, and consumers must all play an active role in this collective endeavor. By working together, we can break the chains of forced labor, protect the rights and dignity of fishers, and ensure that our oceans remain a source of sustenance and prosperity for generations to come.

The fight against forced labor in fishing is not just a legal or economic obligation but a moral imperative. We have a shared responsibility to ensure that the blood, sweat, and tears of exploited workers do not taint the seafood we consume. By embracing the integrated dissuasion strategy and fostering a spirit of collaboration and innovation, we can forge a brighter future for the fishing industry—one that respects human rights, protects the environment, and upholds the principles of justice and equity.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BEYOND THE TORNADO: STRENGTHENING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AGAINST HYBRID WARFARE

Beth Kunce

Resilience is not about bouncing back to where you were—it's about bouncing forward to where you should be.

— Andrew Zollli and Ann Marie Healy,
Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back, 2012

Abstract

Societal resilience is crucial in today's interconnected world, but current approaches often focus narrowly on traditional defense measures. This chapter argues for a broader understanding of resilience, encompassing social cohesion, trust in institutions, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Reviewing recent efforts by the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and select member states, it identifies critical gaps and opportunities to balance traditional defense with whole-of-society strategies. By prioritizing the critical foundation of social cohesion, resilience becomes a dynamic process, empowering communities to adapt and thrive. This chapter urges policymakers to broaden resilience efforts beyond traditional defense institutions toward a more comprehensive approach, starting with the resilience of the individual and building up to strengthen the domestic foundation of national defense.

Defining Societal Resilience in a Polycrisis Era

In 2020, Ganesh Sitaraman proposed a Grand Strategy of Resilience to prepare the United States for inevitable crises such as health pandemics, climate disasters, cyberattacks, and geo-economic competition. He argued that these challenges are not battles to win

but realities to endure, highlighting the country's lack of preparedness, as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. To confront future disruptions—whether they involve droughts, cyberattacks, or other systemic shocks—the United States must build a resilient economy, society, and democracy capable of preventing, withstanding, and recovering from these threats without incurring massive loss of life or widespread unemployment. As Sitaraman noted, “Although Americans tend to think of grand strategy as an overarching foreign policy vision, any true grand strategy requires a solid domestic foundation.”¹

To fully grasp the concept of societal resilience, we must first understand the context in which it operates: the polycrisis. This term, popularized by historian Adam Tooze, describes the convergence of multiple interconnected global crises that create a complex, unpredictable risk landscape.² This interconnectedness demands a more holistic and adaptive approach to resilience than traditional crisis response frameworks offer. Unlike conventional resilience, which often focuses on preparing for and recovering from isolated shocks, resilience in a polycrisis era necessitates navigating continuous disruptions and adapting to a constantly shifting environment.

Technological advancements, shifting power dynamics, and fragmented responses by actors pursuing narrow missions further complicate efforts to address these interconnected challenges collectively. This requires a more nuanced approach that considers the interconnectedness of systems and the dynamic interplay of social, economic, and political factors. These dimensions are particularly critical in the context of hybrid warfare,³ where adversaries leverage unconventional methods and below the threshold of war tactics to attack social, economic, and political elements to weaken a nation from within, much like termites hollowing out the structural integrity of a house.

NATO and the EU: Pioneering Whole-of-Society Resilience Strategies

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) have emerged as global leaders in developing “whole-of-society” resilience strategies to counter hybrid threats.⁴ These efforts were catalyzed by Russia’s aggression in Ukraine in 2014, prompting NATO to develop and adopt its Hybrid Warfare Strategy in December 2015 and the European Union to establish its Joint Framework for Addressing Hybrid Threats in early 2016. Both frameworks emphasize the need to strengthen societal resilience, enhance security, ensure continuity of governance, and foster greater NATO-EU cooperation in mitigating hybrid threats.

NATO defines societal resilience as “the ability of a society to resist and recover quickly from major shocks like armed attacks, natural disasters, health crises, or critical infrastructure failures, combining civil and societal preparedness with military capacity.”⁵ This concept underscores the necessity of complementing military efforts with robust civil preparedness to minimize vulnerabilities and reduce risks during peacetime, crises, and conflict.

Civil preparedness within NATO focuses on three core functions:

1. *CONTINUITY OF GOVERNMENT*: Ensuring that critical governance persists during crises.
2. *CONTINUITY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES*: Maintaining access to resources and infrastructure essential for the population.
3. *CIVIL SUPPORT TO MILITARY OPERATIONS*: Providing logistical and operational backing to defense activities.

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO translated these core functions into seven Baseline Requirements for National Resilience, which serves as a benchmark for member states to assess their preparedness.⁶ These requirements are also aligned with NATO’s

Defense Planning Process to integrate resilience into broader strategic objectives:⁷

1. Assured continuity of government and critical government services.
2. Resilient energy supplies.
3. Ability to manage uncontrolled movement of people.
4. Resilient food and water resources.
5. Capacity to handle mass casualties.
6. Resilient civil communications systems.
7. Resilient civil transportation systems.

These requirements are foundational to NATO's interpretation of Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which emphasizes the importance of civil preparedness as a pillar of resilience and a critical enabler of collective defense.⁸ Overseeing these initiatives, NATO's Resilience Committee provides strategic direction, planning guidance, and coordination of resilience activities among member states, reporting to the North Atlantic Council.

While NATO's focus on civil defense capacity is critical for whole-of-society resilience, there is a risk of overemphasizing worst-case scenarios without adequately addressing the below-the-threshold tactics that undermine social cohesion. Hybrid threats—such as disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and cyberattacks—exploit societal divisions and erode trust, threatening to turn a “house divided” into a national vulnerability.

A 2014 U.S. Institute of Peace report cautions that civil defense mechanisms when designed or implemented without due attention to the social context, may fail to achieve their intended goals—or worse, produce unintended consequences.⁹ Therefore, a balanced approach is essential. In an increasingly polarized world, building technical capacity without simultaneously fostering trust, unity, and

shared purpose risks creating systems that lack the social foundations necessary for resilience.

Understanding and Countering Hybrid Threats: Beyond Traditional Structures

In 2021, NATO leaders reaffirmed their commitment to resilience by emphasizing the importance of countering conventional, non-conventional, and hybrid threats. These efforts were further advanced through the NATO 2030 agenda and the 2022 Strategic Concept,¹⁰ which highlighted the evolving threat landscape and the need for adaptive, multidimensional strategies.

Hybrid threats, as defined by the European Union, occur “when state or non-state actors seek to exploit the vulnerabilities of the EU (state/regional governance) to their advantage by using in a coordinated way a mixture of measures (i.e., diplomatic, military, economic, technological) while remaining below the threshold of formal warfare.” Hybrid threats exploit societal vulnerabilities using a combination of tactics, including:¹¹

- *COGNITIVE WARFARE*: Manipulating public opinion and decision-making through disinformation campaigns.
- *CYBER-ATTACKS*: Targeting critical infrastructure to disrupt governance and erode trust.
- *ECONOMIC COERCION*: Leveraging trade and financial dependencies to achieve political goals.
- *LAWFARE*: Exploiting legal systems to undermine institutional integrity.

To address these threats, NATO and the EU have strengthened cooperation in four key areas: civil-military planning, cyber defense, information-sharing and analysis, and coordinated strategic communications. Since 2016, they have expanded their collaboration to encompass dozens of additional areas of mutual interest, many of which are focused on countering hybrid threats.

The establishment of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki in 2017 has further bolstered these efforts, providing a platform for research, training, and knowledge-sharing to enhance resilience.¹²

In 2019, Chris Kremidas-Courtney outlined three critical shifts required for NATO to effectively address hybrid threats:¹³

1. *CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION*: Moving from an expeditionary-only mindset to one that prioritizes internal resilience.
2. *ELIMINATING LEGAL GRAY AREAS*: Clarifying legal ambiguities that hinder cohesive responses to hybrid threats.
3. *DEEPENING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION*: Strengthening trust among allies and partners to enable seamless, collective action.

Courtney argues that acknowledging the existence of hybrid threats and updating traditional institutions is insufficient. Instead, addressing hybrid threats demands a fundamental reorganization of outdated frameworks, which currently bifurcate conceptions of security with a home-and-away game of domestic and international security interests. Resilience requires a 360-degree approach that integrates whole-of-society stakeholder mapping to meet the complex security needs of today. Recent efforts by both NATO and the EU show initial steps in this direction.

The Crucial Role of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is particularly crucial in countering hybrid threats, which operate “below the threshold of armed attacks” but can still cause widespread disruption. However, without a strong emphasis on community cohesion, whole-of-society frameworks and NATO’s baseline requirements risk falling short in protecting populations from the compounding harms of below-the-threshold tactics. Building robust defense and governance structures without

simultaneously strengthening the social bonds that hold communities together leaves these systems vulnerable to exploitation or dysfunction.

At the heart of societal resilience lies the individual, the community, and their collective cohesion. These are not only the foundation of domestic resilience but also the primary targets of hybrid tactics. Hybrid threats often aim to erode trust—both horizontally among citizens and vertically between citizens and institutions. This erosion weakens the unity of effort and undermines the very social fabric required for effective planning, equipping, and training in a resilience framework. Without trust and social cohesion, the effectiveness of whole-of-society resilience strategies is significantly compromised.

NATO's Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE) underscores the critical importance of societal resilience:

A resilient society can be broadly defined as one with strong social bonds, social institutions, and societal trust...Trust between citizens and governmental institutions is crucial for effective crisis management and the improvement of societal resilience, highlighting the need to engage the public in civil preparedness and defence efforts for long-term effectiveness. Citizens' understanding and active contribution are essential for a society's success in resisting and recovering from challenges.¹⁴

This perspective highlights a vital truth: resilience begins with people—their trust in institutions, their relationships with one another, and their engagement in shaping collective responses to crises. This emphasis on the domestic foundations of resilience echoes Sitaraman's call for a *Grand Strategy of Resilience* built upon a solid domestic foundation to endure modern challenges.¹⁵

While civil defense plays a crucial role in preparing for and responding to crises, it is essential to recognize that its effectiveness is intrinsically linked to social cohesion. Organizations like NATO

have increasingly emphasized the importance of a civil defense capacity in their resilience frameworks. However, these efforts must be carefully balanced with investments in the social cohesion element to ensure that civil defense mechanisms are rooted in public trust and aligned with social needs.

Social Cohesion: The Foundation of Societal Resilience

Social cohesion is central to “whole-of-society” resilience, encompassing human security,¹⁶ trust, problem-solving, and communication. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN ECE), in its 2023 report, *Social Cohesion: Concept and Measurement*, defines social cohesion as the social bonds or “glue” that connects members of society. Societies with higher levels of cohesion are consistently healthier, more resilient to external shocks, and experience greater economic growth.¹⁷

The report provides an analytical framework for understanding how dimensions of cohesion—such as social inclusion, institutional legitimacy, trust, and a shared sense of belonging—interact and how economic, socio-cultural, and political threats can undermine these dimensions.¹⁸ Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed the *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions Index* to better understand global trends in trust, which is a critical component of social cohesion. This tool helps policymakers, civil society, and governments to identify the causes of trust erosion and develop targeted strategies to restore confidence in institutions.¹⁹ Such efforts provide a crucial starting point for strengthening domestic resilience at the community level.

Lessons from Sweden and Finland: Integrating Social Cohesion into Defense Strategies

Sweden and Finland,²⁰ NATO’s newest members, emphasize the role of social cohesion in national resilience. Sweden, in particular,

has made societal security a cornerstone of its national defense strategy.

Recognizing that national security goes beyond territorial integrity, Sweden prioritizes safeguarding the critical functions of society, protecting people,²¹ and upholding shared values against a diverse range of threats.²²

The Swedish approach to societal resilience acknowledges that “antagonistic activities below the threshold of armed attacks” can cause widespread disruption comparable to natural disasters or armed conflict. These hybrid tactics—whether stemming from “ill will (e.g., conflict), nature (e.g., earthquakes), or accidents (e.g., oil spills)²³—can erode societal trust, disrupt governance, and weaken resilience without activating traditional crisis responses.

To enhance public awareness and preparedness, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) updated its citizen guide *In Case of Crisis or War* in November 2024.²⁴ The revised guide includes expanded sections on digital and psychological security, reflecting a broadened understanding of societal risks and the need for public engagement in resilience efforts. This proactive strategy underscores the importance of equipping individuals with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate both physical and non-physical threats.

Sweden’s perspective is significant because it elevates the potential harm of hybrid tactics—such as disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and cyber-attacks—to the same level as natural disasters or armed conflict. Sweden’s focus on societal security offers a valuable model for resilience strategies worldwide. By prioritizing the protection of critical societal functions and integrating public engagement into its framework, Sweden demonstrates how nations can address the full spectrum of threats—both conventional and unconventional.

“Termites in the House”: Addressing the Global Erosion of Social Cohesion

While the benefits of social cohesion are widely recognized, its role as the essential foundation of whole-of-society resilience is often underappreciated. Social cohesion is a critical precursor to societal resilience, defined as the willingness of diverse members of a society to cooperate, overcome adversity, and thrive.²⁵ However, global trends indicate a worrying erosion of this essential glue. According to the 2024 World Economic Forum Global Risk Report, societal polarization is one of the top three global risks across economic, environmental, societal, geopolitical, and technological domains.²⁶ This growing polarization is leading to intractable division,²⁷ dehumanization, and a recession of democracies,²⁸ all unfolding in a world where 25% of the global population lives in conflict-affected areas.²⁹

The crisis of polarization and societal fragmentation is further amplified by a decline in trust across traditional institutions of governance, including governments, media, civil society, and the private sector.³⁰ Compounding this distrust is an anger-fueled data economy, where algorithms amplify divisive content, deepen societal rifts, and stoke conflict.³¹ In this environment, society’s ability to respond or react to any shock is progressively diminished.

When trust erodes, the capacity for cooperation, information-sharing, and collective action diminishes, creating a cascade of vulnerabilities that can undermine resilience at every level.³² Neglecting social cohesion, therefore, creates a self-reinforcing cycle. As trust declines and polarization increases, societies become more vulnerable to shocks, less capable of adapting to change, and more fragmented in their responses. This fragility undermines resilience, making future crises even harder to navigate.

Breaking this cycle demands a deliberate balance between investments in traditional defense mechanisms and efforts to strengthen social cohesion. Whole-of-society resilience efforts must

move beyond exclusive preparations for worst-case scenarios like war, pandemics, or mass casualty events, and address the ongoing, insidious effects of hybrid threats that exploit societal divisions. Focusing solely on military and civil defense is akin to fortifying a home against a rare tornado while ignoring the termites actively eating away at its foundation. While preparing for the tornado is important, societies must simultaneously confront and repair the structural damage caused by termites—the metaphorical hybrid threats that erode trust, amplify division, and weaken the foundation of resilience.

Rebuilding social cohesion requires skills, partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives that prioritize trust, inclusivity, and countering the forces that fuel division. By addressing these underlying vulnerabilities, societies can restore their ability to adapt, cooperate, and thrive—ensuring that resilience is not just a defensive posture but a proactive strategy for unity and progress.

The Human Dimension of Resilience

While much attention is given to technical and structural measures of resilience, the human dimension is foundational and often overlooked. Social resilience hinges on human security, relationships, problem-solving, communication, and shared understanding. Prioritizing this human-centric approach to resilience building requires asking critical questions:

- *PERCEPTION*: How does the population perceive the world and the threats it faces?
- *PROBLEM SOLVING*: How do communities collaborate to address risks and build a shared capacity for adaptation and recovery?
- *BELONGING*: How can a sense of belonging and shared purpose be fostered to empower individuals and communities to navigate challenges together?

Technical/structural solutions often overshadow these factors, yet the success of these solutions are dependent on community's engagement, trust and buy-in. Without a societal foundation rooted in human security and well-being, even the most sophisticated governance and defense systems risk ineffectiveness. Worse, such systems can be exploited by those seeking to deepen divisions or weaponized against the very populations they are meant to protect. Building resilient institutions without fostering unity and a shared purpose risks leaving them hollow and vulnerable.

Building a Resilient Society: Lessons from Research

Resilience is not a static outcome but a dynamic and evolving process, requiring adaptability, learning, and continuous improvement to navigate the complexities of today's polycrisis. This perspective underscores the need for societies to anticipate challenges, respond effectively to disruptions, and evolve continually in the face of uncertainty. As Dr. Tom Mitchell and Katie Harris articulated in their 2012 concept note, *Resilience: A Risk Management Approach*, resilience requires societies to "learn, adapt, anticipate, and continuously improve" to thrive in an ever-changing world.³³

This understanding is complemented by the work of Aditya Bahadur and colleagues, who identified key characteristics of resilient systems that provide a valuable framework for policymakers and practitioners seeking to build societal resilience.³⁴ These characteristics include:

- **DIVERSITY:** Inclusive systems ensure equitable access to resources, decision-making processes, and economic opportunities. Diversity fosters adaptability by enabling a range of responses to crises and challenges, reducing reliance on single points of failure.

- *CONNECTIVITY*: Strong links between institutions at local, national, and international levels facilitate effective communication and knowledge sharing. These connections enable cohesive responses to disruptions and foster collaborative problem-solving.
- *KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION*: Resilient societies blend multiple forms of knowledge—scientific, local, and experiential—to manage change effectively. This integration allows for tailored responses to evolving risks, leveraging diverse perspectives and expertise.
- *REDUNDANCY*: Systems designed with backup mechanisms and distributed critical functions can withstand failures without collapsing entirely. Redundancy provides a safety net during crises, ensuring the continuity of essential operations.
- *EQUITY*: Fair distribution of risks and resources across societal systems ensures that resilience-building efforts do not exacerbate existing inequalities. Equity is critical for maintaining trust and fostering societal cohesion.
- *SOCIAL COHESION*: At the core of resilience lies strong community support and embedded social networks. Social cohesion provides the foundation for collective action, enabling communities to navigate disruptions together and rebuild stronger.

These characteristics demonstrate that resilience is about much more than infrastructure or preparedness. It is about building systems and societies that can adapt and thrive amid complexity, addressing not just technical solutions but also the broader social, economic, and institutional dimensions of long-term sustainability.

This holistic approach aligns with the findings of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) in its *2019 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction*. The report calls for

a shift from working on distinct, isolated areas of risk—spatial, geographic, temporal, or disciplinary—to transdisciplinary, multisectoral risk assessment and decision-making.³⁵ Such integrated approaches reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and facilitate collective action.³⁶

Policymakers must not assume a strong domestic foundation of trust and community already exists to support resilience efforts. In many societies, trust and cohesion must first be built. By embedding these principles into resilience strategies, nations can restore trust, strengthen community ties, and create a whole-of-society resilience framework for resilience.

Resilience must be understood not as an endpoint but as an ongoing, integrated, and interdisciplinary process of social adaptation, learning, and improvement. By adopting these principles into strategies and practices, nations can structure the organizational and behavioral changes necessary to protect and strengthen societal resilience with a cohesive and adaptable domestic foundation for future challenges.

Balancing Military and Civil Approaches

The increasing complexity and interconnectedness of global challenges demand a more holistic and integrated approach to national security, which moves beyond relying on traditional institutions of defense for all solutions. For decades, policymakers and academics have debated the merits of a “whole-of-government” approach, emphasizing interagency cooperation to address complex challenges such as disaster response, stabilization efforts, and non-traditional security threats. Despite these discussions, the United States has often defaulted to military-led responses, framing diverse challenges through a security lens to leverage the military’s vast resources and capabilities.

This tendency toward over-securitization has drawn criticism from prominent thinkers like Francis Fukuyama,³⁷ Andrew

Bacevich, Rosa Brooks,³⁸ and Daniel Drezner,³⁹ who argue that an overreliance on military solutions undermines the ability of civilian institutions to address issues more effectively and often leads to suboptimal outcomes. This critique underscores the need to balance military and civilian approaches to create a more sustainable and effective strategy for managing global challenges.

To address these concerns, thought leaders and policymakers have advocated for a more balanced and integrated approach to national security. Thomas Barnett, in his 2004 book *The Pentagon's New Map*, highlighted the need for global connectivity and systems thinking to address 21st-century challenges.⁴⁰ Similarly, Robert Gates, during his tenure as U.S. Secretary of Defense, emphasized the importance of bolstering civilian instruments of national power, calling for increased investment in diplomacy, foreign assistance, and economic development.⁴¹

More recently, Sitaraman's "grand strategy of resilience" and the earlier 2008 Armitage-Nye framework of "smart power" have further underscored the need for a call for a comprehensive approach.⁴² These frameworks emphasize the importance of leveraging diverse tools, fostering interagency collaboration, and empowering civilian leadership to address root causes of instability and foster long-term solutions.

The current whole-of-society resilience movement represents an opportunity to apply the lessons observed—but not fully learned—from decades of military-dominated approaches to security. This movement must be the final battleground for shifting toward a balanced, integrated strategy that empowers civilian leadership while leveraging the military's unique capabilities as part of a broader collaborative framework.

Historically, resilience planning in the United States has been event-driven, addressing specific hazards through a siloed crisis management cycle: preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. While this approach has been effective in certain contexts,

today's interconnectedness and systemic risks demand a more dynamic, adaptive framework. Resilience must now be understood as a collaborative, cross-sectoral process that integrates diverse perspectives and capabilities to navigate uncertainty and mitigate systemic risks. This requires the Department of Defense (DOD) to evolve from its traditional role as a primary responder to a more nuanced role as a facilitator and enabler of whole-of-society resilience.

While the DOD has a crucial role to play in fostering resilience, its dominance in this domain presents several challenges. The Pentagon remains the best-trained and best-resourced arm of the federal government, often stepping in to fill voids left by civilian agencies. However, this can lead to an over-securitization of resilience, where military solutions are prioritized even for challenges better addressed through civilian expertise and diplomatic efforts.

This tendency is evident in the disproportionate allocation of resources. For example, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command alone has more troops than the entire combined staff of the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The DOD's budget similarly dwarfs those of these agencies, reflecting a structural imbalance that perpetuates a reliance on military solutions. Even senior DOD officials have argued for greater investment in civilian agencies to address global challenges more comprehensively.⁴³

The overemphasis on military-led resilience efforts poses significant risks that can undermine the effectiveness of broader resilience strategies:

- *UNDERMINING CIVILIAN CAPACITY*: When the military takes the lead in all aspects of resilience, it can undermine the capacity of civilian agencies to develop their own expertise and address challenges within their domains.

- *ERODING TRUST AND COLLABORATION*: In a polarized world, where hybrid threats blur the lines between civilian and military domains, unchecked military dominance in resilience planning can erode trust and hinder the collaboration necessary for success.
- *INEFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS*: Relying solely on military solutions for complex challenges like pandemics, climate change, and social unrest can lead to ineffective or even counterproductive outcomes.
- *UNSUSTAINABILITY*: Hybrid warfare exploits all instruments and opportunities to strategically undermine adversaries. An overly defense-centric focus is neither sustainable nor strategically sound. Military forces, already stretched thin with traditional warfighting mandates, are ill-equipped and not trained to address the wide-ranging and compounding effects of hybrid threats. Expecting them to do so diminishes their primary mission effectiveness and leaves significant gaps in comprehensive resilience efforts.

To avoid these pitfalls, a balanced approach is essential—one that empowers civilian agencies, fosters cross-sector collaboration, and integrates military capabilities where they are most effective. Recognizing the limitations of a military-centric approach to resilience, the DOD must embrace a more collaborative framework that leverages its strengths while empowering civilian institutions and fostering cross-sector partnerships. This requires a paradigm shift, moving away from automated bureaucratic processes that apply old tools to new buzzwords and toward a more agile and adaptive approach.

Embracing a Systems Approach in a Polycrisis World

In today's polycrisis—a convergence of overlapping, interconnected crises—traditional, siloed approaches to security are insufficient. Challenges such as climate change, pandemics,

economic instability, social unrest, and geopolitical conflicts are deeply intertwined, requiring a systems thinking approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of these challenges. This shift in mindset demands moving away from linear, reductionist thinking toward a more holistic and adaptive framework capable of navigating complexity.

Recent policy developments underscore the growing recognition of systems thinking in resilience-building. The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) 2024 *National Resilience Guidance* emphasizes a whole-community approach,⁴⁴ promoting a common understanding of resilience and addressing the interplay between chronic stressors and acute shocks. Similarly, USAID's 2024 *Resilience Policy* advocates for integrated risk management and systemic approaches, extending its framework beyond agriculture to include health, education, and governance.⁴⁵ The DOD has also elevated climate resilience as a strategic imperative, as evidenced by its Climate Resilience Portal,⁴⁶ and ongoing environmental security initiatives.⁴⁷

While these efforts represent progress, they fall short of constituting a comprehensive whole-of-society strategy grounded in systems thinking. A truly integrated framework would map the interrelated nature of societal risks and delineate how technical experts and community members can collaborate across agencies and organizations to strengthen societal resilience.

Learning from International Models

In contrast to the fragmented U.S. approach, the EU and NATO are further along in developing robust models for fostering whole-of-society resilience. Similarly, the UK Government Resilience Framework offers a comprehensive policy guide linking diverse efforts and actors toward a cohesive, cross-sectional resilience strategy.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the UK Integrated Operating Concept for the Ministry of Defense outlines roles, responsibilities, and

coordination mechanisms for engaging all facets of society to address the complex risks posed by polycrisis and hybrid warfare.⁴⁹ These frameworks conceptualize a new way of doing business in a world increasingly shaped by interconnected crises.

By leveraging the insights and frameworks developed by allies like the United Kingdom, the United States could operationalize a *Grand Strategy of Resilience* that aligns domestic efforts with international best practices.

The DOD should not be the solution to whole-of-society resilience challenges, but it is uniquely positioned to apply its resources and expertise to facilitate dialogue, training, and innovation efforts to help foster a systems approach to resilience. Its vast resources, training capabilities, and global reach enable it to almost immediately convene stakeholders across sectors to develop the roadmap for new approaches to resilience. Key actions for the DOD include:

1. *EXPANDING SECURITY COOPERATION PROGRAMS*: By broadening international and domestic security cooperation efforts, the DOD can facilitate knowledge exchange, align resilience goals, and strengthen partnerships to counter hybrid threats.
2. *ENHANCING TRAINING AND EDUCATION*: Incorporating systems thinking and resilience frameworks into military schoolhouses and training programs ensures that leaders are prepared to address the interconnected challenges of the polycrisis era.
3. *PROMOTING INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH*: Investing in research that integrates diverse perspectives—spanning social cohesion, climate adaptation, cybersecurity, and hybrid warfare—can generate innovative solutions to emerging threats.

4. *FOSTERING CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION*: Acting as a convener, the DOD can bridge the gaps between civilian agencies, private industry, NGOs, and international allies, creating a unified platform for resilience planning and implementation.

To strengthen domestic resilience, the United States must bridge interagency efforts with models being developed by our partners and allies. The DOD's role as a facilitator of collaboration, adaption, and learning is critical in this effort. This approach not only prepares the nation for future crises but also fosters the collective capacity to navigate an increasingly uncertain world.

Conclusion: A Collaborative Path to Resilience

The 21st century's interwoven crises—hybrid threats, democratic backsliding, climate change, and the cascading effects of the polycrisis—demand a transformative approach to resilience. Resilience is not a fixed achievement but a dynamic and ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and collective action. It requires recognizing the interconnected nature of today's threats and developing systems that can navigate complexity and uncertainty with agility.

True resilience must go beyond traditional military strategies of civil defense, infrastructure-focused measures around worst-case scenarios. Its foundation lies in the cohesion of communities, the trust between citizens and institutions, and the shared purpose that unites diverse sectors of society. Without these core elements, even the most advanced governance frameworks and defense mechanisms risk being hollow, ineffective, or even counterproductive. A balanced approach integrates military capabilities with civilian leadership, social inclusion, and public trust.

International models from NATO, the European Union, and allies such as the United Kingdom underscore the value of integrated frameworks that align national, regional, and local efforts. By drawing lessons from these examples, the United States has the opportunity to strengthen its domestic resilience while contributing to global security partnerships. However, the effectiveness of any resilience strategy ultimately depends on prioritizing social cohesion, addressing polarization, and countering the hybrid threats that exploit social vulnerabilities and erode trust.

Resilience is about more than withstanding crises—it is about thriving in their aftermath. It is the capacity to transform adversity into an opportunity for innovation, unity, and growth. By embracing systems thinking, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and centering the human dimension, the United States and its allies can build societies that are adaptive, inclusive, and prepared to face the uncertainties of the modern world.

Traditional conceptions of grand strategy have emphasized the role of nation-states in navigating the international arena through diplomacy, military power, and economic influence. However, the rapidly evolving landscape of hybrid warfare—characterized by tactics that exploit societal vulnerabilities below the threshold of conventional war—necessitates a fundamental shift. Grand strategy must now incorporate a robust and integrated focus on building a domestic foundation of societal resilience.

This reimagined approach recognizes that in today's technologically scaled realities, the population itself is both a target and a tool in hybrid warfare. Threat actors exploit divisions, manipulate information, and erode trust within societies to destabilize governance and undermine collective action. As such, societal resilience becomes not just a defensive imperative but a cornerstone of strategic security.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**LEADERSHIP FOR POSITIVE PEACE: TRANSFORMING
SOCIETIES THROUGH INCLUSION AND EMPATHY**

Roxane Turner and James M. Minnich

Democracy must be built through open societies that share information.

When there is information, there is enlightenment.

When there is debate, there are solutions.

— Atifete Jahjaga, 4th President of Kosovo, 2011-2016

One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I'm not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or maybe somehow, because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong.

— Jacinda Ardern, 40th Prime Minister of New Zealand, 2017-2023

Abstract

Empathy and inclusion are transformative forces capable of healing nations, bridging divides, and fostering lasting peace. This chapter explores the leadership of Atifete Jahjaga,¹ Kosovo's first female president, and Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's former prime minister, who embodied these qualities while addressing systemic injustices, societal traumas, and national crises. Jahjaga championed institutional reform and reconciliation in the wake of conflict, confronting stigma and empowering marginalized voices. Ardern united her nation with compassionate and decisive leadership, particularly during the Christchurch mosque attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their stories demonstrate the power of Positive Peace principles to inspire resilience, equity, and collective progress in an uncertain world.

Introduction:

Leadership and Positive Peace in a Changing World

The challenges of the modern era—cyber warfare, pandemics, systemic inequalities, and growing geopolitical tensions—underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of what sustains peace. The Global Peace Index (GPI), published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), evaluates the peacefulness of 163 nations using a wide array of indicators.² Founded by Australian entrepreneur Stephen Killelea A.M., the IEP has pioneered innovative frameworks like Positive Peace, which shifts the focus from conflict avoidance to building the attitudes, institutions, and structures that foster resilient and equitable societies.³

At the heart of Positive Peace lies the transformative power of leadership—particularly empathetic and inclusive leadership capable of bridging divides and fostering long-term stability. This chapter explores the transformative potential of such leadership through the stories of two extraordinary figures: Atifete Jahjaga of Kosovo and Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand. Their efforts demonstrate how the principles of Positive Peace when embraced by visionary leaders, can guide nations through profound challenges. By analyzing their approaches, this chapter highlights how gender equality, systemic healing, and inclusive governance can serve as pathways to a more stable, just, and equitable world.

Understanding Leadership and Positive Peace

Positive Peace, as defined by IEP, transcends the absence of violence. It focuses on the systemic factors—attitudes, institutions, and structures—that sustain peaceful and equitable societies over time.⁴ The framework's eight interconnected pillars, including Well-Functioning Government, Acceptance of the Rights of Others, Free Flow of Information, and Good Relations with Neighbors,

provide actionable pathways for addressing vulnerabilities and fostering societal resilience.⁵

Leadership is central to transforming these principles into tangible outcomes. Within the context of Positive Peace, effective leaders demonstrate empathy, inclusivity, and a commitment to justice—traits characteristic of transformational and ethical leadership. Transformational leaders inspire change by articulating a compelling vision and fostering collaboration,⁶ while ethical leaders prioritize integrity, fairness, and the well-being of all members of society.⁷

In times of conflict or crisis, these qualities become indispensable. Leaders must serve as bridge-builders, uniting divided communities, addressing historical grievances, and fostering societal trust. Moreover, they must champion the inclusion of marginalized voices, recognizing that sustainable peace can only be achievable when every individual has a stake in the future.

This chapter illustrates these concepts through the leadership of Jahjaga and Ardern, demonstrating how visionary governance rooted in the principles of Positive Peace can transform societies and provide a blueprint for addressing the most pressing challenges of our time.

Case Studies: Jahjaga and Ardern

The stories of Atifete Jahjaga,⁸ the first female president of Kosovo, and Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, illustrate how leadership rooted in Positive Peace can transform societies.

- *ATIFETE JAHJAGA* confronted the trauma of wartime sexual violence and championed gender equality in post-conflict Kosovo.⁹ Her efforts aligned with the Positive Peace pillars of Acceptance of the Rights of Others and Well-Functioning

Government, laying the groundwork for long-term reconciliation and institutional reform.

- *JACINDA ARDERN* demonstrated empathetic and decisive leadership during crises like the Christchurch mosque attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ Her focus on transparency and inclusion embodied the pillars of the Free Flow of Information and Good Relations with Neighbors, fostering trust and unity during periods of uncertainty.

These leaders illustrate how the principles of Positive Peace can be applied to address systemic injustices, strengthen institutions, and inspire collective action. Their examples show that leadership is not merely about managing crises but about creating systems and cultures that sustain peace and equity.

Breaking Barriers:

A Woman's Rise to Power in Post-War Kosovo

In a nation scarred by war and grappling with its newfound independence, Atifete Jahjaga emerged as a symbol of hope. At just 36 years old, she became the first female president of Kosovo, leading the country through a turbulent period of post-conflict recovery from 2011 to 2016.

Kosovo had declared independence from Serbia only three years earlier, following a brutal conflict marked by ethnic cleansing and systemic violence.¹¹ Over 10,000 lives were lost,¹² more than 1.5 million were displaced,¹³ and an estimated 20,000 women endured sexual violence as a weapon of war.¹⁴ Against this backdrop, Jahjaga, a former police officer who had risen through the ranks to become Deputy Director, navigated a troubled political landscape, burdened by the lingering wounds of war and the pervasive stigma surrounding survivors of sexual violence. Rejecting the divisive infighting that plagued Kosovo's leadership, she fostered unity, healing, and reconciliation,¹⁵ embodying the Positive Peace pillar of

Well-Functioning Government, which prioritizes institutional reform and governance grounded in inclusivity and integrity.

Despite societal norms deeply entrenched in patriarchy, Jahjaga's leadership broke barriers, though not without resistance. Media outlets often trivialized her contributions,¹⁶ focusing on appearance over policy. Reflecting on these challenges, Jahjaga remarked, "I was judged by the public with different lenses... not for the content of my character or for what I said, but by how I said it and what I was wearing when I said it."¹⁷ Yet, undeterred by such criticism, Jahjaga became a powerful advocate for women's rights and gender equality.

Recognizing the untapped potential of Kosovo's young, educated female population. She hosted the landmark International Women's Summit, "Partnership for Change—Empowering Women," which convened over 200 global women leaders and resulted in the creation of the Pristina Principles. This framework affirmed women's rights to political participation, economic resources, and access to security and justice, directly addressing the Positive Peace pillar of Acceptance of the Rights of Others. Jahjaga's leadership exemplified how prioritizing these rights not only uplifts marginalized groups but also strengthens societal resilience.

A Diplomatic Partnership in Leadership

Jahjaga's commitment to increasing women's representation in leadership was evident throughout her presidency as she assembled a diverse team of professionals dedicated to advancing Kosovo's diplomatic and societal goals. Under her guidance, the number of women in Kosovo's Foreign Service grew significantly, exemplified by the trailblazing career of Ambassador Zana Rudi, who embodied the President's vision for empowering women in diplomacy.

Rudi served as Kosovo's senior diplomat in Panama from 2013 to 2019, overseeing relations across Latin America and the Caribbean. Holding the positions of Chief of Mission and later Ambassador, she made history as the first Chief of Mission to give birth while in office. Balancing the demands of representing Kosovo on the international stage while building a family, Rudi exemplified resilience and dedication, breaking new ground for women in diplomacy.

During Jahjaga's visit to Panama, her leadership took on a deeply personal dimension. Amid high-level meetings, Rudi vividly remembered a moment of humanity where Jahjaga emphasized the importance of self-care and women supporting one another: "Leadership is as much about humanity and solidarity as it is about achieving goals."¹⁸ This approach reflected the Positive Peace pillar of Acceptance of the Rights of Others, demonstrating how empowering individuals can bolster societal resilience. Rudi later reflected, "Under Jahjaga's leadership, women were empowered to enter leadership roles with strength and confidence."¹⁹

Jahjaga's heartfelt speech in flawless Spanish during the visit, delivered as she received the key to Panama City,²⁰ underscored her commitment to diplomacy and cultural respect. The gesture, which strengthened ties between Kosovo and Panama, also symbolized the profound collaboration between two women breaking barriers in leadership.

Through her governance, Jahjaga demonstrated how principles like Well-Functioning Government and Acceptance of the Rights of Others can anchor the rebuilding of post-conflict societies. By fostering institutional reform, gender equality, and reconciliation, she left a legacy that continues to inspire leaders committed to fostering long-term peace and stability.

*Addressing the Scars of War:
The “Thinking of You” Exhibit*

President Jahjaga’s commitment to women’s rights extended beyond increasing political and diplomatic participation. She worked to address the profound trauma of wartime sexual violence, embodying the Positive Peace principle of Acceptance of the Rights of Others. The *Thinking of You* exhibit, unveiled in Pristina in 2015, became a powerful embodiment of this effort. “We all donated dresses for it,” recalled Blerta Zeqiri,²¹ a Kosovar filmmaker, of the exhibit, where thousands of dresses and skirts fluttered in the wind—a haunting tribute to the estimated 20,000 survivors of sexual violence during the Kosovo War.

Jahjaga championed the exhibit, donating the first of what would become over 5,000 dresses—a symbolic act that underscored her administration’s commitment to breaking the silence around sexual violence and including survivors in Kosovo’s reconciliation process. By publicly supporting this initiative, Jahjaga demonstrated her alignment with the Positive Peace principle of the Free Flow of Information, ensuring that the stories of survivors were acknowledged and amplified, not hidden.

The exhibit, conceived by artist Alketa Xhafa-Mripa in collaboration with Anna Di Lellio, transformed a Pristina football stadium into a profound statement of resilience and acknowledgment. Inspired by harrowing stories she heard upon returning to Kosovo in 2013, Xhafa-Mripa created the installation to provide survivors with a platform to be seen and their experiences recognized.

The *Thinking of You* exhibit not only honored the suffering of survivors but also reshaped national discourse on justice and healing. Jahjaga’s unwavering support for the initiative exemplified her determination to challenge stigma and integrate survivors into Kosovo’s future, addressing both cultural and systemic violence. This act aligned with the Positive Peace principle of Acceptance of

the Rights of Others, fostering reconciliation by emphasizing dignity and equality for all citizens. Ultimately, the exhibit stood as both a stark reminder of the collective trauma endured and a testament to the resilience of Kosovar women, solidifying Jahjaga's legacy as a leader committed to justice and inclusion.

*A Pivotal Moment:
Confronting Stigma and Shame*

In the fall of 2012, just over a year into her presidency, Jahjaga had a deeply moving encounter with survivors of sexual violence from the Kosovo War. This reinforced her commitment to the Positive Peace principles of Well-Functioning Government and Acceptance of the Rights of Others. Among the stories shared, one was particularly harrowing and left an indelible mark on her. A woman who showed Jahjaga the scars of her suffering—"S" symbols, the Serbian cross, brutally carved into her skin along a trail of cigarette burns. Lifting her blouse, she revealed a bright white scar bearing the same symbol, accompanied by more cigarette burns on her stomach. Jahjaga later learned the full extent of the woman's tragedy: her husband and three-year-old daughter had been killed on the same day she was subjected to this horrific abuse.²²

This encounter solidified Jahjaga's resolve to challenge the stigma surrounding wartime sexual violence and ensure that survivors were included in Kosovo's national narrative. Her actions reflected the Acceptance of the Rights of Others, a cornerstone of Positive Peace, by prioritizing the voices and experiences of a marginalized group.

*Taking Action:
The National Council for Survivors of Sexual Violence*

In the spring of 2014, Jahjaga took a groundbreaking step by establishing the National Council for the Survivors of Sexual Violence, a pivotal initiative aimed at addressing the long-neglected

needs of these women. This effort embodied the Well-Functioning Government principle by institutionalizing justice and support for survivors. The Council successfully pushed the Kosovo Assembly to amend the law on war veterans to recognize survivors of sexual violence as civilian victims of war, granting them long-overdue acknowledgment and access to vital support services. This marked a dramatic reversal of the Assembly's rejection of a similar directive the previous year.

Jeta Krasniqi, a political adviser and the Council's coordinator hailed this as a transformative moment, stating that it exemplified Jahjaga's commitment to "put this issue on the highest level possible...and talk about it as a national issue."²³ Jahjaga's leadership reflected the Positive Peace principle of the Free Flow of Information, ensuring open dialogue about survivors' experiences and systemic changes to address their needs.

When asked how she prioritized this issue alongside others, such as European Union integration and UN membership, Jahjaga replied, "How are we going to have economic growth and prosperity if 20,000 people [rape victims] in my country do not believe in justice?" Her focus on justice and recognition for survivors highlighted the inseparable link between societal healing and national stability, further aligning her efforts with the pillars of Well-Functioning Government and Acceptance of the Rights of Others.

A Legacy of Empowerment and Inclusion

Atifete Jahjaga's legacy extends far beyond her presidency. As Kosovo's first female president, she shattered glass ceilings and demonstrated the transformative power and impact of inclusive leadership. Through her commitment to empowering women, fostering interethnic reconciliation, and addressing societal traumas, she became a powerful symbol of progress in a post-conflict nation. By embodying the Positive Peace principles of a Well-Functioning

Government and Acceptance of the Rights of Others, Jahjaga institutionalized systemic changes that continue to shape Kosovo's trajectory.

When asked for advice to female leaders, Jahjaga emphasized authenticity and resilience: "Do not surrender to the pressure to change and to conform to certain rules that men have established as norms of leadership and policy-making. I say to women leaders: bring your own unique persona to the office."²⁴

Her leadership serves as a case study of how a focus on gender equality and inclusion can drive meaningful reform, shift cultural norms, and inspire future generations of leaders. Jahjaga's unwavering dedication to justice and healing remains a beacon for women in post-conflict societies worldwide, demonstrating that transformative leadership can pave the way for a more equitable and peaceful world.

Leading with Empathy:

Jacinda Ardern and the Power of Inclusive Leadership

Jacinda Ardern's tenure as Prime Minister of New Zealand from 2017 to 2023 exemplified the transformative potential of empathetic and inclusive leadership. Steering her nation through unprecedented crises—the Christchurch mosque attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the volcanic eruption on Whakaari/White Island—Ardern demonstrated compassion, transparency, and decisive action. Her governance resonated deeply, domestically and internationally, setting a new standard for fostering unity, resilience, and trust in times of adversity.

Responding to Tragedy:

The Christchurch Mosque Attacks

On March 15, 2019, New Zealand faced one of its darkest days when a gunman attacked two mosques in Christchurch, killing 51 people and injuring dozens more.²⁵ Targeting the Muslim community, the

attack revealed systemic vulnerabilities, including insufficient mechanisms to address hate speech, inadequate monitoring of extremist ideologies, and the marginalization of minority communities within a society often celebrated for its peacefulness.²⁶

Ardern's swift and empathetic response became a hallmark of her leadership.²⁷ Condemning the attack as an act of terrorism, she declared, "They are us," affirming the inclusion and equality of New Zealand's Muslim community.²⁸ Donning a hijab as a gesture of solidarity,²⁹ she visited survivors and victims' families, offering comfort and embodying her commitment to inclusion.³⁰

Beyond rhetoric, Ardern spearheaded swift legislative action, banning military-style semi-automatic weapons and assault rifles within weeks.³¹ This decisive move addressed both the immediate tragedy and systemic risks, aligning with the Positive Peace principle of Acceptance of the Rights of Others. By fostering a culture of inclusion and taking concrete preventive measures, Ardern transformed collective grief into collective action, strengthening societal cohesion.

Leading Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic tested Ardern's leadership on a global stage. Employing a "go hard, go early" strategy, her government prioritized lives over economic concerns, implementing strict lockdowns and border closures.³² Regular press briefings emphasized transparency, collective responsibility,³³ and kindness, with Ardern urging New Zealanders to "Be kind."³⁴

Her empathetic communication style and reliance on accessible, accurate information embodied the Positive Peace principle of the Free Flow of Information, fostering trust between the government and its citizens. By addressing pandemic-driven inequalities through enhanced social support and increased funding for mental health services, her government further reinforced the Equitable Distribution of Resources and High Levels of Human Capital.

New Zealand's pandemic response achieved remarkable outcomes, keeping COVID-19 fatalities among the lowest globally during the early stages.³⁵ More importantly, Ardern's leadership nurtured a sense of unity and shared purpose, showcasing the role of governance in building societal resilience.³⁶

*Responding to Disaster:
The Whakaari/White Island Eruption*

On December 9, 2019, a volcanic eruption on Whakaari/White Island claimed 22 lives and injured dozens of tourists and guides.³⁷ The sudden disaster struck one of New Zealand's most popular tourist destinations, leaving the nation reeling.

Ardern's response exemplified her trademark empathy and decisive leadership. She reached out immediately to victims' families and first responders, offering solace and support amid the devastation.³⁸ Recognizing the tragedy's international dimensions—many victims were foreign tourists—Ardern's outreach extended globally,³⁹ reinforcing her role as a leader fostering international solidarity.

Her government also initiated a comprehensive review of safety protocols for high-risk tourism areas, implementing regulatory reforms to prevent similar tragedies.⁴⁰ This proactive approach embodied the Positive Peace principle of a Well-Functioning Government, prioritizing accountability and public safety.

Building Resilience Through Inclusive Leadership

Ardern's leadership extended beyond crisis management to tackle systemic inequality and foster long-term resilience.⁴¹ Her government introduced transformative policies, such as expanded paid parental leave,⁴² a comprehensive child poverty reduction plan,⁴³ and significantly increased mental health funding.⁴⁴ These proactive measures addressed the root causes of inequality,

reflecting the Positive Peace principles of Equitable Distribution of Resources and High Levels of Human Capital.

Her ability to connect across diverse communities distinguished Ardern as a transformational leader.⁴⁵ By fostering collaboration and collective problem-solving, she empowered individuals and communities to actively participate in solutions.⁴⁶ This inclusive approach aligned with the Positive Peace pillar of Well-Functioning Government, where transparency, accountability, and responsiveness foster trust and effective governance. Ensuring that New Zealand's institutions reflected the diversity of its people, Ardern built a governance model that was both equitable and impactful.⁴⁷

A Legacy of Empathy and Action

Jacinda Ardern's leadership offers a powerful blueprint for how empathy and inclusivity transform challenges into opportunities for societal growth and cohesion.⁴⁸ Her focus on addressing systemic inequalities while responding decisively to crises underscores the critical role of Positive Peace principles in fostering resilient societies.

Ardern's legacy demonstrates that effective leadership is not about exerting authority but about inspiring trust, empowering communities, and prioritizing collective well-being. Her government's emphasis on transparency, equity, and compassion left an enduring impact, proving that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of justice, dignity, and opportunity for all.

Through her actions, Ardern showed that leadership grounded in humanity and inclusivity is a practical and transformative framework. Her legacy reminds the world that the most effective leaders are those who bring people together to create a more just, equitable, and united society.

Conclusion: Lessons for the Future

In an era defined by difficult challenges and polycrises, Atifete Jahjaga and Jacinda Ardern's leadership provides an inspiring blueprint for building resilient, just, and inclusive societies. Their steadfast commitment to inclusion, equity, and humanity underscores the transformative potential of leaders who align their actions with the principles of Positive Peace.

This chapter underscores that peace is more than the absence of conflict—it is the presence of robust systems that uphold justice, dignity, and opportunity for all. By exploring the leadership journeys of Jahjaga and Ardern, we uncover valuable lessons on bridging divides and fostering long-term stability. Their legacies serve as a call to action for leaders worldwide to prioritize resilience, inclusivity, and collective well-being in shaping a sustainable future.

Jahjaga's leadership in post-conflict Kosovo exemplified the Positive Peace pillars of a Well-Functioning Government and Acceptance of the Rights of Others. Her dedication to institutional reform, gender equality, and amplifying marginalized voices transformed Kosovo's approach to governance. By confronting the stigma surrounding wartime sexual violence and ensuring survivors were integral to national reconciliation, she laid a foundation for lasting healing and stability. Her work redefined the role of women in leadership, proving that transformative change is achievable even under the most challenging circumstances.

Ardern's empathetic and decisive leadership through crises, including the Christchurch mosque attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Whakaari/White Island eruption, demonstrated how trust, transparency, and compassion can unify a nation. Her inclusive governance approach aligned with Positive Peace principles such as Equitable Distribution of Resources and the Free Flow of Information, addressing systemic inequalities while fostering societal resilience. Ardern's legacy reminds us that

leadership grounded in humanity is not only a moral imperative but also a practical framework for creating sustainable peace and prosperity.

Together, Jahjaga and Ardern show that leadership capable of bridging divides, addressing systemic injustices, and empowering marginalized communities can create societies that thrive in the face of adversity.⁴⁹ Their examples illuminate a path forward for leaders committed to building a more just, equitable, and resilient world.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PACIFIC ISLAND MICROSTATES AND U.S. SECURITY

COOPERATION: A STRATEGIC REASSESSMENT

Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban

The Pacific is the most dynamic region of the world, and what happens here will shape the future for generations to come.

— Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, 2014

Abstract

Pacific Island microstates are crucial in the U.S.-China strategic competition due to their diplomatic influence, strategic location, and valuable maritime resources. The United States has re-engaged these nations with diplomatic initiatives and partnerships. This chapter proposes a comprehensive U.S. security cooperation strategy focused on four key pillars: U.S. Coast Guard and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration-led maritime security cooperation, strategic collaboration with the European Union, expansion of U.S. Civic Action Teams, and regular deployment of U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs units. These actions will enhance maritime security, bolster crisis preparedness, and foster resilient partnerships, countering Chinese influence and promoting regional stability.

Introduction

The Pacific microstates stretch like pearls across the aquamarine carpet of Oceania. From Palau in the west to the Cook Islands in the east, this collection of sovereign countries plays a significant geopolitical role in the broader Pacific Rim security arena. In fact, these microstates represent key terrain and partners in the ongoing

strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) in the Pacific theater.

However, competition in Oceania is not merely limited to the United States and China. Still, it is also central to other contests in the Indo-Pacific, including the longstanding conflict between Taiwan and China for diplomatic recognition and legitimacy. Furthermore, Oceania is also home to key U.S. allies and partners, namely Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. To achieve a competitive advantage over China and support its allies and partners in this contested space, the United States will need to invest in long-term, tailored, and relationship-oriented security cooperation activities with these small states while avoiding the policy neglect and indifference it has displayed in recent decades.

Superficial measures or outsourcing foreign policy to regional allies are not sustainable strategies for long-term effectiveness in Oceania. This chapter argues for a strategic reevaluation of U.S. engagement with these microstates, advocating for a shift from historical neglect to proactive, tailored, and relationship-oriented security cooperation. It will delve into the unique strategic importance of these states within U.S.-PRC dynamics, outline the challenges and opportunities of engaging with them, and propose tailored strategies to enhance U.S. influence while addressing the microstates' core concerns.

This analysis adopts the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's 1967 definition of microstates as exceptionally small in area, population, and resources yet sovereign and significant on the geopolitical chessboard.¹

The focus on the 13 Pacific microstates recognized by the United States as independent countries with populations under one million—including Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Niue, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau—is strategic. These states are at the confluence of significant global

challenges and opportunities, from climate resilience to maritime security, making them indispensable in crafting a forward-looking U.S. strategy in the Pacific.

To navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical environment and secure a strategic edge over China, the United States must transcend past oversights by investing in long-term, genuine partnerships with Pacific microstates. This step requires a nuanced approach that appreciates each state's unique context and prioritizes sustainable cooperation over transactional engagements.

The proposed strategies for engagement include a partnership between the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to lead projects on fisheries, law enforcement, and climate resilience in the Pacific microstates; collaboration with the European Union (EU) to strengthen maritime security; extending U.S. Civic Action Teams (CAT) to all 13 microstates; and regularly assigning U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs units to these countries. This multifaceted approach addresses the immediate security and environmental challenges. It lays the foundation for a partnership that respects the sovereignty and developmental aspirations of Pacific microstates, ensuring a collaborative future marked by mutual respect and shared prosperity.

Strategic Importance of Pacific Microstates in the U.S.-China Rivalry

Amidst the vast blue expanses of the Pacific Ocean, the microstates emerge not just as sovereign entities but as pivotal actors in the grand strategic competition between global powers. Their unique blend of diplomatic agility, geostrategic position, and stewardship over crucial natural resources places them at the heart of the contest for influence between the United States and China. Despite their small size, Pacific microstates possess rights and privileges on the international stage equal to much larger nations, allowing them to

exert influence in global forums and contribute to shaping international norms and policies. Their strategic location amidst major sea routes and near vital U.S. military installations underscores their importance in geopolitical dynamics, particularly in U.S.-PRC competition. While small, these states could have an outsized impact on future conflicts.

In this intricate contest of power, the Pacific microstates leverage their UN membership and strategic autonomy to make impactful decisions that resonate far beyond their shores. As guardians of the Pacific's vast maritime domains, these microstates not only find themselves in the crosshairs of strategic interests but also as custodians of the international norms and policies that govern pressing global issues.

Diplomatic Influence and UN Engagement of Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest size, Pacific microstates wield influence in international decision-making. Holding equal membership in the UN as any other state, these states use their voting rights to shape global governance and norms. A recent instance of their influence was observed in the UN General Assembly vote on October 27, 2023, concerning a ceasefire in Gaza. The resolution, which passed with 121 states in favor, saw opposition from the United States alongside a small but significant coalition that included five Pacific microstates: Fiji, Tonga, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Nauru.² While UN General Assembly resolutions are not binding, the voting outcomes send signals to the larger world community and can shape perceptions of legitimacy. Building international coalitions in a forum that counts each vote equally illustrates their capacity to influence major international decisions and underscores their strategic importance.

Participation in International Forums

The status of being a UN member state not only equates to a seat at the table in global discussions but also opens doors to impactful participation in various UN committees and forums, magnifying the impact of Pacific microstates on the international stage. The involvement of the Solomon Islands in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) exemplifies how small states can meaningfully engage in global dialogue on critical issues. ECOSOC, a platform for policy coordination and review of economic and social challenges, offers a space for these states to voice their perspectives and influence the implementation of international development goals.³ While ECOSOC recommendations may not be binding, the council's focus on pivotal issues often steers the broader UN agenda, amplifying the reach of smaller states' contributions.⁴ Beyond the confines of the UN, Pacific microstates actively participate in other international groupings, such as the Commonwealth and Pacific Island Forum, where they continue to shape regional policies and assert their global presence.⁵

Taiwan's Recognition and Sovereignty

Moreover, the strategic autonomy exercised by Pacific microstates in diplomatic recognition, especially regarding Taiwan's international standing, underscores their relevant role in global diplomacy. Despite China's extensive economic outreach to isolate Taiwan, a few Pacific microstates maintain diplomatic and economic ties with Taipei, reflecting their sovereign decision-making and strategic balancing in international relations.⁶ This steadfast recognition is not merely a diplomatic stance but an assertion of their agency in the face of global power dynamics, challenging the economic inducements with principled support for Taiwan.

Figure 23.1 visually summarizes the participation of Pacific microstates in key international forums and their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, highlighting their active engagement in global affairs and independent foreign policy stances.

Country	UN Member	The Commonwealth	Pacific Island Forum	Diplomatic Recognition
Federated States of Micronesia	X		X	PRC
Fiji	X	X	X	PRC
Kiribati	X	X	X	PRC
Marshall Islands	X		X	Taiwan
Nauru	X	X	X	PRC
Niue			X	PRC
Palau	X		X	Taiwan
Samoa	X	X	X	PRC
Solomon Islands	X	X	X	PRC
The Cook Islands			X	PRC
Tonga	X	X	X	PRC
Tuvalu	X	X	X	Taiwan
Vanuatu	X	X	X	PRC

FIGURE 23.1: PACIFIC MICROSTATE PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL FORUMS AND DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION OF TAIWAN

Source: Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban, created for this publication

Geopolitical Positioning and Strategic Routes

The concept of the first and second island chains, pivotal to Cold War defense strategies in the Indo-Pacific, underscores the enduring geopolitical significance of these maritime corridors. Initially devised as a bulwark against Soviet and Chinese expansionism, these chains—from Japan through the South China Sea to the Malayan Peninsula and northern Japan through Guam to Indonesia—continue serving as linchpins in contemporary security architectures.⁷ The potential for Chinese presence in Pacific microstates, bypassing these strategic defenses, raises profound implications for regional and global security dynamics.

Strategic Military Installations

The strategic importance of Hawaii and Guam as cornerstones to the U.S. Indo-Pacific defense strategy is paramount. Hosting critical military installations, these territories are proximate to Pacific

microstates, linking their security postures. The recent attention to Kanton Island in Kiribati, just 3,000 km from Hawaii and historically a vital World War II-era refueling point, exemplifies the deepening geopolitical contest in these distant locales. China's announcement in March 2023 that it sent a team to assess the feasibility of renovating the former U.S. military airstrip raised security concerns, given the lack of an obvious commercially viable rationale for the project.⁸ Since Hawaii is a significant part of the U.S. forward defense posture, it would be a central logistical hub in a military confrontation in the Pacific. If China is granted physical access to this Kiribatian island, it would be well positioned to severely interdict or hinder U.S. naval operations in the Pacific. This development underscores the intricate geopolitical contest unfolding in these remote locations.

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are foundational treaties delineating the security and economic relationships between the United States and the Freely Associated States—the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. These compacts grant the United States exclusive military access and strategic privileges within these nations' territories in exchange for economic aid, defense, and other services.⁹ This unique arrangement allows the United States to project power and maintain a significant security presence across the Pacific, contributing to regional stability and safeguarding vital interests in the Indo-Pacific Theater.

The COFA agreements underscore a mutual commitment, ensuring that while the Freely Associated States retain sovereignty and can conduct their internal affairs, they align closely with U.S. strategic imperatives. Key installations, such as the missile defense base on Kwajalein Atoll and recent advancements like the Tactical Mobile Over-the-Horizon Radar (OTHR) system in Palau, highlight the military and strategic benefits accruing to the United States, making these compact agreements pivotal to American defense strategy in the region.¹⁰ According to a recent report, “this modern

OTHR on Palau will be able to support space-based and terrestrial-based sensor and weapon systems for the potential cueing and early warning of incoming hypersonic weapons, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, enemy aircraft, and ships.”¹¹

Submarine Cables and Communication Security

Beyond their military significance, the Pacific region’s strategic importance is further underscored by its vast network of submarine cables, essential for global communications. Key communication lines, such as those connecting Japan and Guam and another linking Australia with Hawaii, underscore the reliance of U.S. allies and partners on these undersea pathways that crisscross the Pacific, many threading through the Pacific microstates’ exclusive economic zones (EEZ)—a sea territory that extends 200 nautical miles from a state’s coast where it maintains exclusive rights for research and economic exploitation.

Figure 23.2 illustrates the intricate network of submarine cables that traverse the Pacific, many passing through the EEZs of Pacific microstates, underscoring the region’s strategic importance for global communication and the potential vulnerability of these vital links. Historically, Chinese research and survey vessels have undertaken activities around these cables that raise alarms of espionage and possible sabotage. Notably, in Palau’s EEZ, Chinese research vessels conduct reconnaissance and potentially the mapping of submarine cable infrastructure.¹² Such actions challenge the principles of free navigation by not adhering to the norms of “continuous and expeditious transit” as mandated by international law, underscoring the strategic vulnerability of these undersea cables.¹³

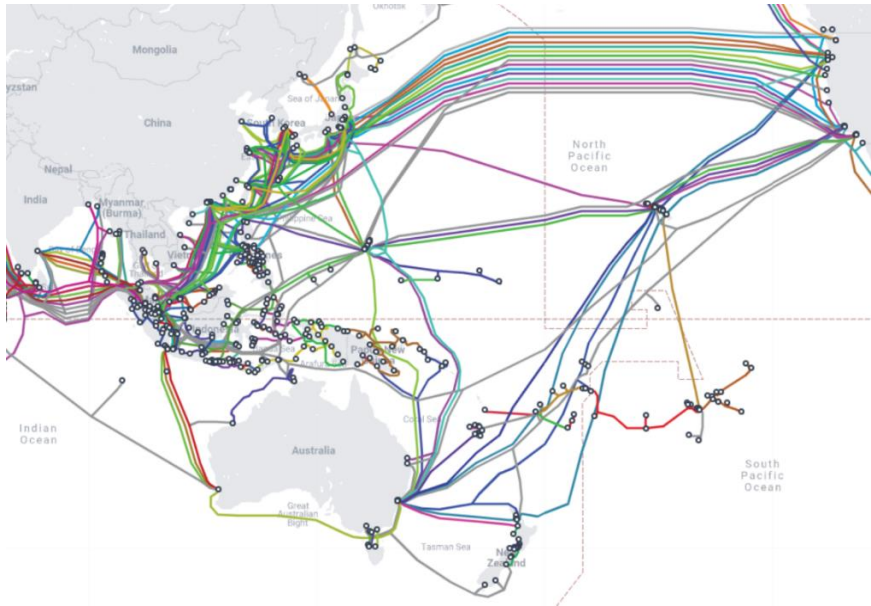


FIGURE 23.2: MAP OF SUBMARINE CABLES

Source: TeleGeography

The sabotage of undersea cables is not without precedent, as evidenced by actions during the Russia-Ukraine War, where Russia reportedly targeted undersea cables to disrupt communications and financial transactions.¹⁴ Such strategies echo Cold War tactics, highlighting the enduring strategic value and vulnerability of undersea communications in modern conflict.¹⁵ In response to these emerging threats, Australia, the United States, India, and Japan launched a notable international initiative—the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience. This collaborative effort seeks to share best practices and develop comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks to bolster the resilience of this critical infrastructure in the microstates.¹⁶ Such proactive measures are vital for safeguarding the arteries of global communication against the backdrop of increasing geopolitical tensions.

This focus on submarine cable security illustrates the critical nature of these assets for economic and strategic stability and emphasizes the imperative for concerted international efforts to protect them. Through initiatives like the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience and by adhering to the laws governing EEZs, the international community strives to ensure the security and reliability of these undersea links, which are pivotal for maintaining global connectivity.

Economic Significance and Resource Control in Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest dimensions, Pacific microstates wield potential influence over global economic currents thanks to their geographical positioning and vast sovereign territories. These nations command expansive EEZs, attributed to their widespread islands and atolls dotting the ocean. Take Kiribati, for instance: its land mass encompasses merely 811 square kilometers—smaller than Hong Kong—yet it boasts one of the globe’s most extensive EEZs, covering an impressive 3.55 million square kilometers.¹⁷ This sprawling maritime domain thrusts Pacific microstates into the forefront of pivotal areas such as global fisheries, the pursuit of essential minerals for the green energy transition, and the intricate web of maritime trade connecting Northeast Asia and Oceania.

Fisheries and Maritime Trade

The Pacific’s EEZs are vital to the global fishing industry, particularly for tuna, which significantly bolsters these nations’ economies and is a crucial component of global food supplies.¹⁸ One-third of the world’s tuna catch emerges annually from these waters, including those of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Tokelau, a territory of New Zealand.¹⁹ Between 2015 and 2018, fishing licenses and access fees generated over 45% of government revenue for the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu.²⁰ The South Pacific Tuna

Treaty, a collaborative effort among the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the 13 Pacific microstates, underscores the significance of fishing rights and economic assistance while also addressing the challenges posed by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which threatens both fish stocks and the economic sovereignty of these nations, escalating geopolitical tensions.²¹

Mineral Resources and Deep-Sea Mining

Beneath and on the Pacific seafloor lies a treasure trove of natural resources, especially critical minerals like cobalt, indispensable for battery technology and the transition to green energy. While deep-sea mining remains in its infancy and regulatory frameworks are still being formulated, the potential for resource extraction ignites considerable interest and anticipates increased regional activity.²² Exploratory deep-sea mining efforts have spanned a significant portion of the South Pacific, with samples collected from diverse locations, including Fiji, the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.²³ Notably, the region stretching between Hawaii and Guam, particularly within the Marshall Islands' EEZ, has emerged as a promising site for cobalt extraction.²⁴ Additionally, potential cobalt-rich areas exist within the EEZs of Micronesia, Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Niue, highlighting the strategic importance of these areas in diversifying supply chains for essential green energy components.²⁵

Enhancing the range of sources for these essential minerals is critical for diversification, especially considering the Democratic Republic of Congo's significant monopoly, which accounts for 70% of the world's cobalt production amidst its instability and corruption.²⁶ Such strategic diversification is essential for reinforcing global supply chains and encouraging new economic growth opportunities. The International Seabed Authority's issuance of exploration contracts near Guam highlights the growing

global interest in deep-sea mining from various stakeholders, including the China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association (COMRA) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation.²⁷ This development represents a significant stride toward tapping these underexplored resources. Yet, the venture in deep-sea mining is not without its environmental concerns, from the potential harm to marine ecosystems to the regulatory uncertainties impacting ecological and economic outcomes.²⁸ The global pursuit of seabed minerals necessitates a reasonable balance between financial gain and environmental stewardship, necessitating international collaboration to navigate these uncharted waters responsibly.

Beyond their extractable resources, Pacific microstates sit astride key trade pathways, with their territorial waters encompassing crucial sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), maritime commercial trade routes, and strategic chokepoints within the first and second island chains. Regional SLOCs vital for Australia and New Zealand, for instance, traverse the territorial waters of these microstates, notably around the Solomon Islands.²⁹ Maritime routes connecting Japan or South Korea with Australia or New Zealand frequently navigate these waters.³⁰ With Japan ranking as Australia's second-largest trading partner and export market as of 2021, the imperative of maintaining unfettered navigation through these channels cannot be overstated.³¹ While not directly affecting the United States, these trade dynamics are of paramount importance to its regional allies, highlighting the interconnected nature of global commerce and underscoring the strategic value Pacific microstates hold in facilitating or potentially disrupting the free flow of goods across these pivotal maritime corridors.

U.S. Policy Neglect and Recent Recalibration

In the post-Cold War era, the U.S. attention toward the Pacific microstates waned, creating a vacuum that China's expanding

influence began to fill.³² The pivotal moment came in 2019 when the Solomon Islands and Kiribati shifted their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, signaling that the United States needed to reassess and reinforce its position in the region.³³ This change led to a significant recalibration of U.S. policy aimed at countering China's sway and reaffirming America's role as an indispensable partner in Pacific geopolitics.

Shifts in Diplomatic Recognition

The announcement of a security pact between the Solomon Islands and China in 2022 was a stark reminder of the shifting dynamics in the Pacific, necessitating a strategy for consistent U.S. engagement. This development, set against the Solomon Islands' complex historical backdrop of internal strife and external efforts toward stabilization, underscores the pivotal moments shaping the region's strategic landscape.

From 2003 to 2017, the Pacific Islands Forum—led by Australia and New Zealand, with participation or contribution from eight of the Pacific microstates (the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu)—spearheaded the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a comprehensive intervention designed to restore order and rebuild governance structures amid escalating violence and political instability.³⁴ Initiated at the request of the Solomon Islands' government, RAMSI's multifaceted approach encompassed enhancing security, promoting legal and judicial reforms, and fostering economic recovery.

Two years after RAMSI disbanded, protests again erupted in the Solomon Islands over the government's decision to shift its recognition to China in September 2019, highlighting the deep-seated tensions within the country. A local premier's denouncement of the federal government's decision and subsequent ban on PRC investment on the island he governed underscored deepening

divisions.³⁵ By November 2021, the discontent had escalated into violence in Honiara, the capital city, notably affecting Chinatown, amidst a pandemic-induced economic downturn that exacerbated inequalities.³⁶ Despite the disbandment of RAMSI, a coalition of security forces from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand intervened at the Prime Minister's request.³⁷

Shortly afterward, in April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands signed a security-cooperation agreement, the terms of which have not been officially publicized. However, a leaked copy of a draft troubled Washington and Canberra as the agreement set the conditions for a PRC military presence on the Solomon Islands, granting the PRC military the right “to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects.”³⁸ Given the history of conflict, as well as differing foreign policy perspectives pertaining to diplomatic recognition and relations with Taiwan, a PRC invasion of Taiwan, coupled with protests in the Solomon Islands, could lead to a legal PRC military presence on the Solomon Islands. While the purpose of such a presence would ostensibly be “to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects” in accordance with the treaty, it would also greatly expand China's ability to subjugate dissent in the Solomon Islands and project power into the South Pacific.

Renewed U.S. Engagement Strategies

In response to these developments and the broader challenges posed by China's growing influence, the United States embarked on a comprehensive strategy to enhance its engagement with the Pacific microstates. High-profile gestures, such as President Biden's landmark address at the Pacific Islands Forum in August 2021 and Secretary Blinken's visit to Fiji, marking the first such visit by a Secretary of State in nearly four decades, marked the beginning of this renewed focus.³⁹

Initiatives to reopen the U.S. embassy in Honiara and establish new embassies in Tonga and Kiribati, the appointment of an envoy

to the Pacific Islands Forum, and an increase in the presence of the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID) in Oceania further bolstered diplomatic ties.⁴⁰

High-Profile Diplomatic Initiatives

The U.S. intensified engagement culminated in the launch of the inaugural U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit and the unveiling of the Pacific Partnership Strategy, signaling a shift toward more sustainable and meaningful partnerships in the Pacific.⁴¹ This approach is characterized by efforts to enhance regional cooperation in critical areas such as fishing regulation and environmental response, as demonstrated by the 2023 establishment of the USCG Marine Environmental Response Regional Activities Center (MER RAC) and the Illegal Unreported Unregulated Fisheries Center of Expertise (IUU-F COE) in Hawaii.⁴² Together, these efforts underscore the U.S. intention to build sustainable, rather than transactional, relationships with Pacific nations by addressing key areas of mutual concern and reinforcing the U.S. position as a committed partner in the Pacific's future development and security.

Commenting on the U.S. decision to re-engage over the last years, Dr. Anne-Marie Schleich, a retired German ambassador to multiple Pacific microstates, put it succinctly:

The US re-engagement with Pacific Island countries will not be judged by high-ranking visits or new embassies but by its willingness to address the Pacific Islands' major concern, i.e., climate crisis, to contribute towards sustainable development and to increase trade with the region. China will focus its diplomacy on a few selected countries, further increase its trade with the whole region and use some soft power. The geopolitical tug of war in its courtyard is an opportunity for Pacific Island nations. They will pragmatically pick the best development offers. Competition for influence in Oceania will increase.⁴³

As the U.S.-China geopolitical competition intensifies, Pacific microstates stand at a crossroads. They have the opportunity to utilize rivalry to secure improved political, security, and economic arrangements, especially given their reliance on foreign aid. However, for these partnerships to be enduring and impactful, they must transcend diplomatic overtures and focus on delivering tangible benefits that resonate with the island nations' core interests and aspirations.

In essence, the U.S. strategic recalibration in the Pacific represents a critical step toward building a resilient and mutually beneficial relationship with the microstates of Oceania, grounded in shared values and long-term cooperation rather than short-term transactions. This nuanced approach to security cooperation is essential for maintaining influence and stability in a region that is increasingly becoming a focal point of global strategic competition. The following section sketches the contours of a potential U.S. security cooperation approach that aims to build a sustainable rather than transactional relationship with the nations of Oceania.

Security Cooperation Recommendations for the United States

The strategic dynamics of the Pacific, marked by the intricate interplay of global powers, underscore the pivotal role of Pacific microstates in the geopolitical landscape. These small yet sovereign islands are at the heart of diplomatic maneuvering, geopolitical positioning, and the guardianship of critical natural resources. This central position makes them indispensable in the strategic competition between the United States and China. This section delves into recommendations for enhancing U.S. security cooperation, tailored to bolster resilience, advance economic opportunities, and protect these nations' environmental and maritime assets. It aligns with the vision outlined in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and the 2023 Pacific Islands Forum communique, advocating for an approach that underscores climate change mitigation, economic development, and fisheries

protection. In doing so, it proposes a cost-effective engagement focused on maritime security and disaster preparedness—areas where the existential threats to these island nations intersect with opportunities for meaningful partnership.

However, while the following recommendations are broad in scope, it should be noted that the Pacific Island microstates are by no means homogeneous. Each state has unique priorities, cultures, politics, and history that ought to be considered when approaching security cooperation. For example, the three states that recognize Taipei over Beijing lack access to many of the PRC's infrastructure and development financing programs. Furthermore, the Solomon Islands' security agreement with China and Tuvalu's recent security pact with Australia in 2023 highlight that there is no one preferred partner within the Pacific.⁴⁴ Additionally, the longstanding relationship between the Freely Associated States and the United States, exemplified by high rates of islander service in the U.S. armed forces, offers a rich foundation for deepening mutual commitments.⁴⁵ A one-size-fits-all approach that ignores these contours will likely be ineffective in building trust and advancing mutual priorities.

Pillar One:

USCG and NOAA-led Maritime Security Cooperation

Under the rubric of maritime security cooperation, the USCG and NOAA should lead a collaborative initiative to confront maritime security and environmental challenges. This effort aims to bolster fisheries management, law enforcement, and climate resilience, employing a civilian-led approach to counteract climate change-induced threats. Both agencies are well-suited for this role, with the USCG operating under the Department of Homeland Security and NOAA under the Department of Commerce, offering a civilian-oriented approach to addressing Oceania's security challenges.

This initiative is particularly critical in addressing the exacerbated threats to fisheries, including the interception of IUU fishing activities that climate change aggravates. Collaborating with Pacific nations on this issue promises to achieve multiple political, economic, and social objectives, such as helping to safeguard vital natural resources and income sources for Pacific microstates and fostering deeper U.S.-Oceanic ties.⁴⁶ Moreover, this approach actively supports maritime law enforcement, countering efforts by actors like China to weaken it.

The recent establishment of the previously mentioned USCG MER RAC and IUU-F COE are important first steps in this comprehensive strategy. Furthermore, in April 2024, the United States Coast Guard and Samoa signed an agreement that expands integrated operations and allows Samoa to authorize a USCG vessel to conduct law enforcement activities on its behalf (e.g., inspect maritime vessels, enforce Samoa's EEZ) to counter illicit transnational maritime activity.⁴⁷ This agreement is one example of how such partnerships could be structured and is evidence of the importance of this line of effort. Additionally, NOAA's specialized skills in weather forecasting, climate monitoring, fisheries management, coastal restoration, and support for marine commerce are ideally suited for engaging with and benefiting the Pacific microstates.⁴⁸ This multifaceted initiative addresses immediate environmental and security concerns and lays the groundwork for sustainable, resilient Pacific communities.

A second area of concentration under maritime security cooperation is the extension of international collaboration efforts to focus on shared responsibilities in fisheries, law enforcement, and climate action. While maintaining its policy sovereignty in Oceania, the United States benefits significantly from engaging a broader alliance of partners. Australia and New Zealand are natural allies in this domain, offering deep-rooted regional collaboration.

Pillar Two:

Strategic EU Collaboration on Maritime Security

To further enhance this cooperative framework, the United States should deepen ties with the European Union in maritime security, leveraging its considerable capacity-building expertise and resources. The European Union has extensive experience in maritime domain awareness, fisheries management, and maritime law enforcement, honed through decades of managing its vast maritime borders and participating in international missions. Its advanced technologies, such as satellite surveillance and vessel tracking systems, could significantly enhance monitoring and enforcement efforts in the Pacific.

The EU's capacity-building programs, focused on training and equipping coast guards and maritime law enforcement agencies, can be tailored to the specific needs of Pacific microstates, empowering them to better protect their resources and enforce their laws. A prime example is the EU's Critical Maritime Routes program, which has successfully strengthened maritime security in the Indian Ocean by providing training and equipment to regional partners.⁴⁹ A similar initiative, adapted for the Pacific and focusing on combating illegal fishing, piracy, and other maritime crimes, could prove highly beneficial.

Collaboration with the EU could also involve joint patrols, information sharing, and coordinated responses to maritime incidents. The EU's *Atalanta* operation in the Horn of Africa, which effectively deterred piracy and protected shipping through multinational naval forces, is a potential model for the Pacific.⁵⁰ In this scenario, the European Union could contribute vessels, aircraft, and personnel to joint patrols with the USCG and Pacific Island nations.

France and Germany, key EU members with significant interests in the Indo-Pacific, can play pivotal roles in fostering this collaboration.⁵¹ France's overseas territories in the Pacific, such as

New Caledonia and French Polynesia, give it a unique understanding of the region's challenges and opportunities. Germany's commitment to the Pacific, demonstrated through its participation in the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) ministerial, underscores its potential contribution to the region. Initiated in June 2022 and comprising Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the PBP aims "to drive resources, improve coordination, and close gaps with the goal of supporting Pacific priorities."⁵² Germany's establishment of an embassy in Suva, Fiji, in August 2023 further signifies its support for Pacific Island nations.⁵³ The combined Franco-German diplomatic, economic, and military resources would significantly bolster U.S.-EU efforts to support Pacific microstates.

This strategic U.S.-EU partnership would address immediate security challenges and contribute to long-term regional stability and sustainable development. By pooling resources, expertise, and capabilities, the United States and the European Union can offer a more comprehensive and effective response to the complex maritime issues facing Pacific microstates, ensuring a unified front in safeguarding this vital region.

Pillar Three:

Civic Action Teams (CAT) Expansion

Given the escalating threat of climate change-induced extreme weather in Oceania, U.S. involvement in enhancing crisis preparedness is crucial. This commitment, through combined efforts in medical training and humanitarian assistance, aims to bolster resiliency and alleviate the impact of climate volatility. USAID recognizes Pacific Islands as particularly susceptible to climate change, facing hazards such as cyclones, floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.⁵⁴ Additionally, unprecedented climate variations introduce new challenges, like altered rainfall patterns, intensifying storm severity, and rising sea

levels. The heightened vulnerability is exacerbated by the limited availability of accessible, quality healthcare in many islands, a situation that becomes direr during emergencies.⁵⁵

Enhancing the islands' preparedness and response capabilities to these evolving environmental threats necessitates a comprehensive approach, leveraging U.S. resources and expertise to support the development of robust, adaptable systems for healthcare and disaster response, ensuring communities can withstand and recover from climate change and natural disasters. To further bolster crisis preparedness in response to climate change, the authors propose the implementation of expanded U.S. joint force civic action teams (CAT) in each country. Civic action involves using military forces to execute projects that directly support the local populace at all levels in education, training, public works, agriculture, transportation, communications, and health sanitation.⁵⁶ These activities aid societal development and enhance the relationship between military forces and the community.

The United States has a history of engaging its military in civic action roles abroad, providing a wealth of experience and resources for such missions. Drawing inspiration from the Civic Action Team-Palau (CAT-Palau) model, these initiatives aim to leverage the unique capabilities of U.S. military personnel in supporting local development and resilience efforts. The CAT-Palau, operational for over 50 years, exemplifies the positive impacts of such engagements. Comprising a versatile team of U.S. Navy, Army, and Air Force personnel with expertise in engineering, healthcare, and more, CAT-Palau has significantly contributed to development in Palau.⁵⁷ From construction projects to educational programs and medical outreach, the team's efforts have fostered a strong bond with the local population and government, showcasing the potential for mutual growth and understanding.⁵⁸ Extending this successful model to other Pacific microstates would ensure a sustained U.S. presence that enhances disaster response capabilities and

strengthens community ties. Such an approach underscores the U.S. long-term commitment to supporting the Pacific islands' resilience, showcasing a collaborative strategy to address the multifaceted challenges of climate change and natural disasters.

*Pillar Four:
USAR Civil Affairs Deployment*

Enhancing the strategic deployment of U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) civil affairs units to Pacific microstates would complement the established CAT programs, further bolstering disaster preparedness and crisis management capabilities across Oceania. Civil Affairs units specialize in conducting operations that address and mitigate sources of instability within societies. Organized, trained, and equipped for civil affairs operations, these Reserve Component forces are adept at working within communities to foster security, stability, and development.⁵⁹ Their expertise spans six critical areas highly relevant to the Pacific microstates: the rule of law, economic stability, infrastructure development, governance enhancement, public education and information dissemination, and public health and welfare improvement.⁶⁰ Among these, enhancing local health systems and capacities is especially vital, considering the escalating threats posed by climate change and natural disasters.

By prioritizing health engagement, Civil Affairs units can substantially strengthen healthcare infrastructure and better prepare island nations to manage and recover from emergencies.⁶¹ This comprehensive approach addresses immediate needs and contributes to long-term sustainable development and improved health outcomes for the island communities.

It begins with thorough assessments of existing healthcare infrastructure, identifying vulnerabilities, and developing tailored plans for improvement in collaboration with local stakeholders. Capacity building is another critical component, providing training and mentorship to local healthcare professionals, focusing on

emergency medicine, disaster response, and public health interventions. Infrastructure enhancement involves assisting in constructing or renovating healthcare facilities, ensuring they are resilient to natural disasters and equipped to handle a surge in patients during emergencies. Facilitating the procurement and distribution of essential medical supplies, medications, and equipment ensures adequate resources during crises. Public health education campaigns educate communities about disaster preparedness, hygiene practices, and disease prevention, empowering them to take proactive measures to protect their health. Finally, establishing strong partnerships with local governments, healthcare providers, and international organizations ensures a coordinated and effective response to health emergencies.

Conclusion

Despite their diminutive size and geographical remoteness, Pacific microstates wield diplomatic influence, occupy a strategic position, and control essential maritime and seabed resources. These attributes place them in the middle of geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. To gain a competitive advantage over China and establish enduring, meaningful relationships with these key nations, the United States must transcend superficial or transactional interactions that overlook the fundamental national interests of these states.

The United States should adopt a comprehensive and nuanced strategy for security cooperation anchored on four main pillars. This strategy should include (1) a proactive, multiyear campaign spearheaded by the USCG and NOAA to focus on fisheries, law enforcement, and climate resilience; (2) strategic collaboration with the European Union to harness its significant maritime security and capacity-building expertise; (3) the expansion of U.S. joint force Civic Action Teams (CAT) to all 13 microstates for enhancing community resilience and disaster response capabilities; and (4) the

regular deployment of USAR Civil Affairs units to each country to bolster crisis management and civil support frameworks.

These strategic initiatives represent a reasonable and impactful investment in securing and enhancing cooperation within a region vital to global maritime interests. Neglecting to advance these specialized security strategies could result in ceding critical maritime territories to China, thereby relinquishing significant leverage in the global strategic competition. By recalibrating its security cooperation approach and intensifying engagement with the Pacific microstates, the United States not only counters Chinese influence but also solidifies its role as a committed ally, supporting the sovereignty, development, and security of these pivotal partners in the Pacific.

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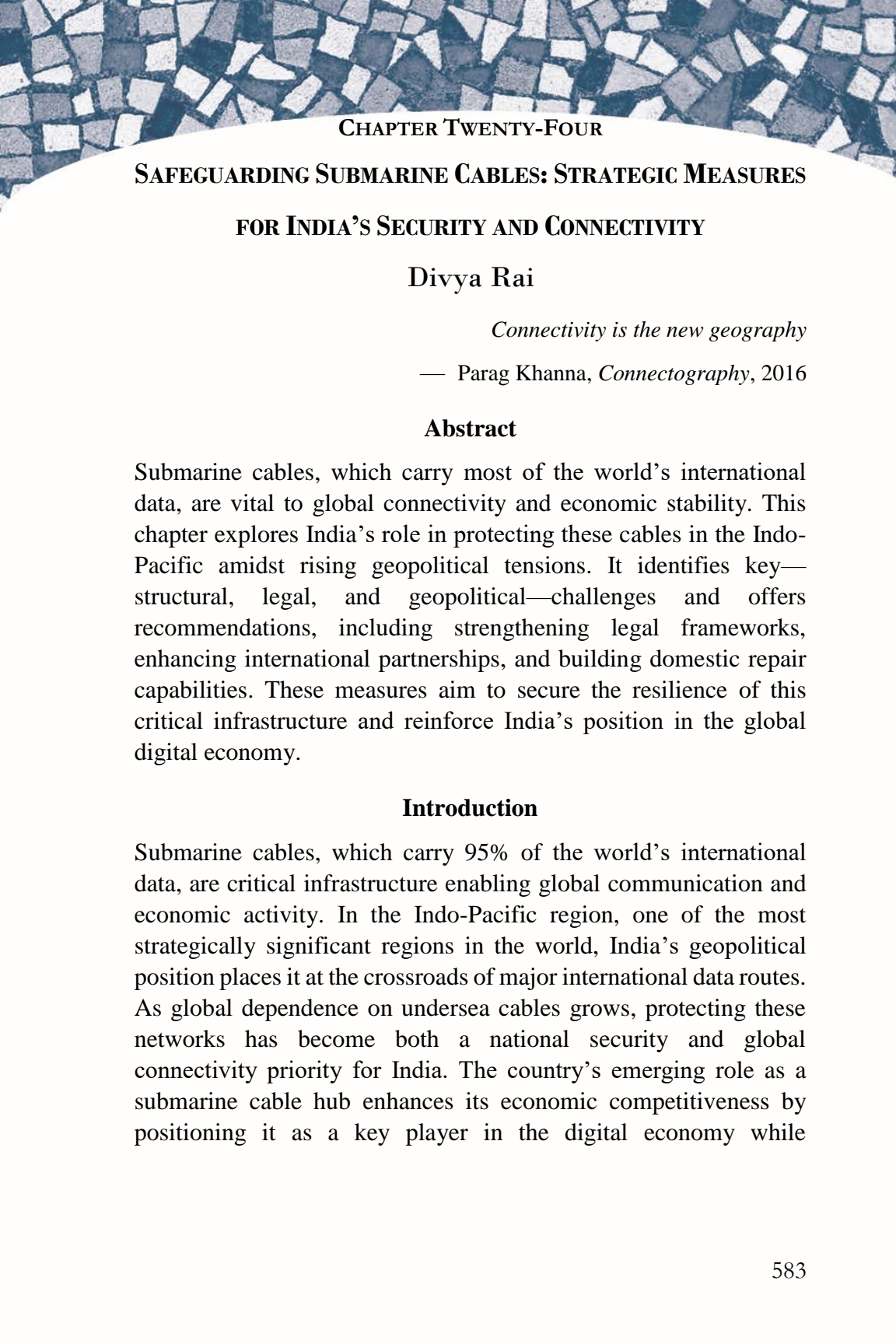
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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SAFEGUARDING SUBMARINE CABLES: STRATEGIC MEASURES FOR INDIA'S SECURITY AND CONNECTIVITY

Divya Rai

Connectivity is the new geography

— Parag Khanna, *Connectography*, 2016

Abstract

Submarine cables, which carry most of the world's international data, are vital to global connectivity and economic stability. This chapter explores India's role in protecting these cables in the Indo-Pacific amidst rising geopolitical tensions. It identifies key—structural, legal, and geopolitical—challenges and offers recommendations, including strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing international partnerships, and building domestic repair capabilities. These measures aim to secure the resilience of this critical infrastructure and reinforce India's position in the global digital economy.

Introduction

Submarine cables, which carry 95% of the world's international data, are critical infrastructure enabling global communication and economic activity. In the Indo-Pacific region, one of the most strategically significant regions in the world, India's geopolitical position places it at the crossroads of major international data routes. As global dependence on undersea cables grows, protecting these networks has become both a national security and global connectivity priority for India. The country's emerging role as a submarine cable hub enhances its economic competitiveness by positioning it as a key player in the digital economy while

simultaneously elevating its strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific's security landscape.

Recognizing this, India is set to launch three major undersea cable initiatives—2Africa Pearls, India-Asia-Express (IAX), and India-Europe-Express (IEX)—which will not only quadruple its internet capacity but also solidify its position as a regional leader in digital infrastructure.¹ These cables will significantly enhance India's ability to facilitate data flow between continents, further integrating it into the global economy and making its security and stability critical to both regional and global stakeholders.

Recent incidents, such as the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines and the cutting of submarine cables in the Red Sea, have highlighted the vulnerabilities of this infrastructure. Given their immense economic value, disruptions to submarine cables can have far-reaching impacts on internet accessibility and global financial markets. The International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) has warned that disruptions could lead to significant financial losses,² underscoring the urgency of implementing stronger protection measures.

With these vulnerabilities in mind, this chapter explores the structural composition, vulnerabilities, and repair mechanisms of submarine cables. It also reviews the international and Indian legal frameworks currently in place to safeguard, maintain, and repair these cables. The chapter concludes by proposing updates to India's legal framework and examines how a collaborative cable resilience partnership under the Quad—an informal strategic alliance between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—could enhance the security of undersea cables across the Indo-Pacific region.

Global Importance of Submarine Cables

Submarine telecommunications cables form the backbone of global connectivity, spanning nearly 1.5 million kilometers (km) across the world's oceans. Originally laid during the telegraph era, this

network has since evolved into an indispensable component of the global economy, enabling communication, financial transactions, and the exchange of data. As of June 2024, nearly 1.4 million km of submarine cables are in service worldwide, with more than 600 active or planned systems.³ These cables carry an estimated \$10 trillion in daily financial transactions, underscoring their vital role.⁴ For example, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), which serves over 8,300 financial institutions in more than 200 countries, relies heavily on these cables.⁵ Thus, disruptions to submarine cables have wide-ranging consequences for global markets, communications, and security. This interconnectedness brings opportunities and challenges, particularly for strategically located nations like India.

India's Geopolitical Role as a Cable Hub

India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region places it at the crossroads of critical submarine cable routes, linking regions such as Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. With the convergence of major cables in Indian waters, the country's role as a critical nexus for global data flows not only enhances its economic power but also heightens its responsibility to protect these infrastructures from natural and man-made threats. As more submarine cables traverse the Indian waters, positioning it as a pivotal player, the nation's stake in enhancing its resilience against various threats becomes crucial. Any failure to safeguard these networks could disrupt global financial systems, communications, and military operations, positioning India as a key player in international stability.

India's investment in new submarine cables, such as the 2Africa Pearls and India-Asia-Express (IAX) systems, bolsters its digital economy and geopolitical influence. As these cables strengthen connectivity between continents, India emerges as an indispensable gateway for commercial and strategic data flows. This growing influence requires India not only to manage these systems

domestically but also to lead international efforts to protect them. India's proactive role in initiatives like the Quad solidifies its position as a regional and global leader in securing critical infrastructure. To fully appreciate the complexities of safeguarding these undersea networks, it is essential to understand their technical composition and inherent vulnerabilities.

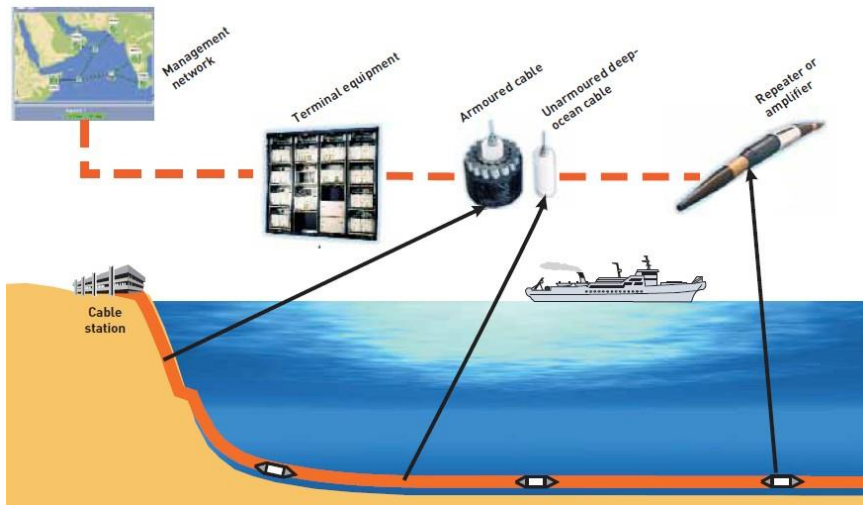


FIGURE 24.1: SUBMARINE CABLE SYSTEM

Source: Fiber Transceiver Solution, "Summary of Cable System," October 16, 2014, <https://www.fiber-optic-transceiver-module.com/essay-about-submarine-cables-system.html/summary-of-cable-system>

Technical Composition of Submarine Cables

The technical composition of submarine cables underscores their vulnerability to both natural forces and human interference, further highlighting the importance of protective measures. Submarine cables consist of fiber-optic strands about the width of a human hair encased in layers of insulation and conductive material. The cable's thickness varies depending on the level of protection required; cables in shallow water are generally thicker and more protected than those in deeper ocean regions. Submarine cables used for power and telecommunications typically range in diameter from 70

millimeters (mm) to over 210 mm.⁶ To maintain signal strength, repeaters (amplifiers) are placed along the cable route every 40 km to 80 km.⁷ Figure 24.1 illustrates the layered structure of these cables, emphasizing the protection they require.

Ownership and Major Industry Players

The global submarine cable system is primarily developed, owned, and maintained by private-sector companies. As of 2021, about 98% of the world's submarine cables were manufactured and installed by four major firms: SubCom (U.S.), Alcatel Submarine Networks (France), Nippon Electric Company (Japan), and China's HMN Technologies.⁸ Alcatel Submarine Networks and Nippon Electric Company collectively dominate the market with an 87% share,⁹ while HMN Technologies holds another 11%. Other key players in the market include Nexans (France), Prysmian Group (Italy), NKT A/S (Denmark), Sumitomo Electric Industries (Japan), and LS Cable & System (South Korea).¹⁰

Major contributors to submarine cable development in India include Tata Communications, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL), Bharti Airtel, and Reliance Jio. Notably, in recent years, the landscape of submarine cable ownership has shifted,¹¹ with tech giants such as Amazon, Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), and Microsoft now owning or leasing roughly 50% of global undersea bandwidth capacity.¹² This shift reflects a broader transition in global power dynamics, where control over data flows increasingly equates to economic influence. This influence also brings with it the responsibility to maintain and repair these critical systems, a task that presents significant technical and financial challenges.

Repair Mechanisms and Challenges

Laying submarine cables is a highly expensive process, with costs ranging from \$30,000 to \$50,000 per kilometer,¹³ depending on factors such as water depth, cable type, and seabed topography. The

complexity of this process has resulted in a market dominated by a few major players with specialized expertise. Repairing submarine cables, especially deep underwater ones, is complex and requires specialized ships and equipment. In addition to that, maintenance and repair of submarine cables can be quite expensive. For example, repairing a damaged cable can cost between \$1 million and \$3 million.¹⁴

Given the critical nature of these systems, the global capacity for cable repair is concentrated in a few countries with specialized resources and specialized ships. Nations such as France, Japan, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and the United Kingdom lead the field in submarine cable repair operations,¹⁵ as detailed in Table 24.1. These countries possess the capability to quickly address issues, ensuring minimal disruption to global data flows.

TABLE 24.1

MAJOR SUBMARINE CABLE SHIPS OPERATING IN THE WORLD TODAY

Country of Registration	Base Port	Cable Ship Name
France	Worldwide	Ile de Batz, Ile de Brehat, Ile de Sein
	La Seyne sur Mer, France	Raymond Croze, René Descartes
	Calais, France	Ile d'Aix
	Cape Town	Léon Thévenin
	Mindelo, Cape Verde	Peter Faber
	Brest, France	Pierre de Fermat
Indonesia	Jakarta, Indonesia	Ile de Re, Teneo, Wave Venture
	Batam, Malaysia	Cable Empowered
Japan	Yokohama, Japan	KDD Ocean Lin, Subaru

	Moji Port, Kita-Kyushu, Japan	KDD Pacific Link
	Worldwide	KDDI Cable Infinity
Marshall Islands	Baltimore, MD, USA	Decisive, Dependable, Durable, Responder
	Noumea, New Caledonia	Reliance
	Taichung, Taiwan	Resolute
United Arab Emirates	Abu Dhabi, UAE	CS Maram, CS Wasel, Etisalat, Niwa, Umm Al Anber
United Kingdom	Worldwide	Cable Innovator
	Portland, UK	CS Global Symphony, CS Recorder, Sovereign
	Curacao, Netherlands	Wave Sentinel
United States	Portland, Oregon, USA	Global Sentinel
Singapore	Colombo, Sri Lanka	ASEAN Explorer
	Singapore	ASEAN Protector, ASEAN Restorer
	Batangas, Philippines	Cable Retriever
Antigua and Barbuda	Worldwide	MV Aniek, MV Layla, MV Lida
Malaysia	Port Klang, Malaysia	Cable Orchestra
	Keelung, Taiwan	Lodbrog
Philippines	Manila, Philippines	PLDT

Source: International Cable Protection Committee. "Publications," updated August 14, 2024, <https://www.iscpc.org/publications/>.

While countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have developed some level of cable repair capability, India currently does not possess any cable repair vessels that are Indian-flagged, owned, or stationed domestically. The lack of a dedicated cable repair fleet presents a significant vulnerability. Delays in repairs could impact both domestic and global communications and financial transactions, threatening not only India's economic stability but also its influence in the Indo-Pacific. This vulnerability highlights a broader challenge: the inherent fragility of submarine cable infrastructure in a world increasingly reliant on seamless data transmission.

Vulnerabilities in Submarine Cable Infrastructure

In today's interconnected world, real-time communication across vast distances is the norm, supported by the internet and globalized technology. However, the exponential rise in data transmission has exposed submarine cables to various vulnerabilities. These cables, responsible for carrying nearly all international data, are at risk from both accidental damage and deliberate acts of sabotage.

While natural events like underwater earthquakes can cause significant damage, the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) reports that most cable damage is unintentional and stems from human activities, particularly anchoring and fishing. Techniques that disturb the seafloor—such as bottom trawling and dredging—along with anchoring accidents account for nearly two-thirds of the estimated 150 to 200 subsea cable faults that occur each year.¹⁶ Additionally, cable landing stations and areas where multiple cables converge are particularly vulnerable to damage from fishing gear and anchors, creating concentrated points of risk.

Man-made threats, including sabotage and espionage, pose an even more severe challenge. Deliberate damage to submarine cables can result in widespread disruption to communication networks, financial markets, and military operations.¹⁷ For instance, in

November 2007, a cable in Bangladesh was deliberately sabotaged, leading to a complete loss of communications for over a week.¹⁸

State actors may also target submarine cables as part of “gray-zone conflicts” to achieve military or political objectives without engaging in open conflict. In March 2007, hostile activities by vessels in the South China Sea led to the removal of substantial sections of undersea cables. The Thailand, Vietnam, and Hong Kong (TVH) system and the Asia Pacific Cable Network (APCN) were severely affected, with 98 km of cable taken from the TVH system and 79 km from the APCN system.¹⁹ More recently, aggressive maneuvers by Chinese ships in the South China Sea and the East China Sea have increased the risks to undersea cables, with Chinese vessels accused of disrupting cables connecting Matsu, a group of islands, to Taiwan’s main island.²⁰

One of the most critical vulnerabilities arises from the limited route diversity in undersea cable networks. Due to financial constraints, seabed topography, and the strategic location of landing stations, many cables converge at specific points, creating choke points that are particularly susceptible to disruption. For example, in June 2022, a section of the Asia-Africa-Europe-1 (AAE-1) cable was severed, affecting millions of people across multiple countries. The cascading impact extended beyond the AAE-1 cable, demonstrating the broad disruptions that a single break can trigger. Given the complexity of repairing submarine cables and the fact that only a few countries possess the necessary resources and technology for repairs, these incidents are challenging and often delayed, further compounding their impact. These challenges underscore the need for international cooperation and legal frameworks to protect submarine cable infrastructure.

International Laws

The international legal framework for submarine cables began with the International Convention for the Protection of Submarine

Telegraph Cables, commonly known as the Paris Convention. Finalized on March 14, 1884, this agreement was the first to establish a regulatory structure aimed at safeguarding submerged cables on the ocean floor.²¹ The Paris Convention laid out specific provisions for cable protection beyond national jurisdiction,²² including:

- *ARTICLE I:* The convention applies “outside territorial waters to all legally established submarine cables landed on the territories, colonies, or possessions of one or more of the High Contracting Parties.”
- *ARTICLE II:* It is a punishable offense to “break or injure a submarine cable willfully or by culpable negligence, in such a manner as might interrupt or obstruct telegraphic communications, either wholly or partially.”
- *ARTICLE IV:* A cable owner who, while “laying or repairing [their] cable, [damages] another cable, must bear the cost of repairing the breakage.”
- *ARTICLE VII:* Ship or vessel owners who sacrifice an anchor, net, or other fishing gear to avoid damaging a submarine cable are entitled to “compensation from the owner of the cable.”

Evaluation of Legal Frameworks

Despite the progress introduced by the Paris Convention, its limitations—particularly the absence of wartime protection—led to the development of additional legal frameworks. One of the most important is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).²³ Preceded by the 1958 Geneva Convention on the High Seas, UNCLOS, finalized in 1982, codified key principles governing international waters and provided broader legal protections for submarine cables.²⁴ UNCLOS remains the primary

legal instrument governing the use of oceans, including the protection of undersea cables.

United Nations Resolutions

Additionally, recognizing the growing importance of submarine cables as critical information infrastructure, several United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions have addressed the need for enhanced protection:

- *UNGA RESOLUTION 58/199 (2002)*: This resolution emphasized the creation of a global culture of cybersecurity and the protection of critical information infrastructure, including submarine cables.²⁵
- *UNGA RESOLUTION 66/231(2011)*: This resolution reiterated the importance of protecting submarine cables as part of critical global infrastructure.²⁶
- *UN OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME (UNDOC) EXPERTS MEETING* in 2019 highlighted criminal threats to submarine cables, including sabotage, and called for greater international cooperation to prevent such activities.²⁷

Gaps in International Law

However, significant gaps remain in the international legal framework for submarine cable protection:

- *NON-STATE ACTORS*: Current international law does not adequately hold non-state actors—such as terrorist groups or private entities—accountable for sabotaging submarine cables.
- *ECONOMIC LOSSES*: Existing frameworks do not sufficiently address the financial costs of repairing damaged cables or the economic losses caused by disruptions in connectivity.²⁸

- **JURISDICTIONAL CHALLENGES:** International law lacks clear provisions for prosecuting non-state actors who damage submarine cables when the perpetrators operate from a country different from where the damage occurred.²⁹

These gaps in international law underscore the need for individual nations to develop comprehensive domestic legal frameworks to safeguard their critical submarine infrastructure. India, with its growing reliance on undersea cables and its strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, exemplifies this need.

Submarine Cable Networks and Legal Provisions in India

India's prominence as a key hub for submarine cable networks is rooted in its strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region and its efforts to drive digital transformation through initiatives like *Digital India*. Submarine cables, forming the backbone of global communication and data exchange, are vital for India's economic growth and national security. The rapid expansion of India's submarine cable infrastructure—through projects like 2Africa Pearls and the India-Asia-Express (IAX)—has positioned the country as an increasingly important player in the global data network.

With its growing domestic and international cable infrastructure, India must address critical vulnerabilities such as the lack of domestic cable repair capabilities. Similarly, developing a strong legal framework for governing these networks and the geopolitical importance of securing these assets is particularly crucial as the nation navigates rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. To fully grasp the scale of this challenge, it is important to understand the extent of India's submarine cable network.

India's Cable Network

As of the end of 2022, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) reported that India had 17 international subsea cables,

landing at 14 distinct cable landing stations across five cities—Mumbai, Chennai, Cochin, Tuticorin, and Trivandrum.³⁰ In addition to international cables, India operates domestic submarine cables, including developing cable connections with the two islands. Notable examples include:

- *CHENNAI-ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLAND CABLE (CANI)*: Connecting Port Blair to seven other islands in the Andaman & Nicobar archipelago.
- *KOCHI-LAKSHADWEEP ISLAND (KLI) CABLE*: Providing a direct communication link between Kochi and 11 islands in Lakshadweep.³¹

India's submarine cable network is undergoing significant expansion. Between March 2023 and March 2024, TRAI reported an 8.3% growth in internet subscribers, from 881.25 million to 954.4 million.³² Key players driving this expansion include Tata Communications, which operates the world's first round-the-world fiber-optic cable network, the Tata Global Network–Eurasia (TGN-EA).³³ Reliance Jio is also rapidly expanding its footprint, leading the development of both the India-Europe-Xpress (IEX) and India-Asia-Xpress (IAX) projects.³⁴

Additionally, BSNL is also involved in enhancing India's international connectivity. BSNL operates its first international submarine cable connecting India and Sri Lanka (BLCS) and manages a cable landing station in Tuticorin. The company also constructed the Chennai-Andaman & Nicobar Islands (A&N Islands) submarine cable system.³⁵ These efforts by BSNL, along with initiatives from other major players, contribute to India's rapidly growing prominence in the global submarine cable network. Figure 24.2 illustrates the global submarine cable network, showcasing critical routes and India's strategic position.

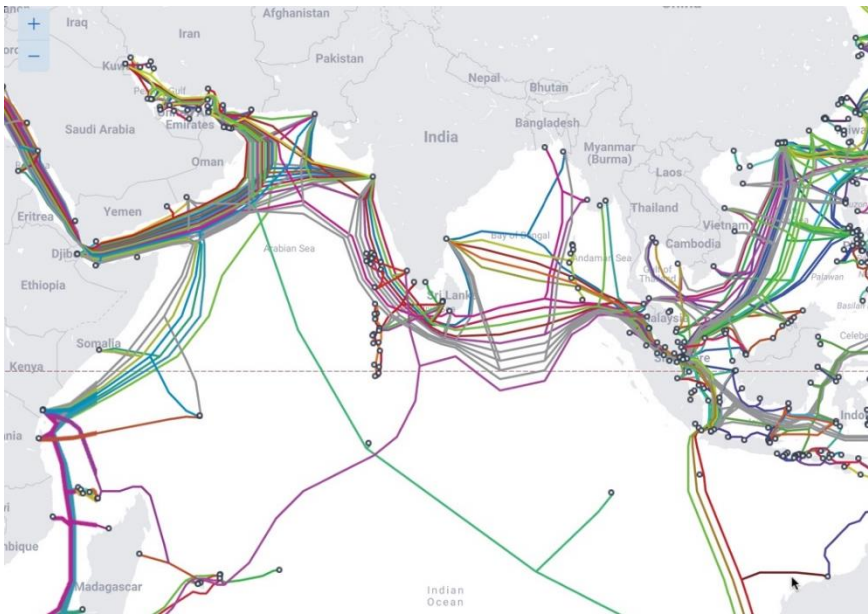


FIGURE 24.2: SUBMARINE CABLE MAP

Source: TeleGeography, "Submarine Cable Map,"
<https://www.submarinecablemap.com/>

Expanding India's Submarine Cable Infrastructure

India is rapidly emerging as a crucial hub for submarine cable infrastructure, a vital element of the *Digital India* initiative to

transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. Recent announcements of three major submarine cable projects are expected to enhance this infrastructure:

- *2AFRICA PEARLS*: One of the world's longest submarine cable systems, spanning more than 45,000 km with a capacity of 180 terabits per second (TBps), connecting 33 countries, including a landing station in Mumbai.
- *INDIA-ASIA-EXPRESS (IAX) AND INDIA-EUROPE-EXPRESS (IEX)*: Developed by Reliance Jio, these cables will add over 200 TBps each. IAX will stretch over 16,000 km, linking Mumbai to Southeast Asian hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. While IEX will cover approximately 9,775 km, connecting India to Europe via the Persian Gulf.³⁶

These cables are expected to strengthen India's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, support the country's broader "Act East" policy, and make it a key player in global data transmission. To ensure the secure and efficient operation of this expanding network, a robust legal and regulatory framework is essential.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks Governing Submarine Cables in India

India's submarine cable infrastructure is regulated by several key legislative acts:

- *THE MARITIME ZONES OF INDIA ACT OF 1976*: Provides the legal framework for laying underwater cables within India's maritime zones.
- *THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 2023*: Replacing the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885, this act defines submarine cable systems, particularly those connecting India internationally.³⁷

- *THE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACT OF 2000 AND THE SUPPRESSION OF UNLAWFUL ACTS AGAINST SAFETY OF MARITIME NAVIGATION AND FIXED PLATFORMS ON CONTINENTAL SHELF ACT OF 2002*: Used for legal actions against damages to submarine cables, though their application remains complex and limited.³⁸

Despite these frameworks, India's legislation lacks a comprehensive definition of submarine cable systems, complicating regulatory oversight and enforcement. The modern complexities of these systems are not fully addressed in existing laws, leaving vulnerabilities in protection and management, including a critical gap in domestic cable repair capabilities.

Cable Vulnerabilities and Lack of Domestic Repair Fleet: A Critical Challenge for India

India's submarine cable infrastructure remains vulnerable due to several factors, most notably the lack of dedicated domestic cable repair vessels. As detailed in Table 24.1, India does not possess any flagged or domestically stationed repair ships, leading to potential delays in addressing disruptions.³⁹ This gap became apparent in January 2008, when multiple undersea cables were severed off the coast of Egypt and Dubai, causing the catastrophic loss of over 80% of India's international internet service and affecting approximately 60 million users for over two weeks.⁴⁰

The potential sabotage of cable landing stations in key cities like Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi poses additional risks. Any disruption could have severe consequences for communication networks and national security. As India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean becomes central to the data flow, this gap exposes it to significant risks and could be severely undermined by its inability to promptly repair damaged cables.

Therefore, addressing this deficiency should be a top priority in India's broader submarine cable strategy. A proactive approach—

investing in specialized repair ships, technology transfer, and collaboration with international partners—would ensure the uninterrupted flow of data essential for the global economy. Developing domestic repair capabilities would also reinforce India's position as a reliable and resilient hub in the global data network. However, India's efforts to secure its cable infrastructure must also consider the increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

Geopolitical Tensions and Strategic Importance

With rising geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, submarine cables are becoming focal points of international cooperation. As countries vie for influence in the region, ensuring the security and resilience of these cables has become a focal priority, particularly within the context of frameworks like the Quad. Strengthening collaboration on cable security within such frameworks could provide a solution to many of India's existing vulnerabilities. Building on this understanding of the challenges and opportunities, India must adopt a proactive and comprehensive strategy to safeguard its submarine cable infrastructure.

Strategic Path Forward:

Enhancing Submarine Cable Security in India

India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region makes it a vital hub for submarine cables, linking regions such as Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Asia. These cables are indispensable for data transmission, forming the backbone of modern economies and military communications.

Recognizing the significance of submarine cables, TRAI issued recommendations in June 2023 on the "Licensing Framework and Regulatory Mechanism for Submarine Cable Landing in India."⁴¹ The recommendations proposed classifying submarine cables and Cable Landing Stations (CLS) as "Essential Services," granting them higher protection and prioritization under national regulations.

While this is an important first step, a more structured and multi-layered approach is necessary to address the range of challenges India faces in safeguarding its undersea infrastructure.

Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Submarine Cable Security

To ensure the resilience and security of its submarine cable infrastructure, India must adopt a comprehensive strategy that addresses both immediate vulnerabilities and sets the groundwork for future challenges. This strategy should prioritize legal reforms, international collaboration, and domestic capacity-building to protect this critical asset. The following recommendations are divided into immediate, medium-term, and long-term actions, offering a roadmap for India to enhance its cable security while strengthening its role as a global hub in the Indo-Pacific region.

Immediate actions:

1. *CLASSIFY SUBMARINE CABLES AS CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE:* Designate submarine cables and landing stations as critical infrastructure under the Information Technology Act (IT Act) 2000 and integrate them into the Critical Information Infrastructure (CII) framework. This will ensure accelerated legal protections, enabling authorities to swiftly prosecute individuals or entities that damage or threaten these vital assets.
2. *EXPAND INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS:* Beyond the Quad, India should engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union, and key private-sector payers like Google, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft. These tech giants control a significant portion of global undersea bandwidth and could provide co-investment opportunities, technological expertise, and collaborative security efforts. Expanding international collaboration will

support a holistic approach to cable resilience and protection.

3. *DEVELOP DOMESTIC SOLUTIONS FOR CABLE MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR*: Prioritize the development of Indian-flagged vessels dedicated to submarine cable maintenance and repair to reduce reliance on foreign capabilities. Implement tailored security measures for Cable Landing Stations (CLS) by categorizing them as Main CLS or CLS Point of Presence (CLS-PoPs) based on their vulnerabilities, ensuring faster response times in case of disruptions.
4. *ESTABLISH A NATIONAL CRITICAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION CENTRE (NCIIPC)*: Create an NCIIPC tasked with overseeing the security of submarine cables and managing the extra-territorial application of Indian law. This center would address emerging vulnerabilities in modern submarine cables and coordinate efforts to enhance their security across domestic and international jurisdictions.⁴²

Medium-term actions:

5. *ESTABLISHING CABLE PROTECTION ZONES WITHIN INDIA'S EEZ*: Adopt best practices from countries like Australia by establishing Cable Protection Zones within India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). These zones would restrict high-risk activities such as fishing, anchoring, and dredging, which could damage submarine cables. Aligning these efforts with UNCLOS will further India's commitment to international marine security norms.
6. *STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE INTERNATIONAL CABLE PROTECTION COMMITTEE (ICPC)*: Increase India's involvement with the ICPC to ensure that Indian interests are represented in international discussions on cable protection. While currently represented only by Tata Communications,

India's government and relevant ministries should take an active role in the ICPC to contribute to the development of global standards for cable security.⁴³

7. *ENHANCING MULTILATERAL COOPERATION THROUGH THE QUAD AND ASEAN*: Leverage the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience by deepening its collaboration with the Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre (CCRC),⁴⁴ an Australian government initiative focused on improving undersea cable governance.⁴⁵ Additionally, the ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020 emphasizes regional cooperation for cable resilience and repair and serves as a valuable model for India's multilateral engagements, particularly in streamlining processes and adopting best practices.⁴⁶

Long-term actions:

8. *BUILDING A DEDICATED DOMESTIC CABLE REPAIR FLEET*: Invest in the development of a dedicated Indian-flagged fleet for cable repair operations. This will reduce response times to disruptions and enhance India's capacity to manage and protect its growing submarine cable network, solidifying India's position as a reliable global connectivity hub.

By pursuing these multifaceted strategies, India can proactively safeguard its submarine cable infrastructure, ensuring the uninterrupted flow of information vital for its economic prosperity and national security. This proactive approach will not only enhance India's domestic resilience but also its role as a responsible stakeholder in the global effort to protect this critical infrastructure.

Conclusion

Though submarine cables have existed for over 200 years, serious discussions about their protection have only recently gained prominence due to their growing strategic importance in an

increasingly interconnected world. As the backbone of global data transmission, these cables are indispensable to the functioning of economies, financial systems, and military communications. With over 95% of international data flowing through submarine cables, ensuring their security is critical to maintaining the stability of both national and international infrastructure.

As India emerges as a pivotal hub in the Indo-Pacific's submarine cable network, the country must prioritize the protection and resilience of these cables. The expansion of India's digital infrastructure through new projects underscores the country's growing role in global connectivity. However, this also makes India a key player in the security of these essential infrastructures.

Implementing robust security measures, such as classifying submarine cables as critical infrastructure and increasing cooperation with international partners through frameworks like the Quad and ASEAN, will be essential to safeguarding this critical component of India's connectivity. Additionally, investing in domestic repair capabilities and enhancing legal protections will allow India to respond swiftly and effectively to any potential disruptions.

In conclusion, safeguarding submarine cables is vital for India's economic stability, national security, and defense communications. As the digital economy continues to grow and geopolitical tensions persist in the Indo-Pacific, India must take decisive action to protect these cables, ensuring the resilience of its digital infrastructure and reinforcing its position as a leader in global connectivity.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GENDERED SECURITY ANALYSIS: A CRITICAL TOOL FOR SECURITY

James M. Minnich

The omission of gender from work on international security does not make that work gender-neutral or unproblematic.

— Laura Sjoberg, *Gender and International Security*, 2010

Abstract

Traditional security approaches often overlook the crucial role of gender in shaping security outcomes.¹ This chapter presents Gendered Security Analysis (GSA) as a transformative framework for understanding and addressing the complex interplay between gender and security. It introduces the GENDER 4Ps models to foster more inclusive, equitable, and effective security strategies. Practical tools like the Gender Security Analysis Tool (GSAT) and Rapid GSAT help integrate gender dynamics into operations, illustrated through stabilization operations and natural disaster response scenarios. The SHAPE and ACTION frameworks guide real-world applications. The chapter also examines case studies, including Malaysia's National Action Plan, to illustrate how GSA can be operationalized within national security frameworks. By integrating GSA into security policy and practice, stakeholders can enhance situational awareness, improve operational effectiveness, and promote more equitable and sustainable security outcomes.

Introduction

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, security challenges demand nuanced and inclusive solutions. This is particularly true in contexts marked by state-based competition,² transnational threats, economic instability,³ cyber risks,⁴ and

environmental crises like climate change, which pose multifaceted challenges to peace and security.⁵ As feminist scholar J. Ann Tickner argued in her seminal work *Gender in International Relations*, traditional security strategies often fail to address the complex social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to insecurity.⁶ For instance, Tickner critiques the traditional concept of “national security” as inherently masculine, prioritizing military strength over human security.⁷ She argues that this narrow focus neglects the diverse security needs of individuals and perpetuates gendered power dynamics.

To truly understand and address these multifaceted security challenges, we must examine the world through a gendered lens. As Jill Steans eloquently states, “To look at the world through gendered lenses is to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation or to trace out the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes.”⁸ This is the essence of Gendered Security Analysis (GSA).

A holistic approach is urgently needed—one that recognizes the interconnected social, economic, and cultural factors contributing to instability and insecurity. *Gendered Security Analysis (GSA)* offers this comprehensive solution. By examining how gender dynamics intersect with broader security concerns, GSA empowers practitioners to develop more inclusive, nuanced, and ultimately more effective strategies. The GSA framework has gained significant traction in recent years, evidenced by its integration into key military education programs like the U.S. Army War College’s “Campaign Planning Handbook”⁹ and the U.S. Marine Corps’ manual on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) in Professional Military Education.¹⁰ The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) also incorporates GSA into its curriculum, equipping future security leaders with the knowledge and skills to conduct gender-sensitive analysis and response.¹¹

These developments highlight a growing recognition that gender perspectives are not merely an addition to security practices but are central to creating more equitable and sustainable solutions for future challenges. To effectively utilize GSA in addressing complex security landscapes, it is crucial to establish a shared understanding of its core concepts and principles, including the need to create a culture of belonging where women feel valued and empowered.¹²

Understanding Gendered Security

To fully harness the potential of GSA, it is crucial to understand the core concepts that underpin this approach. Moving beyond traditional security paradigms that often overlook diverse gender experiences, *gendered security* prioritizes the safety, well-being, and rights of individuals across the gender spectrum in all security situations.¹³

The critical elements of this framework can be remembered through the *GENDER* acronym:

- **G** – *GENDER* diversity recognized: Acknowledges that gender exists on a spectrum, with each identity contributing unique needs, strengths, and challenges to their experiences of peace and security.¹⁴ As Laura Sjoberg states, “Gender is a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics.”¹⁵ This understanding is crucial for recognizing that gender is not simply about biological differences but a social construct that shapes individuals’ roles, opportunities, and experiences, including in the context of peace and security. For example, women, men, girls, boys, and transgender individuals may experience conflict and insecurity differently and have different needs and vulnerabilities.
- **E** – *EMPOWERING* participation: Emphasizes the full and equal involvement of all genders in peace and security

processes, ensuring inclusive decision-making. This could involve encouraging women to join peacekeeping forces, ensuring their representation in peace negotiations, and supporting their leadership in community-based security initiatives. This involves not only ensuring women's formal inclusion in security processes but also actively working to create a culture of belonging where they feel valued and empowered.¹⁶

- **N – NEEDS** of individuals prioritized: Shifts the focus from abstract notions like state sovereignty to individuals' lived experiences and security needs, ensuring people-centered policies and actions.¹⁷ For instance, instead of just focusing on protecting national borders, gendered security considers the safety and well-being of individuals within those borders, particularly those who may be marginalized or at risk. This focus on individual needs is crucial for achieving sustainable peace and security. As Fen Osler Hampson highlights in his research on peace agreements, addressing the specific needs of women, who are often disproportionately affected by conflict and insecurity, is essential for building lasting peace. He emphasizes that their security and well-being are intertwined with the broader stability of society.¹⁸
- **D – DISMANTLING** root causes: Addresses the underlying causes of insecurity—such as gender inequality, discrimination, and violence—that perpetuate conflict and instability. As argued by Augusto López-Claros and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani in their book *Equality for Women Equals Prosperity for All*, addressing these root causes is not just a matter of social injustice but is crucial for achieving lasting peace and security.¹⁹ For example, they highlight how countries with greater gender equality tend to be more peaceful and stable, while those with high levels of gender

inequality are more prone to conflict and violence. This could involve promoting gender-equitable access to education and economic opportunities, challenging harmful gender norms, and addressing gender-based violence's root causes.

- **E – ENGAGING** in policy implementation: Advocates for developing and enforcing gender-responsive policies sensitive to diverse gender experiences and applied across all security domains. For example, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, enshrined in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, calls for the integration of gender perspectives into all aspects of peace and security efforts.²⁰ This underscores the importance of not only developing gender-sensitive policies but also actively engaging in their implementation to ensure they are translated into meaningful action on the ground.
- **R – RELATIONSHIPS** built through partnerships: Fosters collaboration between governments, international organizations, civil society, and gender-focused non-governmental organizations (NGO) to create sustainable peace and security outcomes. This could involve partnering with women's organizations to implement community-based security initiatives, working with international organizations to develop gender-sensitive peacekeeping operations, and collaborating with governments to implement national action plans on women, peace, and security.

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the "Other" in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, GSA recognizes that women have been historically marginalized and excluded from positions of power and influence in society, including within the security sector.²¹ This marginalization has resulted in their perspectives and needs being overlooked in traditional security paradigms, perpetuating gender inequalities and hindering the development of

comprehensive and effective security solutions. By challenging these traditional paradigms and integrating women's voices and experiences, GSA seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable security environment for all.

The GENDER 4Ps Framework

The GENDER acronym lays the groundwork for understanding gendered security's core values. To put these values into action, the *GENDER 4Ps* framework serves as the operational component, connecting broader concepts with actionable principles. The 4Ps—Protection, Perspective, Prevention, and Participation—provide a clear pathway to applying gendered security and highlight the ultimate goal of “Gender for Peace.” By incorporating diverse gender perspectives and dismantling barriers, the GENDER 4Ps help ensure security strategies are inclusive, effective, and sustainable in any context.

The GENDER 4Ps framework is the practical backbone for translating gender diversity into peace-focused action, helping practitioners achieve gender-equitable peace and security outcomes.

The GENDER 4Ps are guiding principles for implementing the gendered security approach, ensuring that the key concepts are embedded into peace and security efforts. These four principles form the backbone of effective GSA in any security context:

1. *PROTECTION*: Safeguards all genders from violence, discrimination, and harm by promoting equitable access to security and justice.²² This could involve establishing safe spaces for women and girls in conflict zones, providing access to legal aid for survivors of gender-based violence, and training security personnel on gender-sensitive approaches.
2. *PERSPECTIVE*: Integrates diverse gender perspectives into all phases of security analysis and decision-making, leading to

more inclusive and effective solutions.²³ For instance, understanding how women experience conflict differently from men can lead to more effective strategies for protecting civilians and building peace.

3. *PREVENTION*: Dismantles cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that hinder equitable access to resources, opportunities, and participation.²⁴ This could involve promoting gender-equitable laws and policies, challenging harmful gender norms, and supporting women's economic empowerment.
4. *PARTICIPATION*: Promotes the equitable involvement of all genders in decision-making processes and governance structures.²⁵ For example, including women in peace negotiations can lead to more sustainable peace agreements. Laurel Stone's research on female peacemaking supports this assertion. Her quantitative analysis of 156 peace agreements revealed that advancing the role of local female representation in the peace process can contribute to a more durable peace. Specifically, when women are included in a peace process, the resulting peace agreement is 20% more likely to last at least two years. Of those agreements that last at least two years, the ones reached with women's participation are 35% more likely to last at least fifteen years. Stone also highlights the importance of quotas in ensuring women's participation in peace processes and decision-making roles.²⁶

The GENDER 4Ps framework provides the foundation for conducting GSA. As highlighted in Valerie Hudson et al.'s book *The First Political Order*, gender dynamics profoundly influence and are influenced by security issues, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender operates within security contexts.²⁷ GSA involves a more in-depth examination of how gender dynamics influence and are influenced by security issues.

Unpacking Gendered Security Analysis (GSA)

To effectively implement the GENDER 4Ps in practice, a nuanced understanding of how gender operates within security contexts is necessary. This is where GSA becomes critical. While both gender analysis (GA) and gendered security analysis (GSA) aim to understand how gender impacts various aspects of life, GSA is specifically designed for security environments.

- *GENDER ANALYSIS (GA)*: Focuses on how gender shapes social, economic, and political outcomes, with an emphasis on identifying and addressing gender disparities.²⁸ Typically applied in development and humanitarian contexts,²⁹ GA ensures that policies and programs are equitable and inclusive. For example, a gender analysis of a healthcare program might reveal that women face barriers to accessing maternal health services, leading to interventions that address these inequalities.
- *GENDERED SECURITY ANALYSIS (GSA)*: Builds on GA principles by applying them specifically to security contexts. GSA integrates gender perspectives into every phase of security analysis, planning, and implementation, examining how gender roles, relations, and inequalities shape and are shaped by security issues.³⁰ For instance, GSA might be used to analyze how the recruitment of child soldiers impacts boys and girls differently or how security sector reform can address gender-based violence.

The SCOPE of GSA

Understanding the full scope of GSA is essential for its effective application in diverse security contexts. The *SCOPE* framework—an acronym representing Strategies, Challenges, Opportunities, Participation, and Environments—outlines five key aspects that practitioners should focus on to ensure comprehensive integration of GSA:

- ***S*** – ***STRATEGIES***: Develop gender-sensitive strategies for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. This includes incorporating gender perspectives into all security planning and implementation phases, from needs assessments and early warning systems to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs.³¹
- ***C*** – ***CHALLENGES***: Identify and mitigate gender-specific vulnerabilities and capitalize on strengths in security environments. This includes understanding how different genders experience conflict and insecurity and how their social roles and responsibilities may affect their access to resources and protection.
- ***O*** – ***OPPORTUNITIES***: Assess the impact of security policies and practices on different gender groups. This involves analyzing how security interventions may differentially affect women, men, girls, boys, and marginalized genders, ensuring that policies do not exacerbate existing inequalities or create new ones.
- ***P*** – ***PARTICIPATION***: Prioritize the inclusion and empowerment of women and other marginalized genders in all security processes. This involves recognizing their leadership potential, ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making, and addressing their specific security needs.
- ***E*** – ***ENVIRONMENTS***: Consider diverse operational environments, from peace to conflict, and recognize that gender dynamics may manifest differently in each context. This includes understanding how gender roles and relations shift during conflict and influence peacebuilding efforts.

By applying the *SCOPE* framework, practitioners can ensure that GSA is fully embedded in all security operations, leading to more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable outcomes.

The GSAT Framework: A Practical Tool for GSA

To effectively implement GSA, it is crucial to understand how gender dynamics intersect with the specific operational environment. The PMESII-PT framework provides a structured approach to analyze key operational variables, including political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, the physical environment, and time. These variables represent the major components of the operational environment, and by viewing them through a gendered lens, practitioners can uncover the unique security challenges faced by individuals across the gender spectrum.

PMESII-PT Framework:

Analyzing the Environment Through GENDER 4Ps

By integrating GENDER 4Ps—Protection, Perspective, Prevention, and Participation—into the PMESII-PT framework, practitioners can develop more inclusive strategies. Below is an overview of how each operational variable is viewed through the GSA lens:

1. *POLITICAL*: Power structures and decision-making processes.

GSA Application: Analyze how power structures and decision-making processes may exclude or marginalize certain genders. As Judith Lorber argues in *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*, “Gender inequality is not an individual matter; rather, it is deeply ingrained in the structures of societies.”³² This means that addressing gender inequality in the political sphere requires examining and challenging the underlying structures and norms perpetuating it. Identify barriers that limit political participation for all genders, safeguard against political

violence targeting specific genders, and promote equitable governance that includes diverse perspectives.

2. *MILITARY/POLICE*: Leadership, capabilities, and operations of security forces.

GSA Application: Examine how gender dynamics within security forces may affect their effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs of different genders. As highlighted in the experiences of Sandra Perron, Canada's first female infantry officer, and Robyn Fellowes, Australia's first female Green Beret commando, gender dynamics can significantly impact operational effectiveness. For example, Perron faced systemic discrimination and harassment throughout her career, hindering her ability to contribute fully to her unit.³³ Fellowes advocated for gender-inclusive training and policies to ensure that women are equipped to succeed in combat roles.³⁴ Eliminate gender barriers within security forces, provide equitable opportunities for all genders, and protect all genders from violence and harassment. Incorporate gender perspectives into training and operations to ensure that security forces are equipped to address the specific security needs of diverse groups.

3. *ECONOMIC*: Resource production, distribution, and consumption.

GSA Application: Analyze how economic policies and practices may disproportionately impact different genders. Promote inclusive economic policies that address gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities, dismantle barriers to equal resource access, and protect against exploitation through gender-responsive budgeting.

4. *SOCIAL*: Cultural, religious, and ethnic compositions and customs.

GSA Application: Examine how social norms and cultural practices may perpetuate gender inequality and insecurity. Integrate gender perspectives into social norms and cultural practices, promote equity, and safeguard against harmful practices. Engage communities to reform social structures that perpetuate inequality.

5. *INFORMATION*: Systems for collecting, processing, and sharing information.

GSA Application: Analyze how information is accessed and disseminated and how this may affect different genders. Prevent the spread of gender-biased information and ensure all genders have equitable access to information dissemination and governance, including media representation.

6. *INFRASTRUCTURE*: Systems for public facilities and services and IDP camps.

GSA Application: Assess how infrastructure design and accessibility may affect different genders, particularly in crises. Plan and design infrastructure that meets the needs of all genders, ensuring accessibility and safety. Implement gender-sensitive design and equitable access to services, especially in crises.

7. *PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT*: An area's natural features, ecosystems, and climate.

GSA Application: Analyze how environmental factors may disproportionately impact different genders. Integrate gender considerations into environmental policy to address vulnerabilities, enhance resilience, and ensure equitable access to resources.

8. *TIME*: Duration and sequencing of activities and events.

GSA Application: Consider how time constraints and scheduling may affect different genders, particularly concerning caregiving responsibilities and access to services. Address time-related inequalities affecting work, education, and caregiving opportunities. Adapt planning to accommodate diverse time burdens.

By applying the PMESII-PT framework through a gendered lens, practitioners can develop more inclusive and effective strategies that address the diverse needs and experiences of all genders in the operational environment. To assist in this process, the GSAT Matrix has been developed to facilitate the integration of gender perspectives into security analysis and planning.

		December 10, 2024							
		James M. Minnich, "Guided Security Analysis: A Critical Tool for Security" in <i>The Indo-Pacific Mosaic</i> , ed. James M. Minnich, APSS, 2025							
		INSTRUCTION: Assess the security environment by applying a gendered lens across the eight (PMES)-PT variables and the four GENDER4Ps. This tool defines 32 aspects of gendered security in an operational environment. Follow these three steps: (1) <i>Inventory</i> - Examine facts and observations. "What do we know?" (2) <i>Analyze</i> - Interpret insights and patterns. "What does it mean?" (3) <i>Act</i> - Develop actionable strategies. "What can we do?"							
		POLITICAL	MILITARY/POLICE	ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	INFORMATION	INFRASTRUCTURE	PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	TIME
PROTECTION	Power structures and decision-making	POLITICAL PROTECTION Are all genders protected from political violence, exclusion, and discrimination during decision-making processes? <i>If not, implement inclusive policies that ensure equitable political participation and protection.</i>	MIL-POLICE PROTECTION Do security forces have the capacity & willingness to protect all genders from violence and discrimination, while ensuring access to security services? <i>If not, revise operational strategies, training, and accountability mechanisms.</i>	ECONOMIC PROTECTION Are economic policies and practices safeguarding all genders from violence, exclusion, and discrimination, while ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities? <i>If not, implement protective measures for economic security.</i>	SOCIAL PROTECTION Do social systems & services protect all genders from violence, exclusion, and discrimination in accessing resources and opportunities? <i>If not, implement community-based policies and programs that ensure equitable and safe access to social support and services.</i>	INFORMATION PROTECTION Are all genders protected from information-related threats, including harassment, cyber violence, and online privacy violations? <i>If not, establish safeguards against gender misinformation and harmful media portrayals, and digital threats.</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION Does infrastructure safeguard all genders from violence, harassment, and discrimination in public spaces, services, and safety camps? <i>If not, implement safety measures and ensure protocols protect gender access and safety.</i>	ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION Are environmental policies protecting all genders from risks related to natural disasters, climate change, and resource depletion? <i>If not, establish protective measures and address gender-specific vulnerabilities.</i>	TIME PROTECTION Are all genders protected from time-related discrimination that limits access to work, education, and caregiving opportunities? <i>If not, implement measures that ensure equitable access to paid work, education and caregiving.</i>
	Safeguards others' welfare and ensures respect	POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE Do decision-making & governance structures actively consider the viewpoints and needs of diverse genders? <i>If not, analyze why these perspectives are missing and how to integrate them.</i>	MIL-POLICE PERSPECTIVE Are gender perspectives integrated into the leadership, capabilities, and operations of security forces? <i>If not, analyze the barriers and advocate for gender-sensitive training and policy reforms to embed gender considerations into operations.</i>	ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE Are gender perspectives incorporated into economic policy-making and resource allocation, ensuring equitable access to opportunities? <i>If not, advocate for gender-responsive budgeting and policies to address the disparities.</i>	SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE Are diverse gender perspectives integrated into social norms, values, and cultural practices to challenge inequality? <i>If not, collaborate with community leaders to promote social reform and equity.</i>	INFORMATION PERSPECTIVE Are gender perspectives reflected in information systems, media, and public opinion, challenging stereotypes? <i>If not, advocate for inclusive representation and diverse gender voices in media and information dissemination.</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE PERSPECTIVE Are gender perspectives incorporated into infrastructure planning, including DP camps to ensure accessibility, safety, and the well-being of all genders? <i>If not, advocate for gender-sensitive design and inclusive services in public spaces.</i>	ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE Are gender perspectives integrated into environmental policy to address gender-specific vulnerabilities related to climate change, natural disasters, and resource depletion? <i>If not, advocate for gender-inclusive environmental planning & policies.</i>	TIME PERSPECTIVE Are time management practices in security planning inclusive of gendered time burdens, such as work, caregiving, and household responsibilities? <i>If not, adjust schedules to accommodate the diverse time demands on different genders.</i>
PREVENTION	Importers and exporters	POLITICAL PREVENTION Are there systemic barriers to gender equity in justice, legal services, and political participation? <i>If yes, dismantle these barriers through comprehensive legal reform to promote equitable access.</i>	MIL-POLICE PREVENTION Are there cultural or institutional barriers restricting gender equity within security force operations? <i>If yes, eliminate these barriers to ensure equal opportunities.</i>	ECONOMIC PREVENTION Are there barriers to gender equity in accessing economic resources and opportunities? <i>If yes, eliminate these barriers through inclusive economic reforms.</i>	SOCIAL PREVENTION Do social structures perpetuate gender inequality and restrict access to social institutions? <i>If yes, address these issues through inclusive reforms and community engagement.</i>	INFORMATION PREVENTION Are there barriers to equitable access to and dissemination of information for all genders? <i>If yes, promote inclusive media policies to address these barriers.</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE PREVENTION Are there barriers to equitable access to essential services and infrastructure, including DP camps? <i>If yes, ensure gender-sensitive design and planning to eliminate these barriers.</i>	ENVIRONMENT PREVENTION Are all genders equitably involved in disaster response and access to ecosystem benefits like food, freshwater, shelter, and fuel? <i>If not, ensure inclusive through equitable environmental decision-making & resource management.</i>	TIME PREVENTION Are policies and practices addressing time-related inequalities, such as caregiving burdens, that restrict access to opportunities? <i>If not, remove these barriers to allow equal access across all genders.</i>
	Ensures equitable access to resources and opportunities	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION Are there mechanisms and opportunities to ensure the inclusion of all genders in political decision-making and governance? <i>If not, identify the barriers and advocate for increasing participation.</i>	MIL-POLICE PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in developing and executing security operations? <i>If not, revise recruitment practices and leadership structures to promote inclusive participation.</i>	ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in economic activities and decision-making processes? <i>If not, ensure gender-equitable participation in financial management and resource distribution.</i>	SOCIAL PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in shaping social norms and community decision-making and cultural practices? <i>If not, promote gender inclusion in decision-making and cultural practices.</i>	INFORMATION PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in creating and sharing information? <i>If not, ensure equal participation in media and communication channels.</i>	INFRASTRUCTURE PARTICIPATION Are all genders involved in the decision-making and development of infrastructure projects and services, including DP camps? <i>If not, promote equitable participation in planning and execution of essential services.</i>	ENVIRONMENT PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in environmental decision-making, conservation, and disaster response? <i>If not, ensure inclusive in environmental decision-making and resource management.</i>	TIME PARTICIPATION Are all genders equitably involved in decision-making about time-sensitive activities? <i>If not, promote inclusive scheduling and ensure gender participation in time management.</i>

FIGURE 25.1: GSAT MATRIX
Source: James M. Minnich, created for this publication

Applying the GSAT Matrix

The GSAT Matrix is a practical tool for systematically applying GSA across the PMESII-PT variables.³⁵ It helps practitioners analyze how gender dynamics intersect with different aspects of the operational environment. The matrix can be viewed in two ways:

1. *HORIZONTALLY*: Analyzing a single gendered security principle (e.g., Protection) across all operational variables (Political, Military, Economic, etc.) to gain comprehensive insights into how that principle applies throughout the environment. This view helps identify how a specific gender concern manifests across different sectors.
2. *VERTICALLY*: Assessing all gendered security principles (Protection, Perspective, Prevention, Participation) within a single operational variable (e.g., Economic) to gain sector-specific insights tailored to particular elements of the environment. This view helps understand the range of gender issues within a specific sector.

To guide your analysis within the GSAT Matrix, as shown in Figure 25.1, use the *Identify-Analyze-Act* steps, which can be understood through the *know-mean-do* framework:

1. *IDENTIFY (KNOW)*: Examine the facts and observations of each intersection of a PMESII-PT variable and a gendered security principle. Gather data and information to answer the question: “What do we *know* about the gender dynamics in this area?”
2. *ANALYZE (MEAN)*: Draw insights and patterns from the identified information using the GENDER 4Ps framework. Analyze the data to answer the question: “What does this

information *mean* in terms of the gender security challenges and opportunities in this area?”

3. *ACT (DO)*: Develop strategies and actions to address identified gaps and promote gender-inclusive security. Formulate specific recommendations to answer the question: “What can we *do* to address these challenges and promote gender equality in this area?”

The GSAT Matrix facilitates the assessment of gendered security across 32 intersections of operational variables and gender principles, allowing analysts to identify and benchmark gender-based vulnerabilities, risks, and needs. This tool enables practitioners to develop strategies that are more equitable, inclusive, and adaptable to the needs of all genders.

*Deliberate GSA Using GSAT:
A Comprehensive Scenario*

Practitioners often struggle to understand when and how to conduct a deliberate GSA.³⁶ To aid this, the following stabilization operation scenario demonstrates the value of applying a deliberate GSA using GSAT. This example follows the *Identify-Analyze-Act* (know-mean-do) approach, illustrating how this tool can be adapted across diverse operational contexts.

1. *IDENTIFY (KNOW)*: A stabilization operation is underway in a country emerging from a protracted conflict. Observations across the PMESII-PT spectrum reveal the following:
 - *Political*: Fragile government with limited capacity, unequal power dynamics between different ethnic groups, and exclusion of women from decision-making positions.
 - *Military/Police*: Presence of international peacekeeping forces, weak national security institutions, and reports of human rights abuses by security personnel.

- *Economic:* Devastated infrastructure, high unemployment rates, particularly among women and youth, and unequal access to economic opportunities.
- *Social:* Deep-rooted social divisions along ethnic and religious lines, prevalence of harmful traditional practices, and limited access to education and healthcare, particularly for women and girls.
- *Information:* Limited access to reliable information, spread of misinformation and hate speech, and restrictions on freedom of expression.
- *Infrastructure:* Damaged infrastructure, including roads, schools, and hospitals, hindering access to essential services.
- *Physical Environment:* Environmental degradation due to conflict, displacement of populations due to natural disasters, and limited access to safe water and sanitation.
- *Time:* Ongoing security threats, slow pace of recovery, and limited timeframe for international assistance.

2. *ANALYZE (MEAN):*

- *Protection:* Women, girls, and marginalized individuals face heightened risks of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, and trafficking. Security forces may lack the capacity or willingness to protect vulnerable populations.
- *Perspective:* The perspectives and experiences of women and marginalized groups are often excluded from decision-making processes, leading to policies and programs that fail to address their specific needs.
- *Prevention:* The root causes of gender inequality and insecurity, such as discriminatory laws and social norms, limited access to education and economic opportunities,

and lack of accountability for gender-based violence, remain unaddressed.

- *Participation*: Women and marginalized groups face barriers to participating in political processes, peacebuilding efforts, and economic recovery. Their exclusion undermines the effectiveness and sustainability of stabilization efforts.
3. *ACT (DO)*: (Note: the following actions are representative. A thorough GSA would delve deeper into each GENDER 4Ps for each PMESII-PT variable to better analyze the security situation and how to advance a better security outcome.)
- *Political*: Support the establishment of inclusive governance structures that ensure women's participation in decision-making at all levels. Advocate for gender-equitable laws and policies.
 - *Military/Police*: Strengthen the capacity of security forces to protect civilians, particularly women and marginalized groups, from violence and abuse. Promote gender-sensitive training and accountability mechanisms.
 - *Economic*: Implement economic recovery programs that prioritize women's access to employment, education, and financial resources.³⁷ Address gender-based barriers to economic participation.³⁸
 - *Social*: Promote social cohesion and reconciliation through dialogue and community engagement. Challenge harmful social norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.³⁹
 - *Information*: Ensure access to accurate and unbiased information for all genders. Support media initiatives that promote peacebuilding and gender equality.

- *Infrastructure*: Rebuild infrastructure in a way that is accessible and safe for all genders.⁴⁰ Prioritize the restoration of essential services that benefit women and girls.
- *Physical Environment*: Integrate gender considerations into environmental protection and recovery efforts.⁴¹ Ensure equitable access to natural resources and address the specific vulnerabilities of women and marginalized groups to environmental risks.
- *Time*: Recognize the different time constraints women and men face during stabilization operations. Design programs and policies that are flexible and responsive to these diverse needs.

This scenario demonstrates how GSA is essential for building more inclusive, effective, and sustainable security solutions. By identifying gender-specific vulnerabilities, analyzing their impact, and acting to address these needs, practitioners can develop strategies that promote long-term peace and security for all. Embracing GSA as a core component of security operations equips practitioners to navigate the complex interplay between gender and security, leading to more just and equitable outcomes. Security practitioners are urged to actively incorporate GSA into their analysis and planning to ensure that responses to security challenges are comprehensive and effective and promote the well-being of all individuals and communities.

Rapid GSAT:

A SIMP-lified Approach for Time-Sensitive Situations

While the full GSAT provides a comprehensive framework for GSA, Rapid GSAT offers a streamlined approach for time-sensitive situations where immediate action is critical. By focusing on the most essential elements, Rapid GSAT enables practitioners to

quickly assess gender dynamics and integrate gender considerations into urgent responses.

This framework utilizes four key categories from the PMESII-PT model—Social, Infrastructure, Military, and Political (SIMP)—and prioritizes the core gendered security principles of Protection and Perspective.

The Rapid GSAT Matrix, illustrated in Figure 25.2, provides a structured tool to systematically analyze how these factors intersect and influence gender dynamics in a crisis. For example, in a natural disaster, the matrix could help identify how damage to infrastructure (lack of clean water, sanitation) disproportionately impacts women and girls, leading to increased health risks. It could also reveal how men and boys might be disproportionately affected by the destruction of livelihoods (leading to increased stress and potential for engaging in risky activities) or be expected to take on dangerous roles in recovery efforts (requiring a provision of safety equipment and training). By using the matrix, practitioners can systematically assess these vulnerabilities and develop targeted responses.

Gendered Security Analysis: A Critical Tool for Security

		December 10, 2024	
RAPID GENDERED SECURITY ANALYSIS TOOL (GSAT) MATRIX			
INSTRUCTION: Assess the security environment by applying a gendered lens across four key SIMP variables and two GENDER-4Ps. This tool defines 8 aspects of gendered security in an operational environment. Follow these three steps: (1) IDENTIFY - Examine facts and observations. (2) ANALYZE - Interpret insights and patterns. (3) ACT - Develop actionable strategies. "What can we do?"			
		POLITICAL	POLITICAL
		MILITARY/POLICE	MILITARY/POLICE
		INFRASTRUCTURE	INFRASTRUCTURE
		SOCIAL	SOCIAL
PROTECTION Safeguards against violence and harms to civilians	SOCIAL PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from social exclusion, violence, and discrimination in the delivery of essential services (e.g., healthcare, food, shelter)?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Continuously monitor whether vulnerable groups (e.g., women, children, elderly, marginalized communities) encounter barriers or risks when accessing essential services during the crisis. Identify identity safety, accessibility, and inclusion issues in real-time.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how existing service delivery methods might create or exacerbate risks for different gender groups. Consider how these risks may be exacerbated by the crisis, such as overcrowding, loss of privacy, or insufficient safety measures, that could increase risks for specific groups.</p> <p>ACT: Implement immediate measures to improve the safety and accessibility of essential services, ensuring equitable and secure access for all.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Deploy rapid-response strategies like setting up designated safe areas, adjusting service layouts for privacy, and training staff to handle sensitive situations. Establish clear guidance to service providers on supporting vulnerable populations.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Does the infrastructure (e.g., shelters, transportation, healthcare facilities) protect all genders from violence and ensure safe access to services during the crisis?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Evaluate whether infrastructure elements are designed to be safe, accessible, and free from hazards that may disproportionately affect certain gender groups, such as poorly lit pathways, accessible transport, or unsafe shelter conditions.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Assess which aspects of infrastructure might pose risks or hinder access to essential services for different gender groups. Consider how these risks may be exacerbated by the crisis, such as inadequate safety or access, such as water to shelters that expose individuals to harassment or healthcare facilities that lack privacy for certain groups.</p> <p>ACT: Enhance safety, accessibility, and inclusivity of infrastructure during crisis conditions.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Implement safety measures like improved lighting, secure transport routes, and designated safe spaces in shelters. Ensure that infrastructure planning considers the diverse needs of all genders to provide equitable and secure access.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	SOCIAL PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are diverse gender perspectives integrated into the ongoing delivery of social services during the crisis?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Evaluate whether the voices and needs of different gender groups are actively considered when planning and adjusting social support programs. Ensure services are reaching those in need.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Assess how the lack of diverse perspectives might hinder the effectiveness and inclusivity of social services during the crisis.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Identify gaps where exclusion or oversight of certain groups leads to inadequate service provision and/or limited access to shelter, or insufficient community support systems.</p> <p>ACT: Adjust the delivery of social services to ensure they are inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the needs of all genders.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Implement immediate adjustments to services, such as providing maternal care kits, establishing child-friendly spaces, and ensuring mobility aid resources. Engage with affected communities regularly to gather input and adapt services to better meet their changing needs during the crisis.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are gender perspectives integrated into the operation and adjustment of crisis-related infrastructure, ensuring that facilities are responsive to all genders' needs?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess whether existing infrastructure (e.g., shelters, healthcare facilities, transportation) addresses the immediate needs and safety of different gender groups, such as privacy, accessibility, and inclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Consider how facility adjustments can be made to meet needs. Identify specific gaps where infrastructure fails to support diverse gender needs, such as lack of privacy in shelters, inadequate sanitation for women, or limited accessibility for elderly or disabled individuals. Consider how these issues affect safety/well-being.</p> <p>ACT: Examine how current infrastructure operations and adjustment might overlook or inadequately address requirements of certain gender groups.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Identify specific gaps where infrastructure fails to support diverse gender needs, such as lack of privacy in shelters, inadequate sanitation for women, or limited accessibility for elderly or disabled individuals. Consider how these issues affect the safety and well-being of affected populations during the crisis.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	MILITARY/POLICE PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are gender perspectives integrated into security forces' operations, ensuring that crisis response includes the protection of vulnerable populations?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess whether security teams are trained on gender-specific risks, such as increased threat of trafficking, harassment, or exploitation, and whether operations reflect an awareness of these issues.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Determine how current security practices may inadvertently increase risks for specific groups in an ill-prepared adequate protection. Identify specific gaps where infrastructure fails to support diverse gender needs, such as lack of privacy in shelters, inadequate sanitation for women, or limited accessibility for elderly or disabled individuals. Consider how these issues affect safety/well-being.</p> <p>ACT: Incorporate gender-sensitive practices into all aspects of security operations to ensure a comprehensive, inclusive response.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Deploy rapid-response strategies like setting up designated safe areas, adjusting service layouts for privacy, and training staff to handle sensitive situations. Establish clear guidance to service providers on supporting vulnerable populations.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	MILITARY/POLICE PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are gender perspectives integrated into political crisis response and governance structures to ensure decisions reflect the needs of all genders?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Evaluate whether emergency policies, crisis communications, and response plans consider the specific needs of different gender groups. Ensure diverse perspectives are part of key decision-making processes, such as recovery and resource allocation.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Assess how gender perspectives might influence crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify specific gaps where infrastructure fails to support diverse gender needs, such as lack of privacy in shelters, inadequate sanitation for women, or limited accessibility for elderly or disabled individuals. Consider how these issues affect the safety and well-being of affected populations during the crisis.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
	POLITICAL PROTECTION	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>	<p>IDENTITY: Are all genders protected from political exclusion and violence during crisis-related decision-making processes?</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Assess if women leaders, representatives from marginalized communities, and diverse voices are included in crisis management committees and decision-making bodies and protected from political intimidation or exclusion.</p> <p>ANALYZE: Examine how the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making affects crisis response and the delivery of essential services. Identify instances where the lack of diverse voices in decision-making exacerbates risks for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.</p> <p>ACT: Ensure inclusive and representative governance in crisis response, emphasizing effective crisis communication.</p> <p>GENERAL APPROACH: Advocate for the active inclusion of women and representatives from marginalized groups in emergency planning and decision-making committees. Ensure their insights shape equitable policies and that safety measures are in place to protect them from political marginalization or violence.</p>
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Figure 25.2: Rapid GSAT Matrix
Source: James M. Minnich, created for this publication

*Applying Rapid GSAT:
A Representative Scenario*

Every second counts in the face of urgent crises. Yet, effective response requires more than rapid action; it demands an understanding of how different individuals and groups are impacted. This is where Rapid GSAT comes in. This section provides a practical scenario of a natural disaster response, demonstrating how security practitioners can utilize the Rapid GSAT framework to swiftly identify gender-specific vulnerabilities, analyze their impact, and take targeted action. Using the *Identify-Analyze-Act* (*know-mean-do*) approach, this example will guide you through the process of applying Rapid GSAT in a crisis context.

1. *IDENTIFY (KNOW)*: A severe cyclone has struck a coastal city, causing widespread devastation. Homes and healthcare facilities are destroyed, transportation networks are damaged, and people are displaced. Social systems are overwhelmed, and there are reports of looting, gender-based violence, and increased vulnerability for marginalized groups, including women, children, older adults, and those with disabilities.
2. *ANALYZE (MEAN)*:
 - *Protection*: The breakdown of social order and infrastructure increases the risk of gender-based violence, particularly for women, girls, and marginalized individuals. Displacement and overcrowded shelters exacerbate these risks. Limited access to healthcare, sanitation, and essential resources further jeopardizes their safety and well-being.
 - *Perspective*: In the rush to provide aid, the unique needs and perspectives of women, girls, and marginalized individuals may be overlooked. Their voices are crucial

for ensuring that relief efforts are inclusive and address their specific concerns.

3. *ACT (DO)*:

- *Social*: Establish safe spaces and shelters with adequate privacy and security, prioritizing the needs of women, girls, and marginalized individuals.
- *Infrastructure*: Ensure access to essential services, including healthcare, sanitation, food, and water.
- *Military/Police*: Deploy female security personnel and train all security forces on gender-sensitive approaches to disaster response.
- *Political*: Advocate for gender-inclusive policies and decision-making in the recovery efforts.

This scenario demonstrates the power of Rapid GSAT in time-sensitive crisis situations. By providing a streamlined framework for swiftly identifying gender-specific vulnerabilities and analyzing their impact, Rapid GSAT empowers security practitioners to take immediate action. By prioritizing the principles of protection and perspective, this approach ensures that gender considerations remain central to operational planning, even in the most urgent circumstances. Ultimately, this leads to more inclusive responses that enhance the safety, well-being, and resilience of all individuals and communities affected by crises. Security practitioners are urged to integrate Rapid GSAT into their crisis response toolkit to ensure that no one is left behind.

GSA in Practice: Case Studies and Applications

This section examines real-world examples of how GSA can be integrated into national security policy and practice.

Malaysia's National Action Plan

Malaysia's forthcoming National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) demonstrates how GSA principles can be operationalized to promote gender equality and enhance security outcomes. Informed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the NAP recognizes the crucial role women play in peace and security. Drafted through a collaborative process involving government agencies and international experts at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the NAP integrates GSA principles into its framework.⁴²

While the NAP itself does not explicitly mention the GSA by name, the framework was instrumental in its development. The NAP's focus on Protection, Perspective, Prevention, and Participation aligns with the GENDER 4Ps framework. For example:

- *PROTECTION*: The NAP aims to protect women and girls from violence and discrimination through strengthened legal frameworks, access to justice, and gender-responsive security measures.
- *PERSPECTIVE*: The NAP highlights the need to integrate gender perspectives into all policies and decision-making processes to ensure that the diverse needs and experiences of women and men are considered in peace and security efforts.
- *PREVENTION*: The NAP aims to ensure that women and girls have equal access to institutions, structures, and resources, enabling them to be full agents in society.
- *PARTICIPATION*: The NAP promotes women's equal and meaningful participation in all levels of decision-making, including social, economic, political spheres, and peace and security processes.

This holistic application of GSA principles demonstrates how the GENDER 4Ps can guide national security policies to be equitable and effective. By integrating GSA into its national security framework, Malaysia takes significant steps to promote gender equality, enhance security, and build a more peaceful and inclusive society.

The Pivotal Role of GSA in U.S. Agencies

There is a growing recognition within U.S. agencies of the need to integrate GSA into security policy and practice.⁴³ The U.S. government demonstrated its commitment to this approach through the release of its own Strategy and National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security.⁴⁴ Integrating GSA across U.S. agencies, particularly within defense, marks a significant shift in recognizing and addressing gendered dynamics in military operations.⁴⁵ This approach, grounded in GENDER 4Ps framework, is crucial for formulating equitable and responsive strategies to operational needs while advancing gender equality.

By embracing the GENDER 4Ps, U.S. agencies can ensure gender perspectives are systematically included across all decision-making levels, leading to more equitable outcomes and enhanced operational effectiveness.

- *PERSPECTIVE*: Incorporating diverse gender experiences allows for a more nuanced understanding of security threats and the development of more effective responses. To address the complexity of military operations, agencies can adopt GSA frameworks like GSAT, specifically designed for military contexts to ensure gender perspectives are integrated into all aspects of planning and operations.
- *PREVENTION*: GSA enables U.S. agencies to identify and address the root causes of gender-related security threats, such as gender inequality and discrimination. This proactive approach can help prevent conflict and promote long-term

stability. Integrating GSA into training programs and operational planning processes can overcome institutional resistance and demonstrate its relevance and effectiveness.

- *PARTICIPATION*: Ensuring all genders' full and meaningful participation in decision-making processes is essential for building inclusive and sustainable security. This includes promoting women's leadership in the military and ensuring their voices are heard in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This involves not only ensuring women's formal inclusion in security processes but also actively working to create a culture of belonging where they feel valued and empowered, which can lead to increased retention and improved performance.⁴⁶ Addressing data limitations, particularly in collecting gender-disaggregated data in conflict zones, is crucial. Implementing robust data collection mechanisms and utilizing existing data sources from NGOs and international organizations can help overcome this challenge.
- *PROTECTION*: GSA emphasizes protecting individuals from all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence and domestic abuse. This requires addressing data limitations that can hinder effective analysis and response.

By addressing these challenges through the GENDER 4Ps, U.S. agencies can enhance operational outcomes while fostering more inclusive and equitable security environments.

Practical Applications and Benefits of GSA

The practical benefits of GSA, aligned with the GENDER 4Ps, can be summarized using the acronym SHAPE:

- *S – SITUATIONAL AWARENESS ENHANCED*: GSA provides a more complete understanding of the security environment by

incorporating diverse gender perspectives, leading to more informed decision-making. For example, understanding the specific security concerns of women and girls in a conflict zone can lead to more effective protection strategies.

- **H – HIGHER OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS:** Integrating gender results in more inclusive and effective strategies. For instance, including women in peace negotiations can lead to more sustainable peace agreements.
- **A – ADAPTABILITY STRENGTHENED:** GSA fosters flexibility by recognizing how gender roles and dynamics shift during conflicts and crises, enabling security practitioners to adapt their strategies and better meet the needs of affected populations.
- **P – PREVENTION OF CONFLICT:** By addressing the root causes of insecurity, such as gender inequality and discrimination, GSA promotes long-term peace and stability.
- **E – EQUITY IN SECURITY:** GSA ensures that security efforts are equitable by guaranteeing that all genders are included in decision-making processes, their needs are met, and they are protected from harm.

The *SHAPE* approach highlights how GSA transforms security operations to be more inclusive, adaptable, and equitable. By enhancing situational awareness, improving operational effectiveness, fostering adaptability, preventing conflict, and promoting equity, GSA shapes the security landscape to better address the diverse needs of all genders. In this way, the GENDER 4Ps are both guiding principles and practical tools for achieving more just, effective, and sustainable security outcomes across any operational environment.

ACTION-Oriented Solutions

In a world where security challenges are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected, simply understanding gender dynamics is not enough. We must translate that understanding into action. This section provides a framework for defense and military organizations to effectively integrate GSA into their operations, ensuring that gender perspectives are not just acknowledged but actively applied to achieve more inclusive, equitable, and effective security outcomes.

To achieve this, organizations must adopt a structured, results-driven approach. The *ACTION* framework outlines clear steps to ensure that gender perspectives are actively applied across all levels of military and defense strategy, leading to more inclusive and effective operations.

- **A – ASSIGN GENDER ADVISORS:** Embed dedicated gender advisors within military planning units to ensure that gender perspectives are integrated at every stage, from strategy development to tactical employment. These advisors should have expertise in gender analysis, conflict resolution, and human rights. They will play a vital role in shaping gender-sensitive operations, promoting inclusivity in decision-making processes, and providing training and guidance to military personnel. For example, gender advisors can assist in conducting gender analysis of mission plans, identifying potential risks and opportunities related to gender dynamics, and developing mitigation strategies.
- **C – CREATE COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING PROGRAMS:** Develop specialized gender-focused training for all military personnel to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how gender dynamics influence security. Training should cover topics such as gender norms and stereotypes, gender-based violence, the importance of gender perspectives in military operations, and conducting gendered security analysis,

including using tools like the GSAT and Rapid GSAT matrices. To ensure effectiveness, address potential resistance to gender training and tailor training content to different military roles and responsibilities. This training is crucial to prevent the exploitation and abuse of local populations, as highlighted in historical instances where untrained security personnel caused harm.⁴⁷

- ***T – TAILOR OPERATIONAL INTEGRATION:*** Incorporate GSA into every aspect of military operations, from mission planning to execution, ensuring gender considerations are embedded across all contexts. This operational integration of GSA leads to more responsive and adaptable strategies. For example, gender analysis should be used to inform design of patrols, the selection of interpreters, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It is important to recognize that gender dynamics may vary across different operational environments, and strategies should be adapted accordingly.
- ***I – IMPLEMENT FEEDBACK MECHANISMS:*** Establish continuous feedback loops to monitor the effectiveness of GSA integration and adapt strategies based on situational dynamics. Ongoing evaluation helps keep GSA relevant and responsive to emerging security and gender-related challenges. This could involve conducting post-operation reviews, gathering feedback from local communities, and tracking relevant indicators. For instance, collecting data on the number of women participating in peace negotiations or the incidence of gender-based violence can help assess the impact of GSA integration and identify areas for improvement.
- ***O – OPTIMIZE COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS:*** Strengthen partnerships with gender-focused NGOs, international organizations, and civil society to enhance GSA's effectiveness. These collaborations provide expert guidance,

resources, and additional support for integrating gender perspectives into security operations. For example, partnering with local women's organizations can provide valuable insights into the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls in conflict-affected communities. These partnerships can also help to build trust and facilitate communication between security forces and local populations.

- *N – NURTURE A GENDER-INCLUSIVE CULTURE*: Promote a culture of gender inclusion within military organizations by fostering diversity, equity, and gender-sensitive policies at all levels. A gender-inclusive culture leads to more cohesive and effective security strategies. This involves challenging harmful stereotypes, promoting women's leadership, and creating a safe and inclusive environment for all personnel.⁴⁸ This can be achieved through initiatives such as mentoring programs for women, promoting work-life balance policies, and addressing gender bias in performance evaluations.

Conclusion

Gendered Security Analysis (GSA) is essential for building more inclusive, effective, and sustainable security solutions, not just within the military but across all security sectors. Frameworks such as GSAT and Rapid GSAT provide invaluable tools for integrating gender perspectives into all phases of military operations, from strategic planning to real-time decision-making during crises. By embracing GSA as a core component of security strategy and taking concrete steps outlined in the ACTION framework, organizations will be better equipped to address the complex interplay between gender and security, leading to more just and equitable outcomes.

Integrating GSA enhances situational awareness, improves operational effectiveness, fosters adaptability, prevents conflict, and promotes equity. As conflicts and security challenges become

increasingly multifaceted, the role of GSA in promoting peace and preventing violence is critical. By taking concrete, actionable steps, institutions can ensure that security strategies are inclusive, effective, and responsive to the diverse needs of all individuals, regardless of gender.

The urgency of integrating GSA into all aspects of security practices cannot be overstated. Stakeholders across the globe—governments, militaries, international organizations, and civil societies—should embrace GSA and actively incorporate it into their policies, programs, and operations. By doing so, we can collectively work toward a more secure, equitable, and peaceful future for all.

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