

CHAPTER I



EDGES OF INSTABILITY

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In a time of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

— Eric Hoffer, American philosopher, *Reflections on the Human Condition*, 1973

Introduction: Navigating the Edges of Instability

Predawn radar screens in Kaohsiung flared as Chinese fighters and bombers brushed Taiwan's air defense identification zone, one of dozens of incursions each month.¹ No sirens sounded,

yet the silent warning revealed how little time Taipei might have if a probe became a strike. Less than an hour north, engineers inside Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company etched nanoscale circuits that power everything from smartphones to precision-guided weapons.² Nowhere is the Indo-Pacific paradox starker: cutting-edge innovation thrives in the shadow of imminent conflict.

Tension echoes across the region. Japan's Air Self-Defense Force recently fired flares at joint Chinese-Russian bombers near Hokkaido,³ signaling an eroding air-power balance. Indian troops remain braced along the icy ridgelines of Aksai Chin.⁴ In Dhaka, protesters denounce a disputed election amid waves of digital disinformation.⁵ In the Solomon Islands, local leaders weigh Chinese-funded projects against questions of sovereignty.⁶

From the chokepoints off Taiwan to the rugged coasts of Hokkaido, and from the towering Himalayas to the shores of Honiara, the Indo-Pacific forms a single strategic tapestry. Yet its threads fray—being pulled apart by disruption, division, and intensifying competition.⁷ These forces are not passing storms; they are the very architecture of today's instability—eroding consensus, weaponizing interdependence, and militarizing disputes.

The stakes are global. The Indo-Pacific holds nearly two-thirds of humanity, produces roughly half of the world's GDP,⁸ and guards maritime arteries—Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, Taiwan—through which much of that wealth flows.

Here, the future of great-power rivalry, technological leadership, and the rules-based order will be decided.

This chapter contends that *disruption* destabilizes, *division* fragments, and *competition* accelerates the scramble for advantage, together reshaping the region's strategic landscape. Understanding how these forces interact is not merely analytical; it is strategic. Their interplay will determine whether the region fractures further or forges a new, resilient equilibrium.

Disruption: Strategic Shock in Motion

Disruption is no longer an exception in the Indo-Pacific; it is the operating environment. Technological leaps,⁹ pandemics,¹⁰ market convulsions,¹¹ and political upheavals now arrive in overlapping waves,¹² turning “black swans” into routine visitors.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid this reality bare. It fractured supply chains,¹³ stalled entire economies,¹⁴ and forced militaries to pivot to domestic crisis response,¹⁵ all while governments scrambled for protective gear in a zero-sum scramble that magnified geopolitical rifts.¹⁶ The virus proved less a health anomaly than a live-fire drill for state resilience.¹⁷

Technology adds a second, accelerating front. Control of semiconductor, quantum computing, hypersonic weapons, and artificial intelligence now defines deterrence and prosperity alike.¹⁸ Taiwan's fabrication clusters make the point:¹⁹ a shock in Hsinchu could ripple from Cupertino to Canberra and upend

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s war-fighting timelines within hours.²⁰

Political and environmental shocks compound the strain. Myanmar’s 2021 coup reversed a decade of political liberalization, unleashing a humanitarian flood across borders.²¹ In the Pacific Islands, stronger storms and encroaching seas imperil entire communities, eroding governance and offering outside powers new levers of influence.²²

These shocks rarely stay local. They mesh and magnify, turning regional tremors into global aftershocks. Strategy premised on a stable baseline is obsolete. The task is no longer to forecast the next crisis but to treat crises as constant.

Strategic relevance will hinge on adaptability: hardened infrastructure, redundant supply chains, agile force posture, and region-wide coordination mechanisms. Advantage will accrue to actors who plan for volatility rather than resist it.

Division: Fragmented Orders, Fractured Trust

Disruption’s impact is magnified by division—the Indo-Pacific’s widening fault line. National interests splinter, institutions strain, and partnerships buckle under asymmetric expectations.²³

Multilateral pillars show the cracks. ASEAN, once praised for “centrality,” often deadlocks over the South China Sea, Myanmar, and great-power courting.²⁴ Its convening power

remains indispensable, yet its political unity is increasingly contested.

Even loose coalitions feel the strain. The Quad now militarily drills and shares technology, but its members diverge on pace and priorities. India guards strategic autonomy,²⁵ Australia juggles Chinese trade ties,²⁶ and leadership churn in Tokyo and Washington complicates alignments.²⁷ Trust proves brittle, sensitive to perception gaps and unmet promises.

Internal fragmentation compounds the external. Across the region, algorithm-driven echo chambers,²⁸ foreign influence operations,²⁹ and widening income divides erode public confidence in elites.³⁰ Democracies battle polarization; autocracies suppress dissent that still foment below the surface. Such fractures sap governments' ability to speak—or act—with a coherent strategic voice.

Adversaries exploit the seams. Beijing and Moscow weaponize narrative warfare,³¹ painting U.S. alliances as unreliable and liberal norms as exclusionary.³² Simultaneously, many South and Southeast Asian states see double standards in Western agendas, deepening Global South skepticism toward existing frameworks.³³

Division is more than disagreement; it is dislocation. Trust breaks faster than it mends, and in an age of instant signaling, fragmentation yields strategic paralysis—precisely when collective resolve is required against gray-zone coercion, cyberattacks, and supply-chain chokeholds.³⁴

Closing these rifts demands more than summitry. It requires consistency, credibility, and relentless trust-building: aligning interests without insisting on uniformity and acting decisively even amid divergence. Strategic cohesion in the Indo-Pacific will belong to those who can bridge the gaps faster than rivals can widen them.

Competition: Seeking Advantage in an Unsettled Order

Competition is now the Indo-Pacific's steady heartbeat—multidomain, fluid, and fiercely consequential. Unlike the Cold War era of binary standoffs, today's contest unfolds across overlapping arenas in which dozens of actors vie to shape the rules, norms, and institutions of a still-unsettled order.

Hard power remains the most visible front. China is racing ahead with shipbuilding, missile forces, and an expanding maritime militia, all designed to impose anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities that deter U.S. intervention and coerce neighbors.³⁵ Washington and its allies answer with forward deployments, agile logistic hubs, multilateral live-fires, and joint surveillance networks meant to demonstrate resilience as much as raw force.³⁶

Yet firepower is only part of the duel. Semiconductor chains,³⁷ rare-earth supplies,³⁸ digital standards, and infrastructure finance have become contested ground.³⁹ Beijing's Digital Silk Road and surveillance exports compete with democratic models that prioritize transparency and data

protection;⁴⁰ victory lies not just in who lays the cable, but whose values run through it.

Middle and small powers refuse a pawn's role. India balances autonomy with Quad cooperation;⁴¹ ASEAN members hedge between Chinese markets and U.S. security ties; Pacific island states extract concessions from competing actors. The regional board now resembles a shifting mosaic of selective alignments rather than a chessboard controlled by two giants.⁴²

The real danger lies not only in escalation but in normalization. Admiral Paparo warns that the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) "multi-domain pressurization" around Taiwan is a "dress rehearsal for forced unification," not a mere drill.⁴³ Elbridge Colby calls this "the most consequential" storyline of current U.S. policy: a race to keep power balances favorable as Beijing seeks regional hegemony.⁴⁴ These rehearsals show competition moving from symbolic deterrence to operational preparation. Without reliable guardrails, friction points multiply and mechanisms for crisis management—transparency, reciprocity, and institutional restraint—erode.⁴⁵

Navigating this era demands more than capability; it requires equal measures of resolve and restraint. Indo-Pacific states and their partners must compete for influence without letting the contest itself shred the fragile fabric of regional peace.

Sustaining Advantage: Warfighting at Scale Requires Production at Scale

Competition in the Indo-Pacific is no longer a contest of clever tactics; it is a test of industrial muscle. In any high-end war, victory will hinge less on the brilliance of opening moves than on the capacity to keep fighting when stockpiles are depleted, critical systems are lost, and attrition becomes the measure of endurance.⁴⁶

History is blunt on this point.⁴⁷ From World War II to the Cold War arsenal race, the side that could mobilize, adapt, and out-produce over time—not the side that struck first—ultimately prevailed.⁴⁸

China has absorbed that lesson. Through Military-Civil Fusion,⁴⁹ Beijing plugs its vast civilian workshops into military supply lines:⁵⁰ commercial shipyards can churn out frigates;⁵¹ aerospace plants pivot to drones and missiles;⁵² and peacetime supply chains are engineered for wartime conversion.⁵³

By contrast, the United States, long dominant in services and high technology, is scrambling to rebuild an industrial base that spent decades trading surge capacity for cost efficiency. Ammunition stockpiles are thin,⁵⁴ critical components come from far-flung suppliers,⁵⁵ and ramp-up timelines lag the pacing threat.⁵⁶ The recent drive to reshore manufacturing—from the CHIPS and Science Act to multibillion-dollar munition contracts—reflects a strategic awakening:⁵⁷ a nation that cannot produce ships, missiles,

satellites, and spare parts at scale cannot prevail in a sustained conflict against an industrial peer competitor.⁵⁸

Enduring advantage will depend on industrial resilience: the ability to absorb losses, regenerate forces, and adapt under the grind of long-duration, high-intensity conflict. As Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi warn, “Strategic advantage will accrue to those who can operate at scale. China possesses scale; the United States does not—at least not by itself.”⁵⁹ Without deeper allied integration and pooled capacity, America risks confronting a competitor whose overall manufacturing output is triple its own and whose shipbuilding yards deliver hulls at roughly 200 times the U.S. rate.⁶⁰

China’s preparation is not theoretical. A leaked 2022 Guangdong mobilization transcript outlines detailed plans to requisition merchant ships, convert factories, mobilize hundreds of thousands of workers, and stockpile critical materials.⁶¹ Civilian companies have even rehearsed switching to combat vehicles, unmanned systems, and heavy-lift production.⁶² State media trumpet these drills as proof that China can surge from peace to war industry almost overnight.⁶³ Analysts such as John Culver caution that the exercises do not necessarily signal imminent conflict, but they do reveal a deliberate effort to acquire the stamina for a protracted fight.⁶⁴ The United States and its allies must match that stamina if deterrence is to remain credible.

Warfighting at scale demands production at scale. In this contest, the advantage will belong to the side that prepares its

industrial arsenal not for the first week of combat, but for the fifty-first.

Subregional Landscapes: Where Strategic Friction Finds Its Form

Draw a wide arc from Hokkaido's capes to the Antarctic swell, and you outline a single strategic canvas—but its colors flare differently in every quadrant. Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania rest on distinct fault lines, shaped by old wars, young populations, fragile politics, or capricious geography. Some serve as front-row arenas of great-power rivalry; others survive by hedging bets and trading favors.

Consider three rapid chain reactions:

- A missile splashes in the Taiwan Strait. Insurance premiums spike overnight, tankers idle off the Malacca chokepoint, and smartphones assembled in Ho Chi Minh City suddenly lack chips etched in Hsinchu.
- A quantum breakthrough in Osaka halves encryption times. The algorithm is replicated in Manila within weeks, hacked in Pyongyang days later, and the vulnerability ricochets through data centers from Suva to Seattle.
- A skirmish ignites along the Himalayan crest. Indian warships redeploy to the Andaman Sea, Pakistan deepens its reliance on Beijing-backed loans, and Sri Lanka swaps port access for emergency debt relief.

Chokepoints knit these dramas together. Strategist Edward Fishman calls the Bosphorus “a gateway so critical that blocking it can bring an enemy to its knees.”⁶⁵ The Taiwan Strait and South China Sea are Asia’s twin Bosphorus—narrow passages that determine whether global trade flows or founders.

Divisions migrate as quickly as cargo. Tension along the India–China border shapes defense budgets in Canberra. Myanmar’s civil war entangles ASEAN diplomacy in Jakarta. Pacific Island leaders weigh Chinese subsea cables against American security umbrellas. Belt and Road loans, Japanese infrastructure finance, and U.S. digital trade standards all overlap, pulling smaller states into intersecting webs of dependence.

Almost nothing stays local. Shocks in one subregion can jolt another—often before headlines update. To navigate the turbulence, we must zoom in on each landscape while keeping an eye on the tremors that bind them. The pages that follow do just that, tracking how disruption, division, and competition unfold across four distinct theaters—and why stability in any one depends on resilience, and at times, courage, in them all.

Northeast Asia: Anchored Power, Accelerating Pressure

We begin where pressure is densest. If the Indo-Pacific were a spinning top, Northeast Asia would be its iron tip—compact in geography, immense in weight. Here reside the region’s three largest economies, its most sophisticated militaries, and historical wounds that still pulse.

U.S.-China rivalry sets the tempo. Beijing's shipyards now launch warships at a pace unmatched in peacetime; its missile brigades can strike every U.S. runway from Okinawa to Guam. In 2024, the PLA logged over 5,100 sorties into Taiwan's air defense identification zone⁶⁶—an airborne metronome intended to normalize coercion.⁶⁷ Cyber intrusions, tariff feints, and propaganda surges shadow those aircraft, compounding pressure after Taiwan's 2024 presidential election.⁶⁸

Japan is rearming with a clarity of purpose. Declaring China its "greatest strategic challenge,"⁶⁹ Tokyo has initiated its largest defense buildup since 1945: doubling defense budgets, purchasing Tomahawk cruise missiles,⁷⁰ and rehearsing island-retake operations while PLA Navy vessels circle the Senkaku/Diaoyu chain.⁷¹

South Korea straddles turbulence at home and abroad. The 2025 impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol fractured domestic consensus even as Seoul deepened trilateral missile defense drills with Washington and Tokyo—an uneasy pairing of political flux and strategic resolve.⁷²

North Korea has evolved from regional spoiler to what analysts now call a "small great power."⁷³ In late 2024, Pyongyang traded artillery shells and ballistic missiles for roughly \$20 billion in Russian cash and commodities,⁷⁴ reportedly dispatched 14,000 troops and technical personnel to support Moscow's war in Ukraine.⁷⁵ Its cyber units have stolen more than \$3 billion in cryptocurrency since 2017,⁷⁶ financing weapons projects insulated from sanctions. Admiral

Samuel Paparo warns that the emerging China–Russia–DPRK triangle may be “the most complex, interconnected challenge” in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁷

Paradoxically, commerce thrives even as tensions rise. China, Japan, and South Korea exchange more than \$700 billion in annual trade while fighter jets shadow one another’s airspace.⁷⁸ Prosperity and provocation traverse the same shipping lanes, creating a volatility all their own.

Northeast Asia is where unresolved history meets an unmapped future. A single misread radar blip⁷⁹—or one missed handshake—could send shockwaves across every other subregion in this chapter.

Southeast Asia: Crossroads of Change, Shifting Currents

Southeast Asia is the axis on which the wider Indo-Pacific turns: 693 million people, a median age of thirty-one, and growth rates that rival any on Earth.⁸⁰ Yet the same seas and straits that fuel its dynamism also expose deep vulnerabilities. Here, disruption, division, and competition blend more subtly—but no less consequentially—than elsewhere in the region.

The South China Sea remains the region’s pressure valve. Beijing enforces sweeping claims with dredged islands, a coast guard fleet that dwarfs all others, and swarms of maritime militia. Now the world’s largest, the China Coast Guard (CCG) increasingly resembles a second navy—crewed by military personnel, armed with 76mm cannons, and subordinated to the Central Military Commission.⁸¹ In 2024,

Chinese cutters rammed Philippine resupply boats at Second Thomas Shoal,⁸² prompting Manila to publicize every encounter. Admiral Paparo calls the pattern “coercive behavior and bare aggression,”⁸³ threatening one-third of global trade that sails through these lanes. Escalation risk often stems less from grand design than from routine patrols colliding in contested waters.

Once hailed for “centrality,” the ten-member ASEAN bloc now struggles to craft unified responses to Chinese assertiveness or Myanmar’s civil war. Consensus still brings leaders to the table, but communiqués grow thinner as national interests diverge.

Infrastructure is the new diplomatic currency. China’s Belt and Road funds ports and railways; Japan counters with “quality infrastructure” loans;⁸⁴ and Washington’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework advances digital and supply-chain standards. The instruments differ—grants, loans, rulebooks—but the aim is shared: embed structural influence.

Thailand’s political reshuffling, Malaysia’s fragile coalitions, and insurgencies in Myanmar and Mindanao create openings for foreign leverage. Disinformation campaigns, cyber intrusions, and elite capture blur the line between external pressure and internal instability. Still, Southeast Asian governments are not passive. Most hedge with skill, diversify partnerships, and bid up the price of access.

- Indonesia courts U.S. investment for nickel refineries while buying Chinese dredgers for its new capital.

- Vietnam deepens defense ties with Washington and Tokyo, yet maintains party-to-party channels with Beijing.
- Singapore plays translator and balancer—championing a rules-based order while hosting dialogue among rivals.

Competition here is for time, talent, markets, and trust. Decisions made in coastal villages, data centers, and logistics corridors may shift the regional balance as surely as warships on patrol. In this theater of quiet coercion and agile agency, Southeast Asia's choices will help shape the Indo-Pacific's strategic future.

South Asia: Calculated Ambition, Enduring Fragility

South Asia stretches from Himalayan ridges to reef-ringed atolls, home to nearly two billion people and three nuclear powers. Ambition here is vast—transcontinental rail corridors, digital platforms serving hundreds of millions, and naval aspirations reaching from the Bay of Bengal to the Western Pacific. Yet this promise rests on deep seams of historical grievance, domestic polarization, and fiscal strain, making the subregion both pivotal and precarious.

New Delhi seeks to position itself as a trusted production hub and security partner in a rebalanced Indo-Pacific while preserving strategic autonomy. Along the high-altitude frontiers of Ladakh, Indian and Chinese troops remain entrenched in fortified standoffs, vestiges of the 2020 Galwan clash that killed twenty Indian soldiers and shattered decades

of border protocol.⁸⁵ Further south, the Line of Control with Pakistan remains a flashpoint, reignited by the April 2025 terrorist attack in Kashmir and subsequent military exchanges.⁸⁶ India's response has been twofold: accelerate force modernization—Rafale fighters,⁸⁷ indigenous artillery,⁸⁸ and the INDUS-X defense-tech initiative with Washington, while retaining legacy defense and energy ties with Moscow to avoid overdependence. A third consecutive BJP victory in 2024 cemented policy continuity, yet sharpened scrutiny over press freedom and communal tensions.⁸⁹ Expansion into semiconductor fabrication and digital public infrastructure reflects national confidence,⁹⁰ but domestic cleavages may dilute long-term cohesion.

Islamabad juggles a deepening debt crisis, IMF conditionalities, and the resurgence of Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan.⁹¹ Following the Kashmir attack, retaliatory strikes across the Line of Control revived speculation about Pakistan's "limited" nuclear doctrine. Meanwhile, the once-flagship China–Pakistan Economic Corridor has stalled;⁹² even Gwadar Port, once hailed as a strategic crown jewel, remains poorly integrated with inland infrastructure.⁹³ Each tranche of Chinese financing deepens dependency on a government riven by civil-military fissures.⁹⁴

Bangladesh entered political uncertainty during the 2024–25 election cycle, marked by mass protests, internet shutdowns, and the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.⁹⁵ Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus now heads an interim government, cautiously courting Japanese green-

hydrogen investment while distancing from Chinese funding overtures.⁹⁶

Sri Lanka remains a cautionary tale. The 2022 sovereign debt default triggered mass unrest and regime change.⁹⁷ The 99-year lease of Hambantota Port remains under intense scrutiny. Ongoing negotiations with Beijing, New Delhi, and the IMF reflect competing great-power pressures on an economy still struggling with elite capture and ethnic polarization.⁹⁸ Ethnic tensions and elite rivalries, deepened by economic hardship, continue to impede recovery.⁹⁹

Smaller Himalayan and maritime states—Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives—are navigating a volatile geopolitical field with increasing agility.¹⁰⁰ Nepal's pro-monarchy protests signals deep institutional fatigue.¹⁰¹ In 2023, the Maldives elected a pro-China president who followed through on his pledge to expel Indian military personnel. Mounting debt and diplomatic hedging illustrate the strategic dilemmas faced by small states under economic and geopolitical strain.¹⁰²

Environmental disruption adds yet another destabilizing overlay. Pakistan's 2022 floods displaced over 33 million people,¹⁰³ and India's 2024 heatwaves underscored the region's growing vulnerability to environmentally linked shocks.¹⁰⁴ These pressures deepen governance deficits, exacerbate social dislocation, and test already brittle regional coordination mechanisms.

South Asia's central paradox lies in the coexistence of strategic ambition and persistent internal fragility. Its future will hinge on whether regional actors—especially India—can

reconcile national advancement with cooperative stability and intensifying domestic and geopolitical crosscurrents.

Oceania: Strategic Frontline, Rising Vulnerabilities

Once dismissed as a peripheral backwater, Oceania now sits at the forward edge of Indo-Pacific competition. Pacific Island Countries (PIC) command an arc of maritime space that dwarfs their landmass—anchoring sea lanes, rich fisheries, and potential nodes for military logistics. Collectively, their exclusive economic zones cover nearly 40 million km²—twice the size of Russia.¹⁰⁵ Geography, leverage, and fragility—not population or industry—give the region its outsized strategic weight.

Beijing has moved fastest. Port loans, fiber-optic cables, and security assistance now weave a dense network of influence aimed at securing resources, diplomatic support in international fora, and potential staging rights. The 2022 China–Solomon Islands security accord crystallized regional anxiety: nominally a policing agreement, it opened the door to possible basing.¹⁰⁶ China’s gray-zone tactics—survey ships probing archipelagic waters, distant-water fleets shadowing local patrols—only underscore those fears.

Washington, Canberra, Tokyo, and Wellington have responded in concert. The *Partners in the Blue Pacific* initiative, new embassies in Honiara and Nuku’alofa,¹⁰⁷ and renewed *Compacts of Free Association* with Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands all deepen allied political and logistical ties.¹⁰⁸ Australia has operationalized its AU\$1.4

billion Pacific strategy through bilateral security agreements and tailored partnerships across the region.¹⁰⁹ France and the United Kingdom are ramping up patrols and disaster-response missions.¹¹⁰ While Beijing offers infrastructure with few questions, allied programs emphasize transparency, capacity-building, and long-term support.

For island governments, the most acute threat is not great-power rivalry but environmental collapse. Rising seas, intensifying cyclones, and saltwater intrusion endanger food security and basic habitability, turning adaptation finance into the sharpest form of leverage. Offers of resilient ports, seawalls, and renewable grids thus serve dual purposes: meeting urgent needs while embedding strategic presence.

Digital sovereignty has emerged as the newest flashpoint. Chinese firms like HMN Tech and FiberHome have pushed undersea cable projects deep into the Pacific, raising surveillance concerns.¹¹¹ In response, the United States, Australia, and Japan have co-funded secure alternatives—the *Coral Sea Cable System* (linking Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to Sydney) and the *East Micronesia Cable* (connecting Micronesia, Nauru, and Kiribati).¹¹² Control of subsea infrastructure now means more than connectivity—it sets the terms for the region’s digital security architecture.

Yet PICs are anything but passive.¹¹³ Palau and the Marshall Islands maintain exclusive U.S. defense agreements; Fiji courts multiple partners to preserve maneuver space. Even the Solomon Islands—despite its tilt toward Beijing—remains active within the Pacific Islands Forum. By staging public

bidding processes and recalibrating alignments, island leaders are converting vulnerability into bargaining power, securing patrol boats, development funds, and diplomatic recognition on more favorable terms.

Oceania's arc will bend on the capacity of island nations to steer through converging pressures—and on whether external actors treat sovereignty and resilience as prerequisites, not bargaining chips. Failure risks turning the Pacific into a laboratory of coercion. Success would anchor an open, rules-based Indo-Pacific. Either way, the region is no longer on the strategic sidelines.

Geoeconomics: Instruments of Power in a Contested Arena

Economic power is no longer the backdrop to Indo-Pacific security—it is the arena. Trade corridors, semiconductor foundries, currency-swap lines, and digital platforms now operate as instruments of geopolitical influence. This shift is encapsulated in a single term: *geoeconomics*—the strategic deployment of economic tools to shape political outcomes.¹¹⁴ As capital follows strategy, the Indo-Pacific's map is being redrawn—not just on military charts, but in ports, server farms, and sovereign bond markets.

Regional Responses and the Strategic Contest Models in Motion, Influence in Play

China's Belt and Road Initiative still dominates the Indo-Pacific development landscape. Beijing has committed close

to \$1 trillion across more than 150 countries, financing railways, deep-water ports, and fiber-optic grids that extend commercial reach while embedding strategic leverage.¹¹⁵ The scale is formidable, but the model—opaque contracts, collateral clauses, and political strings—has provoked growing unease from Colombo to Wellington. Debt distress in Sri Lanka and Laos has prompted many governments to diversify lenders and demand greater transparency.

Yet hedging efforts remain uneven. Some states turn to Japan's quality infrastructure program or new development banks; others tighten procurement laws to screen for embedded security risks in telecommunication and digital platforms. Still, the lure of fast cash and turnkey projects keeps Beijing's offer attractive, especially in fiscally constrained environments shaped by the pandemic and rising global borrowing costs.¹¹⁶

India now casts itself as both competitor and balancer. Backed by a *Make in India* industrial push and a rising digital-sovereignty agenda, New Delhi seeks Western investment in semiconductors and critical minerals while sustaining energy and defense ties with Moscow. Its large market, regulatory leverage, and subregional initiatives—from the Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor to Southeast Asian rail integration—offer partners a China alternative without demanding exclusivity.

Beneath these maneuvers lies a widening fear of debt vulnerability. When revenue shortfalls collide with repayment schedules, fiscal distress becomes a conduit for strategic

pressure. As Dale Copeland notes, when states doubt future access to trade and capital, the “realist logic will kick in,” and war may appear as “the rational lesser of two evils.”¹¹⁷ That risk is magnified in the Indo-Pacific, where economic trust thins under the strain of contested influence.¹¹⁸

The boundaries between economic and security domains have all but dissolved. Modern infrastructure is inherently dual-use. The China-Laos Railway carries tourists by day but could transport troops in crisis.¹¹⁹ Smart ports regulate cargo while monitoring naval movements. Undersea cables boost connectivity even as they open channels for surveillance and data exfiltration.¹²⁰ In this environment, every commercial asset is a potential strategic lever.

*Washington’s Alternative Model of Statecraft
Rules, Resilience, and the Struggle for Alignment*

Since 2025, the United States has reoriented its geoeconomics playbook around a security-first logic. The resulting approach is less centralized than China’s technonationalism,¹²¹ yet markedly more interventionist than the laissez-faire tradition that long defined U.S. economic policy. Four interlocking pillars now underpin Washington’s model:¹²²

1. Strategic Supply Resilience

The COVID-19 pandemic, coercive export bans, and tightening technology controls have prompted a strategic reassessment of U.S. supply chain vulnerabilities. In response, Washington is working to relocate the production of semiconductors, rare earth

elements, and critical medicines to U.S. territory or to trusted partners.¹²³ Recent executive orders on critical minerals have invoked the Defense Production Act (DPA).¹²⁴ Simultaneously, expanded “Buy American” rules, new tax-credit proposals currently before Congress, and targeted loan guarantees through the Export-Import Bank¹²⁵ reflect a growing willingness to deploy federal tools when national security is at stake.

2. Alliance-Based Industrial Networks

Rather than building a singular infrastructure scheme akin to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the United States is stitching together a distributed web of industrial security partnerships. Frameworks such as the Quad and AUKUS now coordinate research, export controls, and technical standards across sensitive sectors. The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR) supports regional sustainment hubs and joint production lines,¹²⁶ while bilateral accords with allies deepen co-production in high-tech domains.

3. Technology Governance and Controls

The United States has expanded what might be termed a Technology-Control Suite, a coordinated set of export restrictions, outbound investment reviews, and intellectual property (IP) enforcement tools designed to prevent the flow of sensitive or dual-use technologies to strategic rivals. This suite includes tightened export licensing, enhanced authorities under

the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS),¹²⁷ and stricter penalties for IP theft.

4. Selective Domestic Industrial Revitalization

Washington is pairing its external agenda with targeted incentives at home. Federal efforts now include fast-tracked permits, tax credits, and DPA financing to bolster domestic capacity in advanced manufacturing, aerospace, and next-generation energy systems.

Taken together, this toolkit eschews the speed and scale of China's state capitalism in favor of a value proposition built on transparency, legal predictability, and alliance solidarity.¹²⁸ Whether it will prevail depends less on aggregate investment totals than on how Indo-Pacific capitals judge competing offers in terms of sovereignty, resilience, and strategic flexibility. In a region where containers, code, and capital move faster than trust, the boundary between geoeconomic statecraft and national security has effectively dissolved.

Systemic Challenge: China's Grand Strategy

China poses the Indo-Pacific's most far-reaching systemic challenge. Its leverage stems not just from scale or economic momentum, but from a deliberate model that fuses centralized political control with decentralized, market-driven execution. Economist Keyu Jin describes this as "a unique blend of state and market," where central authorities set the strategic course while provinces and firms compete to deliver results—an intimacy between party and private sector "unlike anything we see anywhere else in the world."¹²⁹ The outcome is a system

capable of piloting bold ventures, then refining them through localized adaptation.

Beijing's ambitions, however, reach beyond territory. It aims to construct parallel institutions,¹³⁰ reshape global norms, and project influence through a coordinated mix of hard power, digital infrastructure, financial inducement, and civilizational narrative.¹³¹ What unsettles the prevailing order is not merely the speed of China's rise but the simultaneity with which it pursues dominance across every domain: military, economic, technological, and ideological.

*Military Modernization:
Projecting Power, Reshaping Deterrence*

Under Xi Jinping, the PLA is undergoing its most sweeping transformation in history—evolving from a predominantly land-centric legacy force into a modern, multi-domain military capable of projecting power far beyond China's littoral.¹³² Xi's declared goal of fielding a “world-class” force by 2049 undergirds Beijing's broader campaign to tilt the Indo-Pacific balance in its favor.¹³³

At sea, the PLA Navy now commands the world's largest fleet by hull count—more than 370 warships in 2024, projected to reach roughly 435 by decade's end.¹³⁴ Guided-missile destroyers, big-deck amphibious assault ships, and three increasingly capable aircraft carriers—including the *Fujian*, equipped with electromagnetic catapults—signal the maturation of genuine blue-water ambitions. Recent dual-carrier operations,¹³⁵ the operationalization of the catapult-

capable J-15T, and the expected deployment of the stealthy J-35 all point to a force preparing to sustain airpower across the vast maritime spaces of the South and East China Seas.¹³⁶

Equally consequential is the evolution of the PLA Rocket Force. Its expanding arsenal spans the DF-21D “carrier killer,” DF-26 intermediate-range systems capable of striking Guam, and the DF-41 intercontinental missile reportedly armed with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV). The fielding of hypersonic glide vehicles compress decision-making timelines and further erodes traditional deterrence models.

China’s coast guard has also emerged as a pillar of maritime strategy. Now the world’s largest, the China Coast Guard (CCG) incorporates former PLA Navy warships, military-grade weaponry, and paramilitary personnel. Since being placed under the Central Military Commission in 2018, the CCG has operated with a dual mandate: law enforcement in title, strategic coercion in function. Routinely deployed in gray-zone operations—particularly in the South and East China Seas—it extends Beijing’s maritime pressure without triggering overt naval escalation. Its growing integration with PLA activities has blurred the line between white-hull presence and gray-hull deterrence.

Together, these capabilities thicken an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) envelope designed to dissuade external intervention and normalize Chinese operations in contested zones.¹³⁷ Regular joint maneuvers with Russia, advances in space and cyber domains, and the rollout of integrated theater

command systems round out a posture no longer focused solely on homeland defense, but on shaping the regional security architecture and constraining U.S. operational freedom across the Indo-Pacific.¹³⁸

*Technological Ambition and Industrial Strategy:
Chokepoints, Scale, and the Digital Frontier*

Technology remains the linchpin of China's broader strategic design. State-led campaigns—among them *Made in China 2025*, the *New Infrastructure* program, and an expansive Military-Civil Fusion agenda—aim to dominate value chains deemed essential to strategic autonomy: semiconductors, electric vehicles, quantum computing, and advanced cyber capabilities.¹³⁹

By 2024, China was producing nearly two-thirds of all electric vehicles sold globally¹⁴⁰ and had invested more than \$150 billion in its semiconductor sector in an effort to reduce foreign dependence and assert control over future digital ecosystems.¹⁴¹ In space, China has deployed over 800 active satellites and continues to expand its *BeiDou* navigation constellation, giving Beijing independent global positioning and enhanced surveillance capabilities.¹⁴² Meanwhile, anti-satellite tests and hypersonic weapons development reflect a determination not only to compete in, but to shape, the emerging strategic frontier.

China's cyber landscape adds yet another layer. Military-Civil Fusion deliberately obscures the boundaries between commercial innovation and military application, accelerating

technological cycles while complicating attribution. Over the past decade, PLA-linked actors have repeatedly targeted U.S.,¹⁴³ Japanese,¹⁴⁴ and Southeast Asian defense networks with increasing sophistication.¹⁴⁵ Though specific attacks often defy attribution, the strategic objective is clear: to set the standards, norms, and chokepoints that will govern the future digital order.

Taken together, China's technological strategy is not simply development—it is a deliberate, integrated campaign to set global standards, project influence, and establish dominance in domains that will define the next balance of power. As Edward Fishman notes, “a more plausible way for China to level the technological playing field is to solidify control over emerging chokepoints rather than existing ones”¹⁴⁶—especially in clean-energy technologies reliant on critical mineral supply chains that China already commands. Campbell and Doshi similarly warn that “even if China's growth slows and its system falters, it will remain formidable strategically,”¹⁴⁷ not because of short-term innovation alone, but because of its scale, mass, and the durability of its productive base.

*Economic Coercion and Development Leverage:
Interdependence as a Weapon*

Beijing's increasing willingness to weaponize interdependence reinforces its broader shift from influence to coercion.¹⁴⁸ The 2020 economic pressure campaign against Australia—imposing tariffs and informal bans on barley,

wine, lobster, and coal—demonstrated how quickly commercial relationships can be converted into punitive tools.¹⁴⁹ A year later, Lithuania’s decision to allow the opening of a Taiwan representative office triggered a sharp response from Beijing, disrupting European supply chains and offering a cautionary lesson in economic exposure.¹⁵⁰ These incidents are not anomalies; they reveal a consistent pattern: trade, finance, tourism, and digital platforms have become integral components of China’s strategic arsenal.

At the heart of this geoeconomic playbook lies BRI, with investment pledges now exceeding \$1 trillion.¹⁵¹ From rail lines in Laos to data cables in the South Pacific, BRI projects extend China’s footprint across vital maritime and digital corridors. Yet the controversy surrounding Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port—granted to a Chinese firm on a 99-year lease after debt distress—serves as a stark reminder that infrastructure generosity often comes with a long-term strategic string attached.¹⁵²

Through this expansive economic reach, China has woven a web of interdependence that it can selectively tighten or loosen to serve political objectives. In the Pacific Islands, for instance, vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by quiet pressure on local officials deliberating security ties with the United States or Australia. What might appear as routine economic engagement—ports, loans, and consumer market access—is increasingly the terrain on which geopolitical intent is both signaled and contested.

Normative and Institutional Influence: Rewriting the Rules from Within

China is not dismantling the postwar international order so much as rewriting its core tenets.¹⁵³ Under Xi Jinping, Beijing has advanced a trio of interlinked frameworks—the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—which together promote an alternative architecture for global governance.¹⁵⁴ They redefine what it means to develop, secure, and relate, privileging state sovereignty, regime durability, and civilizational pluralism over liberal universalism.¹⁵⁵

GDI, launched in 2021, champions development as a sovereign right and a strategic imperative. Prioritizing infrastructure, public health, digital access, food security, and sustainability. It channels billions through platforms like the \$4 billion Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund. Its hallmark is output legitimacy: ports built, roads paved, vaccines delivered—often with fewer strings than Western aid models. For many Indo-Pacific states, especially those grappling with fiscal constraints or governance sensitivities, GDI's no-questions-asked assistance offers immediate appeal.

GSI, introduced in 2022, reframes security through six commitments centered on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and comprehensive, cooperative stability. It challenges alliance-based deterrence by promoting dialogue over confrontation and partnership over alignment. In the Pacific

Islands, GSI casts China as a patron of non-traditional security, offering support for environmental response, health systems, and disaster resilience while subtly discouraging deeper alignment with U.S.-led security frameworks.

GCI, unveiled in 2023, targets the ideological foundations of the current order. Rejecting claims of civilizational hierarchy or the universality of liberal values, it emphasizes mutual learning, cultural respect, and normative pluralism. A 2024 UN resolution establishing an International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations marked a symbolic win for Beijing's narrative diplomacy,¹⁵⁶ positioning GCI as a global counterpoint to democracy-promotion agendas.

China's efforts are not only discursive—it is institutional. Through platforms like BRICS Plus, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and by pursuing leadership roles in UN agencies, Beijing is embedding its preferred norms into the machinery of global governance. These forums amplify and legitimize GDI-GSI-GCI principles while serving as counterweights to Western-dominated institutions.

This is more than a policy shift—it is a strategic narrative.¹⁵⁷ Beijing is not staging a direct assault on the international system. Instead, it is normalizing its own worldview from within, subtly reprogramming global norms in ways that favor its political model. For Indo-Pacific countries navigating development challenges and strategic uncertainty, the lure of a sovereignty-first, stability-focused,

and culturally relativist order is increasingly difficult to ignore.

Yet the implications are far-reaching. If embraced uncritically, China's three initiatives risk diluting democratic norms, eroding multilateral standards, and legitimizing authoritarian governance—all under the banner of mutual respect and win-win cooperation. The challenge for regional actors is not whether to engage, but how: with eyes open to discern whether these frameworks enhance collective agency or deepen asymmetry and dependence.

*China as the Architect of Regional Strategic Disruption:
Pressure without Provocation*

China's strategic ambition is not piecemeal—it is integrated, coordinated, and deliberately opaque. Across military modernization, technological dominance, economic inducement, and normative projection, Beijing wields a composite toolkit aimed at reshaping Indo-Pacific realities on its terms.

This campaign unfolds below the threshold of open conflict, in the shadow zones of law, diplomacy, and commerce. China militarizes reclaimed reefs while offering infrastructure loans. It harasses vessels in disputed waters while extending trade privileges to compliant neighbors. It promotes dialogue even as it isolates dissenters through targeted sanctions.

This strategic simultaneity is not incidental—it is designed to confuse attribution, blur coercion with cooperation, and

wear down resistance without triggering overt escalation. The goal is not just tactical advantage, but long-term normative and operational reconfiguration: favoring sovereignty over universal rights, interdependence over independence, and accommodation over deterrence.

For Indo-Pacific states, this requires more than vigilance; it demands a recalibration of strategic assumptions. Geography and treaty guarantees still matter, but contests increasingly unfold in domains where power is exercised indirectly: through contracts, code, cargo, and culture. Navigating this environment will depend not on singular choices but on sustained awareness, diversified partnerships, and the political will to uphold autonomy amid ambiguity.

Conclusion: The Far Edge of Competition

The Indo-Pacific is not adrift; it is steering through its own edges—those fault lines where stability meets flux, influence is contested, and new rules are written. Disruption, division, and competition have ceased to be anomalies; they now shape every boardroom calculation and every operational plan.

Instability, however, is not synonymous with chaos. Edges are vantage points as much as vulnerabilities—places where heightened risk intersects with exceptional opportunity. This chapter has traced how cascading *disruptions*—technological, geopolitical, and ecological—are overturning old assumptions; how deepening *divisions* within and among states corrode collective action; and how accelerating

competition among major and minor powers is redrawing the region's map of influence and alignment.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's 2025 posture captures the essence: deterrence must rest on "real, winning combat power,"¹⁵⁸ yet that power must be dynamic, distributed, and diplomatically grounded. Presence and resilience are no longer military luxuries; they are visible statements of resolve, reliability, and regional integration.

The Indo-Pacific's future will be shaped less by raw dominance than by presence, persistence, and principled leadership. As Shivshankar Menon observes, Asia is unlikely to settle into a single architecture; instead, it may oscillate among separate, even fragmented, subregional orders.¹⁵⁹

To navigate those edges wisely is to shape not only today's contested terrain but the regional order that will emerge beyond this phase of strategic rivalry. That task—demanding vigilance without paranoia, firmness without fatalism—will define the strategic craft of the coming decade.

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