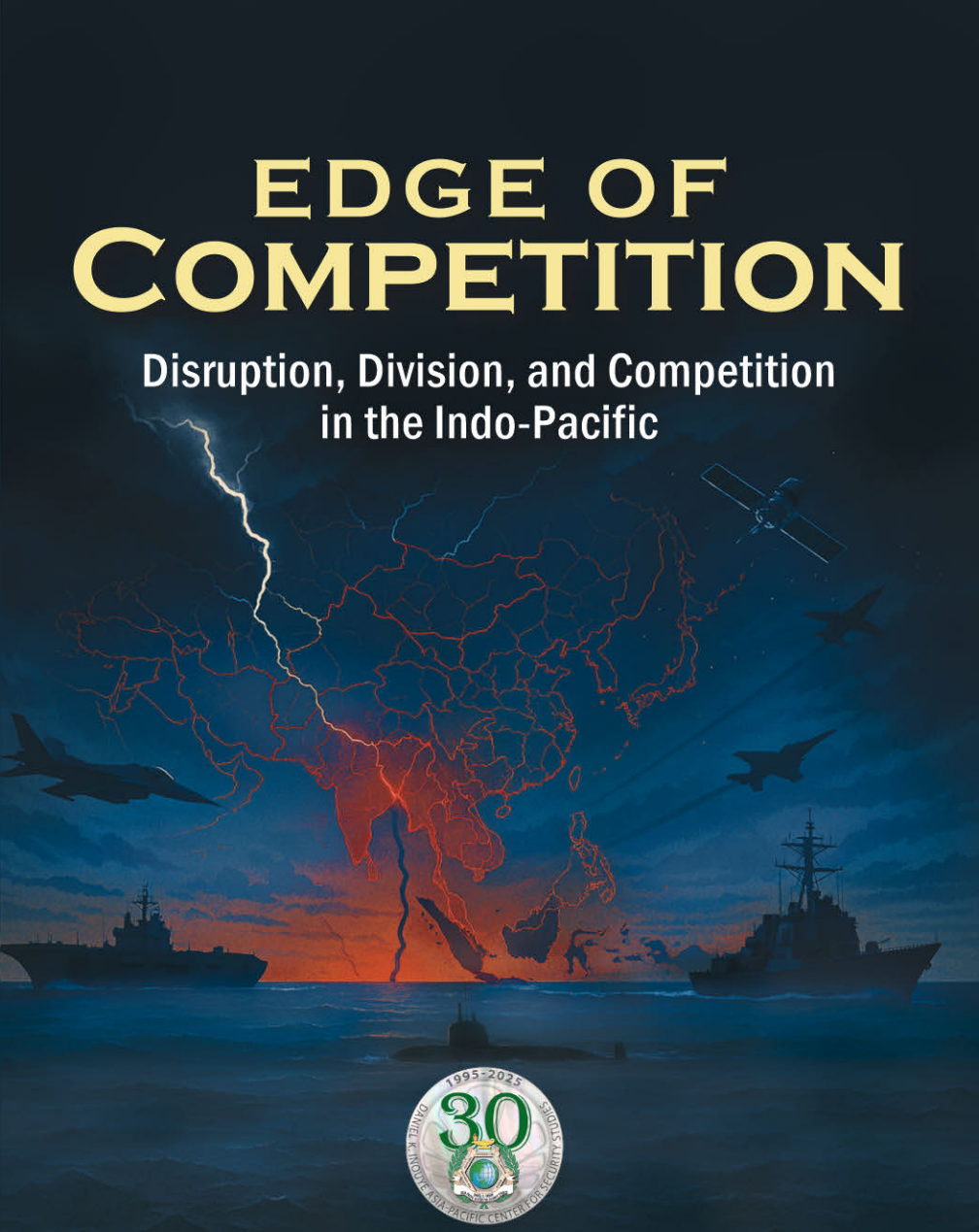
EDGE OF COMPETITION

Disruption, Division, and Competition in the Indo-Pacific



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Volume I of the Strategic Edge Series

James M. Minnich, Editor

Edge of Competition

Disruption, Division, and Competition in the Indo-Pacific

Edited by

James M. Minnich

Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, a U.S. Department of Defense institute, opened its doors in Honolulu, Hawaii, on September 4, 1995. Founded on 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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Where oceans converge, so too do interests,
ambitions, and the contest for tomorrow.

Foreword

The Indo-Pacific has entered an era of intensified complexity. Strategic tremors now travel faster. Fault lines run deeper. The contest for advantage now spans every domain, from seabed cables that bind our economies to the circuitry powering tomorrow's defense systems. Across the region, governments, militaries, and civil societies face a triad of overlapping challenges: disruptive shocks, deepening divisions, and accelerating competition across visible and invisible frontiers.

It is against this backdrop—and in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies—that *Edge of Competition: Disruption, Division, and Competition in the Indo-Pacific* arrives. This timely volume reflects the Center's enduring mission: to educate, connect, and empower security practitioners who advance peace and stability through cooperation. Rather than prescribe singular solutions, the contributors illuminate how

power is gained, tested, and sustained at the evolving edges of regional security.

Three Lenses, One Imperative

The volume is framed around three intersecting themes:

Disruption explores the shocks, threats, and emergent capabilities that challenge traditional assumptions about stability, deterrence, and power projection.

Division examines the fragmentation of state authority, the erosion of legitimacy, and widening asymmetries that enable coercion, interference, and instability.

Competition investigates strategic maneuvering across the modern Indo-Pacific, from maritime flashpoints and critical infrastructure vulnerabilities to the pursuit of industrial and technological rivalries.

Together, these themes reinforce a clear imperative: advantage belongs to those who can recognize early warning signs, align instruments of power with purpose, and respond with disciplined urgency. This ethos mirrors the Center's vision for collaborative leadership in an evolving security environment.

A Chorus of Regional Voices

One of this volume's great strengths is its refusal to frame the Indo-Pacific solely through the lens of major power rivalry. Instead, readers encounter perspectives from large democracies and small island nations, steadfast allies and

strategically autonomous partners. These voices remind us that agency is widely distributed and that enduring security is not imposed from above but forged through dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility.

From Page to Practice

For three decades, the Center has brought together civilian and military leaders to address challenges that transcend borders: piracy, pandemics, disinformation, gray-zone coercion, and the persistent threat of armed conflict. We have learned that insight only matters when it leads to action—policy that builds resilience, exercises that sharpen readiness, and partnerships that close vulnerabilities before they can be exploited.

Edge of Competition is a resource for that translation. Its chapters offer concrete implications for policymakers strengthening deterrence without provoking escalation, for defense planners balancing modernization with fiscal restraint, and for analysts striving to turn complexity into clarity.

An Invitation to Collaborate

This volume launches the *Strategic Edge Series*. Its successor, *America's Strategic Edge*, will examine how the United States can refine deterrence, cultivate lethality, and deepen partnerships that uphold Indo-Pacific security. Whether that volume concludes the series or opens future avenues of inquiry, the imperative remains constant: to sustain an open, stable, and resilient region amidst the pressures of competitive multipolarity.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, this book reflects what we have built and where we must go. I commend Dr. James M. Minnich and the contributing authors for their clarity of vision and commitment to actionable scholarship. May this work spark the cooperation and insight needed to meet the moment and shape the future.

Suzanne “Suzy” Puanani Vares-Lum
Major General, U.S. Army (Ret.)
Director
Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
Honolulu, Hawai'i | June 2025

PREFACE

The defining feature of the Indo-Pacific is its state of constant, accelerating change. But this volatility is not random. It is driven by three converging forces: strategic shocks that disrupt familiar patterns, political divisions that fragment authority, and daily contests that intensify competition across every domain.

As we mark the 30th anniversary of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, these forces lie at the heart of our work. When *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic* appeared in January 2025, it offered a sweeping overview of the region. Readers valued its breadth, but many called for a sharper, more focused lens on the region's most volatile pressure points.

Edge of Competition is our answer. The first volume in the new *Strategic Edge Series*, this book zeroes in on the friction zones where regional stability is being contested—and where the future will be shaped.

Mapping the Edges

The volume begins with my framing chapter, *Edges of Instability*, which introduces the regional conditions that define this moment. From there, the book unfolds across three thematic parts:

Part I | Disruption – *Catalytic shocks to the regional order.*

- **Disruptive Risks of Globalization** – Dr. Sebastian Kevany explores the destabilizing effects of interconnected systems.
- **Peak China?** – Colonel Ryan C. Agee examines whether China is reaching the limits of its strategic ascent.
- **China's Reusable Rocket Surge** – Elliot Joseph Fox analyzes the implications of Beijing's progress in space launch technology.
- **Terrorism after the Caliphate** – Dr. Sam Mullins assesses how violent extremism is evolving in the Indo-Pacific.
- **China's Nuclear Rise** – Dr. Bill Wieninger evaluates the strategic consequences of China's expanding arsenal.

Part II | Division – *Fragmented legitimacy, contested authority, and shifting alignments.*

- **Myanmar on the Edge** – Dr. Miemie Winn Byrd spotlights Myanmar as a persistent blind spot in regional strategy.
- **India's Strategic Ascent and South Asia's Strategic Edge** – Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath offer a dual analysis: India's leadership role and the strategic agency of smaller South Asian powers.
- **ASEAN Leadership in Flux** – Dr. Scott D. McDonald examines ASEAN's internal fractures and path to strategic relevance.
- **Pacific Small States, Big Stakes** – Dr. Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban highlight how Indo-Pacific microstates leverage strategic agency amid competition.
- **Korea's Strategic Clarity** – Dr. Lami Kim argues that South Korea's era of strategic ambiguity has ended, and clarity is now essential.

Part III | Competition – *Daily arenas of strategic maneuver and contestation.*

- **Contesting the South China Sea** – Dr. Denny Roy evaluates regional responses to Chinese maritime coercion.

- **Safeguarding India's Submarine Cables** – Divya Rai examines critical vulnerabilities in undersea digital infrastructure.
- **Dissuading Sea Slavery** – Anny Barlow proposes a new model to counter forced labor in the fishing industry.
- **Battlerace for Industrial Power** – Dr. Srini Sitaraman analyzes the intensifying contest for industrial and technological dominance.

This volume culminates in my afterword, *The Edge of Advantage*, which synthesizes these diverse challenges into three guiding principles for strategic action.

Looking Ahead: From Diagnosis to Prescription

Edge of Competition diagnoses the most pressing dynamics shaping the Indo-Pacific. Its companion volume, *America's Strategic Edge*, will move from diagnosis to prescription, examining how the United States can sustain its pivotal regional role through refined deterrence, readiness for high-end conflict, and a renewed warrior ethos.

Future volumes in the *Strategic Edge Series* will adapt as the environment demands. But each will share a clear aim: to provide sharp analysis, strategic foresight, and actionable insight for navigating the Indo-Pacific's evolving security landscape.

A Word of Thanks

This volume would not exist without the intellectual rigor of our contributing authors and the steadfast support of the DKI APCSS community. For three decades, they have advanced a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific. I am deeply grateful for their scholarship, service, and example.

May the pages that follow offer clarity, challenge assumptions, and help turn insight into action.

Dr. James M. Minnich
Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.)
Honolulu, Hawai'i | June 25, 2025

CONTENTS

Foreword vii
MG (Ret.) Suzanne "Suzy" Punani Vares-Lum

Preface xi
Dr. James M. Minnich

List of Figures and Tables xix

List of Abbreviations xx

1. Edges of Instability 1
Dr. James M. Minnich

PART ONE | DISRUPTION

2. Disruptive Risks of Globalization 57
Dr. Sebastian Kevany

3. Peak China? 71
Colonel Ryan C. Agee

4. China's Reusable Rocket Surge 97
Elliot Joseph Fox

5. Terrorism after the Caliphate 125
Dr. Sam Mullins

6. China's Nuclear Rise 159
Dr. Bill Wieninger

PART TWO | DIVISION

7. **Myanmar on the Edge** 179
   Dr. Miemie Winn Byrd
8. **India's Strategic Ascent** 205
   Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath
9. **South Asia's Strategic Edge** 249
   Shyam Tekwani and Saumya Sampath
10. **ASEAN Leadership in Flux** 275
    Dr. Scott D. McDonald
11. **Pacific Small States, Big Stakes** 301
    Dr. Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban
12. **Korea's Strategic Clarity** 333
    Dr. Lami Kim

PART THREE | COMPETITION

13. **Contesting the South China Sea** 359
    Dr. Denny Roy
14. **Safeguarding India's Submarine Cables** 385
    Divya Rai
15. **Dissuading Sea Slavery** 415
    Anny Barlow
16. **Battlerace for Industrial Power** 453
    Dr. Srini Sitaraman

Afterword: The Edge of Advantage 503
Dr. James M. Minnich

Contributors 507

Index 514

FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

15.1. Strategic Pathway to Combat Forced Labor in Offshore Fishing 437

15.2. Integrated Roles within a Transdisciplinary Task Force 438

15.3. Governance Levels for a Coordinated Task Force Network 440

TABLES

11.1 Pacific Microstate Participation in International Forums and Diplomatic Recognition of Taiwan 307

14.1 Global Submarine Cable Repair Ships and Their Base Ports 392

ABBREVIATIONS

123

3BHA	Three Brotherhood Alliance

A

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
AAE-1	Asia-Africa-Europe-1
ACSA	Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement
ACTIP	ASEAN Convention on the Trafficking in Persons
ADMM-Plus	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AHA	ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AI/ML	Artificial Learning and Machine Learning
AMMTC	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime
AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States partnership

B

BBIN	Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Framework
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation
BIS	Bureau of Industry and Security
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa

C

CALM-CS	Collaborative Accelerator for Lawful Maritime Conditions in Seafood
CALT	China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology
CAT	Civic Action Team
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CCI	Communities of Common Interest
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDRI	Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement
CFIUS	Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S.
CII	Critical Information Infrastructure
CMEC	China-Myanmar Economic Corridor
COC	Code of Conduct
COFA	Compacts of Free Association
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
CT	Counterterrorism

D

DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
DKI APCSS	Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
DPA	Defense Production Act

E

EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
EAS	East Asia Summit
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ESA	European Space Agency

EU	European Union
F	
FOBS	Fractional Orbital Bombardment System
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighters
FY	Fiscal Year
G	
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
H	
HMN	Huawei Marine Networks
I	
IAX	India-Asia-Express
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
iCET	Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology
ICPC	International Cable Protection Committee
IEX	India-Europe-Express
IFC-IOR	Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMAC	Information Management and Analysis Centre
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command
INDUS-X	India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IP	Intellectual Property
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
ISEA	ISIS East Asia
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISK	Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISR	Information, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
ISRU	In-Situ Resource Utilization
IT	Information Technology
ITEC	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (fishing)

J

JeM	Jaish e-Mohammed
JI	Jemaah Islamiyah

K

KINU	Korea Institute for National Unification
KLI	Kochi-Lakshadweep Island (Cable)
KNA	Karen National Army

L

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

M

MIDFIELD	Military, Informational, Diplomatic, Financial, Intelligence, Economic, Law, and Development
MIRV	Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles
MITI	Ministry of International Trade and Industry
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MRO	Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul

N

NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCIIPC	National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre

NDIS	National Defense Industrial Strategy
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NPT	Nuclear Proliferation Treaty
NSF	National Science Foundation
NUG	National Unity Government
NWS	Nuclear Weapon State
NZIA	Net-Zero Industry Act

O

ODA	Official Development Assistance
OSRD	Office of Scientific Research and Development

P

PDF	People's Defense Force
PIC	Pacific Island Countries
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PIPIR	Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China

Q

QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

R

RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific Exercise
ROK	Republic of Korea
RSF	Regional Sustainment Framework

S

S3A	Seabed-to-Space Situational Awareness
SAST	Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology

SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

T

TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
TCA	Trilateral Cooperative Agreement
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
TIP	Turkistan Islamic Party
TRAI	Telecom Regulatory Authority of India
TRUST	Transforming Relations Utilising Strategic Technologies
TTP	Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan

U

UDA	Underwater Domain Awareness
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNDOC	United Nations Office on Drug and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USAR	U.S. Army Reserve
USCG	United States Coast Guard

V

VEO	Violent Extremist Organization
VMS	Vessel Monitoring System
VTVL	Vertical-Takeoff, Vertical-Landing

Chapter 1

Edges of Instability

James M. Minnich

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 foments 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 Bosporus "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 Bosporus—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 zone[66]—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 blip[79]—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 km^2—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 Bank[125] 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 globally[140] 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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Part I | Disruption

Chapter 2

Disruptive Risks of Globalization

Sebastian Kevany

When goods don't cross borders, soldiers will.

— Attributed to Frédéric Bastiat

Introduction

Globalization is no longer a phase;[1] it is the underlying condition of the modern world.[2] From economic integration to labor mobility to digital connectivity and cross-border finance, it shapes how states compete, cooperate, and secure their interests. However, the speed and scale of these global flows have also created friction: economic nationalism, supply chain

insecurity, and political fragmentation have emerged as reactive forces.[3]

Yet globalization has not receded. Instead, it has entered a new phase—what might be called neo-globalization. Unlike the structured, rules-based order of the Bretton Woods era,[4] this phase is diffuse, decentralized, and often leaderless. Global internet use has quadrupled in two decades.[5] International trade and data flows continue to expand.[6] What remains is not coordinated governance, but a relentless, bottom-up surge of goods, services, and information, moving faster than the ability of institutions to adapt.[7]

This chapter uses the lens of complex interdependence to examine how globalization's evolving structures—economic, technological, and digital—create new forms of strategic vulnerability and diffuse insecurity.[8] Traditional models of national defense, focused on territorial protection and conventional force, are increasingly ill-suited to transnational, non-linear, and system-wide threats. From cyberattacks and pandemics to economic coercion and digital disinformation, today's vulnerabilities rarely stop at the border.

These dynamics are especially pronounced in the Indo-Pacific,[9] where strategic rivalry intersects with deep economic entanglement. Tensions between the United States and China unfold not just in military terms but through interdependent supply chains, dual-use technology, and asymmetric tools of influence.[10] In this environment, war may be deterred, but insecurity is diffused and persistent.

This paradox of being bound together and strategically exposed defines the disruptive risks of globalization. Managing these risks requires more than withdrawal or ideological entrenchment. It demands a modern conception of security—one that balances national sovereignty with practical coordination, and resilience with strategic foresight.

This chapter explores how globalization continues to reshape the security environment. It examines how economic, technological, and societal forces converge with traditional defense concerns and outlines strategic options for navigating a world where interconnectedness itself has become a domain of competition.

Rethinking Security in an Interconnected World

The evolution of security reflects the expanding scale of human interaction and the increasing complexity of global interdependence. Where early states focused on defending territory through localized conflicts, today's threats are often intangible, ranging from cyberattacks and terrorism to financial shocks and systemic disruption.

Globalization has accelerated this shift. It has introduced a new category of transnational risks that no single nation can manage in isolation. Threats such as pandemics, cyber intrusions, and strategic resource constraints have supplanted territorial conquest as dominant sources of insecurity. These challenges demand a broader, more adaptive security framework.

This shift is not without precedent.[11] Today's interconnected environment has made large-scale wars between major powers less rational but not less dangerous. Interdependence has not reduced risk. It has redistributed and reframed it.

Modern security threats often bypass the Westphalian model of sovereign states. Transnational networks like ISIS and Al Qaeda exploit global systems of finance, mobility, and information.[12] Meanwhile, system-level shocks like pandemics travel rapidly through supply chains and data networks, affecting entire regions in real time. In this landscape, vulnerability is no longer determined by geography, but by connectivity.[13]

Traditional threats have not disappeared. In regions marked by unresolved conflict, fragile governance, or strategic rivalry, conventional warfare remains a live concern. But the convergence of old and new threats—between tanks and trade routes, militias and malware—requires an integrated approach to security planning.

Navigating this environment calls for strategic foresight, resilient systems, and a readiness to adapt across multiple domains. In a world shaped by exposure as much as by power, security must be understood not only in terms of defense capabilities but also in terms of how nations absorb, mitigate, and respond to shocks that move at global speed.

Strategic Exposure: Transnational Threats in the Modern Era

The defining feature of 21st-century security is the rise of threats that move faster than traditional systems can track, contain, or deter. While large-scale wars between states have become less frequent, the risks posed by transnational threats—pandemics, cyberattacks, supply chain disruptions, and illicit maritime activity—have expanded dramatically.

These threats are system-wide in nature. They move through networks, not borders, affecting nations regardless of size, strength, or geography. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how a localized outbreak could rapidly disable global logistics, strain national healthcare systems, and upend markets. It also exposed overreliance on fragile supply chains and limitations of outdated contingency planning.

The effects of these disruptions are interlinked: workforce dislocation, constrained trade flows, resource scarcity, and political unrest often reinforce one another. For less-resourced states, the challenge is even greater; limited infrastructure and institutional capacity make recovery slower and exposure more severe.

Still, the pandemic also highlighted avenues for resilience. Rapid advances in vaccine development, adaptive logistics, and information-sharing demonstrated that innovation often emerges under pressure. In many cases, local networks and non-state actors responded more nimbly than large

bureaucracies, revealing the value of flexible partnerships and decentralized solutions.

The strategic takeaway is clear: transnational threats are here to stay, and national preparedness alone is insufficient. What matters now is how nations invest in early warning systems, secure critical infrastructure, and align responses with trusted partners. Future disruptions, whether cyber, biological, or economic, will reward those who can adapt at speed and scale.

While some global institutions continue to play a role, the decisive edge will come from tailored, interest-driven coalitions that can act quickly, share intelligence, and avoid institutional drag.[14] In this era of strategic exposure, preparedness is no longer a static capability; it is a dynamic, ongoing posture.

Economic Exposure in a Connected World

Globalization's economic engine—powered by the movement of goods, capital, and labor—has reshaped how states pursue prosperity and manage risk. Concepts like comparative advantage and distributed production are no longer theoretical; they are embedded in the daily operation of global supply chains, financial systems, and labor markets. This interconnectedness has enabled growth, but it has also created new forms of strategic exposure.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the complex dependencies that bind national economies together.[15] Disruptions in one region—whether due to port shutdowns,

cyberattacks, or geopolitical tension—can ripple across continents in days. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of just-in-time manufacturing and highlighted the strategic risks of over-concentrated production hubs.[16] It also revealed how interdependence, once seen as a buffer against conflict, can become a channel for cascading disruption.

Labor mobility and cross-border investment have likewise driven innovation and expanded opportunity.[17] But they also raise difficult questions about resilience. Shocks to supply chains or financial markets can undermine national stability, especially in states with narrow industrial bases or limited fiscal capacity. Strategic competition can further weaponize these linkages through sanctions, export controls, or financial coercion, turning economic tools into instruments of influence.

For policymakers, the task is not to reverse globalization, but to manage its risks more effectively. This requires greater attention to redundancy, diversification, and domestic capacity-building. It also calls for cooperative frameworks to ensure that interdependence does not become a source of coercion or strategic disadvantage.

In short, the economic logic of globalization remains intact, but it must be governed with strategic foresight. In an era of systemic disruption, states that understand and shape their global exposures will be best positioned to secure their interests and sustain stability.

Technology: A Force Multiplier of Risk

Technology is an accelerant of globalization. Digital platforms like Amazon, WhatsApp, and TikTok enable unprecedented speed in communication, commerce, and coordination.[18] Their reach is transnational, their user base massive, and their influence often exceeds that of state institutions. This connectivity has driven economic integration and cultural exchange, but it has also amplified exposure to disruption.

The same tools that knit global systems together are now routinely exploited for destabilizing purposes. Disinformation campaigns, cyber intrusions, data theft, and critical infrastructure targeting all illustrate how malign actors can weaponize openness. Unlike traditional threats, these attacks require neither borders nor armies. A single actor, operating from a laptop, can inflict damage on banks, hospitals, or public trust.[19]

This asymmetry is compounded by governance gaps. Many digital systems operate in legal gray zones, outpacing states' ability to regulate, audit, or defend them.[20] When technology firms function as de facto transnational entities, with limited accountability and immense datasets, they challenge sovereign authority while remaining indispensable to national security.

Managing this duality requires a coordinated and adaptive response. Key elements of that response include:

- **Shared Norms and Standards**

  Building consensus on acceptable behavior in cyberspace and enforcing accountability for violations.

- **Resilient Architecture**

  Designing systems that assume disruption is inevitable and prioritize containment, redundancy, and rapid recovery.

- **Digital Literacy and Trust**

  Equipping populations to navigate information ecosystems with discernment and resilience.

- **Allied Coordination**

  Enhancing cross-border cooperation between like-minded governments and private sector partners to mitigate strategic vulnerabilities.

The digital domain is now a frontline of competition. It is not merely a technical space but a strategic environment. Those who govern digital interdependence—balancing innovation with control, and openness with security—will shape global power.

Strategic Entanglement in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is the frontline of globalization's disruptive risks. It is home to the world's busiest sea lanes, most integrated supply chains, and asymmetries between prosperity and fragility.[21] These interconnections bring opportunity, but

they also sharpen the tools of coercion, disruption, and contestation.

Economic entanglement, especially between China and its trading partners, generates mutual dependence while enabling leverage. Supply chains stretch across fragile political geographies, rendering disruptions—whether by disaster, blockade, or sabotage—strategically significant. Cyberattacks ripple through the region's digital arteries, targeting finance, logistics, and public services.[22]

At the same time, unresolved disputes, governance gaps, and rising populism inject volatility into an already crowded strategic environment. In this crucible, security is not a binary condition but a function of resilience. The same forces that tie states together—trade, infrastructure, and information—can be repurposed for pressure, subversion, or influence.

The Indo-Pacific today operates under conditions of complex interdependence[23]—a state in which military posturing and strategic alliances coexist with deep economic, technological, and digital entanglement. In such a system, conventional deterrence is necessary but insufficient. Strategic exposure now flows through supply chains, critical infrastructure, data networks, and financial systems—each vulnerable to coercion, disruption, or manipulation.

The Indo-Pacific reveals the paradox of modern security: proximity to others is both a strength and a vulnerability. Navigating this space demands not just military readiness but systems thinking: the ability to manage risks that emerge not from invasion but from integration.

Conclusion: Security in an Interconnected Age

Globalization has transformed the operating environment of national and regional security. Its cross-border flows of goods, data, people, and influence generate both strength and exposure, linking prosperity with vulnerability in unpredictable ways.[24] In this environment, security is no longer a matter of isolation or dominance, but of managing risk in a connected system.

For Indo-Pacific actors and their partners, the challenge is not whether to engage the global system but how. Resilience now depends on the ability to anticipate disruptions, safeguard strategic infrastructure, and build flexible partnerships that enhance stability without sacrificing autonomy.

This chapter has outlined how globalization's disruptive effects demand new approaches—grounded in clarity, adaptability, and shared interest. Rather than retreating from interdependence, the task ahead is to navigate it wisely, deliberately, and with eyes open to the risks and rewards of a world where distance no longer offers protection.

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CHAPTER 3

PEAK CHINA?

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

Introduction

China's meteoric rise reshaped the global order—but has it already crested?[1] Once heralded as an unstoppable challenger to U.S. preeminence, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

now finds itself navigating economic stagnation, demographic decline, and growing strategic overreach. At home, shrinking growth and rising debt challenge the party's claim to legitimacy. Abroad, its assertiveness faces growing pushback and diminishing returns.

This chapter examines whether China is entering a period of strategic plateau—or even relative decline—and what that means for global stability. Anchored in power transition theory, it traces the evolution of China's economic and military instruments of power, dissects the headwinds confronting Beijing, and explores the strategic risks a peaking China may pose.

Rather than stabilizing into multipolarity, China's internal contradictions may increase the risk of external confrontation. For the United States and its allies, the imperative is clear: deter, posture, and prepare—not for a rising China, but a reactive one.

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

Before assessing whether China has peaked, it is essential to clarify how we define national ascent and decline. What distinguishes a rising power from a great power? How do nations accumulate and wield power? And to what point can we say a nation has plateaued or entered decline?

Power, in strategic terms, is not a monolith but a composite of instruments. The U.S. Joint Doctrine on Strategy identifies the traditional DIME levers—diplomatic, information,

military, and economic—as the core tools of national power. A broader framework, MIDFIELD, adds finance, intelligence, law, and development,[2] capturing a fuller spectrum of statecraft in the 21st century.

Among these instruments, economic strength is foundational. It enables investment in defense, sustains diplomacy, and supports information and legal systems.[3] A robust economy grants states the flexibility to project influence, resist coercion, and shape global rules.[4]

China exemplifies this interconnected approach. It has pursued growth through a state-led model that fuses centralized control with market incentives. The Ministry of Finance and the People's Bank of China shape fiscal and monetary policy. The Central Propaganda Department and State Council Information Office curate narratives to reinforce CCP legitimacy. Simultaneously, the Ministry of National Defense oversees the steady modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), projecting strength to secure economic interests and regional influence.

Understanding how China integrates these instruments is critical to evaluating its trajectory. The sections that follow trace the evolution of China's economic and military power, identifying the structural drivers of its rise and the headwinds that now threaten to stall—or reverse—its ascent.

Rising Powers and Revisionist States: The Case of China

In *Why Nations Rise*, Manjari Chatterjee Miller identifies two key conditions that underpin power transitions in international

relations:[5]

1. *Relative Power Gains*: A rising power must significantly close the gap in economic and military capability with the dominant power.
2. *Revisionist Ambitions*: Rising powers often seek to reshape the international order to better reflect their interests and values.

Miller defines a rising power as a state gaining relative capability, expanding its global presence, and gaining recognition as a future global.[6]

By these measures, China has clearly risen. Its economy has become the second largest in the world. Its military has modernized rapidly. Its ambition spans continents, most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a sprawling network of infrastructure projects and financial deals across Asia, Africa, and Europe aimed at deepening China's economic reach and strategic influence.

The U.S. National Security Strategy mirrors Miller's framework, explicitly designating China as a revisionist power.[7] This view underscores the geopolitical stakes: a China that continues to rise may upend the existing order, while a China in decline may lash out to preserve internal cohesion.

Defining "Peak": Power Plateaus and Strategic Uncertainty

What does it mean for a nation to peak?

Peaking refers to reaching the apex of relative power—after which a state either plateaus or declines in influence. It is easier to identify in hindsight, as with the ancient empires of Greece, Rome, or Persia. But recognizing it in real time—amid contradictory data and political opacity—is far more difficult.

Alex Vuving argues that relative trends, not absolute numbers, are key indicators.[8] A nation may continue growing in absolute GDP or military size, yet still decline in strategic relevance if others grow faster, more efficiently, or more innovatively.

This perspective is vital in analyzing China. While its absolute capabilities remain formidable, its relative trajectory is increasingly constrained. Slowing growth, rising debt, demographic headwinds, and international backlash suggest that China may be approaching—if not already at—its peak.

The next sections will assess these constraints in detail, beginning with China's economic engines and extending into its military modernization and strategic posture.

Economic Lift and Load: The Engines of China's Ascent

National power rests on economic strength. For China, economic modernization has been the primary driver of global rise, fueling military expansion, diplomatic outreach, and domestic legitimacy. From Deng Xiaoping's reforms to China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization, the CCP's strategy has centered on rapid, export-led growth, and it has delivered unprecedented gains.

Yet the very engines that lifted China's economy now show signs of strain. As China attempts to shift from a growth model built on cheap labor and debt-driven infrastructure toward one driven by innovation and consumption,[9] structural headwinds are mounting. To understand whether China is peaking, we must assess its four foundational economic factors: land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship.[10]

Land: Abundance and Constraint

China's geography is a source of both advantage and constraint. It possesses critical resources—rare earths, coal, hydropower, and arable land—yet faces acute limits. Water scarcity, pollution, and declining farmland challenge both agricultural output and public health.[11] While the United States benefits from protective oceans and favorable land-to-population ratios,[12] China's long land borders necessitate significant defense outlays, drawing resources from other sectors. Moreover, China remains heavily reliant on imports for key commodities like oil, copper, steel, and advanced machinery.[13] This external dependence creates supply chain vulnerabilities, exposed starkly by recent global disruptions.

Labor: Demographic Momentum Reversed

China's demographic dividend has reversed. The same labor force that powered its rise is now shrinking. The one-child policy, urbanization, and rising living costs have sharply reduced birth rates. As India surpasses China in total population, China faces a future marked by labor shortages, an

aging society, and rising dependency ratios. Unlike the United States, which mitigates demographic decline through immigration, China's ethnic homogeneity and restrictive immigration policies offer little relief. Optimists point to automation and AI as potential offsets,[14] but even domestic scholars acknowledge the likely consequences: declining consumption, economic contraction, and diminished national power.[15]

Capital: Fueled Growth, Hidden Risk

China's growth has been capital-intensive, driven by high savings rates, suppressed wages, and massive public investment. But these policies have created severe imbalances. Local governments and state-owned enterprises carry enormous debt. Infrastructure overbuilding, speculative real estate markets, and opaque accounting practices hide systemic risks. Economist Michael Pettis warns that much of China's investment has yielded unproductive assets misclassified as growth.[16] Evergrande's collapse and the broader property crisis signal a reckoning. The mismatch between investment returns and debt obligations threatens financial stability and limits the CCP's ability to stimulate further growth without triggering inflation or capital flight.[17]

Entrepreneurship: Promises Under Pressure

China aspires to move up the value chain—shifting from labor-intensive production toward high-tech innovation. In recent years, Chinese startups have flourished,[18] particularly

in fintech, e-commerce, and AI. Young entrepreneurs increasingly embrace risk,[19] and China is competing globally in sectors like electric vehicles and green tech. Yet innovation struggles under authoritarian constraints. Beijing's crackdown on tech giants and tightening ideological control have chilled investor confidence. As Edward Tse notes, China's entrepreneurial vitality is largely bottom-up—at odds with the CCP's top-down control.[20] Without a freer flow of information, capital, and talent, entrepreneurial dynamism may falter—undermining the very innovation needed to counteract labor decline and capital inefficiencies.

Assessing the Trajectory

Viewed through these four lenses, China's economic rise appears increasingly burdened. Resource constraints, demographic decay, financial fragility, and overcentralized control combine to dim the prospects of sustained ascent.

With economic vulnerabilities mounting, the CCP may turn increasingly to its other lever of national power: military modernization. Yet this pivot is not without risk. Defense expansion requires financial and human capital, and it raises regional tensions at a time when China's margin for error is narrowing. As China's economic ascent slows, its military trajectory—and how it is wielded—will play a critical role in determining whether Beijing can sustain its strategic ambitions or overreach under pressure.

Steel and Signals:
China's Military Ambitions Under Strain

The CCP has long viewed military power as essential to national rejuvenation. Informed by past humiliations and inspired by modern U.S. warfighting dominance, the PLA has undergone a dramatic transformation. This modernization—accelerated since the late 1990s—was shaped by two pivotal events: the U.S. military's swift victory in the Gulf War and Beijing's sense of vulnerability during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, when American aircraft carriers sailed unchallenged near Chinese waters.[21]

Those episodes reinforced a critical lesson for leadership: economic rise without military credibility leaves China vulnerable. Since then, the PLA has pursued a focused buildup designed not just to defend China's sovereignty but to project power, deter intervention, and challenge U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Capability Leap: From Legacy Force to Precision Deterrent

Over the past two decades, China has increased its defense spending tenfold,[22] with consistent annual growth well above inflation.[23] While official defense budgets often understate total expenditures, the trajectory is unmistakable. The PLA has shifted from a bloated, manpower-heavy legacy force to a more agile, high-tech military emphasizing precision fires, cyber and space capabilities, and strategic enablers.

A core feature of this modernization is China's investment in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. This layered strategy—including long-range missile systems, integrated air defense, electronic warfare, and undersea platforms—is designed to raise the cost of U.S. intervention, especially in a Taiwan contingency or a South China Sea crisis.

Wargames conducted by RAND and CSIS consistently show that China could inflict serious losses in a short, high-intensity conflict near its periphery.[24] While China does not yet possess global power projection comparable to the United States, it has significantly shifted the regional balance—especially within the First Island Chain.[25]

The Burden of Strategic Overreach

Yet modernization comes with steep costs. Sustaining dual-capability growth—economic and military—is increasingly difficult as fiscal space narrows. China's economic slowdown limits future defense spending increases, especially as domestic needs like pensions,[26] healthcare, and social stability consume more of the national budget.[27]

Moreover, China's security obligations are expanding.[28] The PLA is expected not only to deter Taiwan and push back U.S. forces, but also to manage potential crises along its borders with India, Russia, and North Korea. The PLA Navy faces growing pressure to secure China's maritime interests,[29] including far-flung fishing fleets and critical trade routes across the Indian Ocean.

This growing burden—compounded by global expectations of great power status—raises the risk of overextension. Unlike the United States, China lacks a network of *trusted* allies to share defense burdens or base access. Without external anchors, the sustainability of China's military reach remains fragile.

People Problems: Talent, Training, and Trust

As platforms and systems grow more complex, China faces a persistent challenge: human capital.[30] Recruiting, training, and retaining a technically proficient force is difficult in a society with an aging population and rising affluence. While China has introduced incentives for college graduates and invested in military education, the PLA still grapples with readiness gaps.[31]

Morale and loyalty are also concerns. Corruption, factionalism, and political purges have left scars. Xi Jinping's sweeping anti-corruption campaign has removed many senior officers,[32] improving accountability but also deepening mistrust within the ranks.[33] Promotion now hinges as much on political loyalty as on merit.

Further, Beijing's insistence on tight party control over the military curtails autonomy at the tactical level—a liability in modern, fast-paced combat environments where decentralized decision-making is essential.

Taiwan and the Test of Credibility

Taiwan remains the central test of the PLA's modernization—and the CCP's political will. A successful invasion would require a complex, large-scale amphibious operation across the Taiwan Strait, likely under fire from defending forces and with the risk of U.S. and allied intervention.

Despite years of buildup, such a campaign would be fraught with risk. Analysts compare it to the Normandy landings in complexity.[34] A failed operation could destabilize the CCP and permanently alter regional alignments. For now, the PLA focuses on gray-zone pressure: airspace incursions, cyberattacks, disinformation, and blockade rehearsals—all designed to wear down Taiwan without firing a shot.

Signals of Strategic Intent

China's military evolution sends a clear message: the PLA is no longer just a territorial defense force. It is becoming a tool for shaping the strategic environment—deterring adversaries, reassuring partners, and reinforcing China's global posture. But whether it can deliver on these ambitions without provoking confrontation or exhausting its resources remains uncertain.

As China's economic growth plateaus, its reliance on hard power may increase. Yet a brittle economy, limited alliances, and persistent institutional weaknesses constrain how far this strategy can go. The real test is not modernization, but how

China applies military power amid mounting internal and external pressures.

Crossroads of Power: China's Strategic Paths Forward

As China's ascent slows, the CCP faces a narrowing set of strategic options. Internally, the economic model that delivered four decades of growth is under strain. Externally, expectations of global leadership outpace capacity. Historically, great powers at such inflection points have responded in three ways: internal reform, collapse, or external mobilization.[35] Each path carries profound implications—not only for China, but for global stability.

Scenario One: Systemic Collapse

While unlikely in the near term, the collapse of CCP rule cannot be entirely discounted. Prolonged economic stagnation, rising inequality, and eroding public trust could overwhelm the regime's capacity for control. The 2022–2023 anti-lockdown protests revealed surprising public defiance—even breaching China's digital censorship apparatus.[36] Although quickly contained, these demonstrations hinted at deeper frustration.

Yet collapse would not be a clean break. No institutional alternative stands ready to govern 1.4 billion people or manage a vast nuclear arsenal. The fall of the Soviet Union offers a cautionary parallel—but with far greater risk. A fractured China could trigger regional disorder, refugee flows, and the emergence of nationalist or militarized factions.

While this scenario remains low probability, its stakes demand contingency thinking—especially regarding nuclear stewardship, maritime security, and the risk of miscalculation in a leaderless vacuum.

Scenario Two: Internal Reform

The more plausible path is strategic adaptation. China has the institutional memory, national pride, and policy tools to recalibrate—though political will remains uncertain. The CCP could gradually pivot from investment-heavy growth to a more sustainable, consumer-driven economy. It could ease restrictions on private enterprise, increase transparency, and restore a more rules-based commercial environment.

However, genuine reform would require rolling back Xi Jinping's centralization of power—something that would threaten elite interests and the CCP's ideological hold.[37] Since 2012, Xi has recast the Party as the singular guardian of national destiny. This has reduced bureaucratic flexibility and stifled policy experimentation. Reform, if it comes, would likely be incremental and highly controlled.

Still, the potential for a managed "soft landing" cannot be dismissed. Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has noted that "China's growth need not come at the expense of America's leadership."[38] Strategic patience, targeted engagement, and support for structural reform—especially in trade, tech standards, and debt governance—could steer China toward a less confrontational path.

Scenario Three: Nationalist Mobilization

The most dangerous but perhaps most likely response is external diversion. As internal pressures grow, the CCP may double down on nationalism to preserve its legitimacy. This playbook is familiar: assert claims in the South China Sea, tighten the ring around Taiwan, escalate maritime disputes, or frame foreign tech restrictions as Western containment.

Rallying the public against a perceived external threat allows the Party to shift blame, consolidate control, and justify tightened repression. It also increases the risk of strategic miscalculation. Manufactured crises can spiral beyond their intended political use, especially in crowded maritime zones or cyber domains with unclear rules of engagement.

This scenario demands vigilance. Deterrence—not provocation—must guide U.S. and allied posture.[39] Strategic signaling, resilience-building, and proactive risk reduction will be key to managing escalation without conceding principles or space.

A Fork in the Road

China's uncertain trajectory presents no single outcome, but a range of unstable equilibria. The CCP may wobble between reform and repression, restraint and escalation. The role of external actors—particularly the United States and its allies—will be critical in shaping incentives, deterring coercion, and encouraging course correction.

The next section will turn to these global implications. What are the risks if China chooses confrontation over reform? And how should the United States structure its alliances, posture, and strategy to prepare for a more volatile era of Chinese behavior?

Global Implications: Strategic Risk in a Peaking China Era

This era of compressed Chinese power presents acute risks that demand more than observation—they require strategic recalibration. The world has spent the past two decades preparing for China's rise. It must now prepare for the risks of China's plateau. A peaking power under internal strain can be more volatile than a rising one.[40] As the Chinese Communist Party navigates economic deceleration, demographic contraction, and growing strategic friction, the risk of coercive or escalatory behavior increases—particularly in contested regions like the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and along China's periphery.

Flashpoints and Force Posture

The most immediate risk lies in gray-zone provocations that escalate into conflict.[41] Beijing will use maritime militia, cyber operations, or economic coercion to test boundaries and set conditions for a posture advantage and a fait accompli. However, fishing rights disputes, semiconductor choke points, or debt-related unrest in BRI partner states could become the spark for regional instability.

The PLA Navy's expanded presence in the South China Sea and Western Pacific reflects a more assertive posture aimed at defending these interests.[42] This includes escorting fishing fleets, probing U.S. and allied maritime operations, and increasing pressure on Taiwan. The risk of accidental clashes or intentional shows of force misread as aggression is rising.

The United States must respond with purposeful posture that is credible, survivable, and proximate. The Indo-Pacific is no longer a theater of future planning—it is the center of strategic gravity.[43] As China relies more on hard power, the credibility of U.S. deterrence and the cohesion of allied coalitions will be tested.

Debt Diplomacy and Destabilization Risks

China's overseas lending—once seen as a soft power tool—now risks triggering systemic instability. Nations like Sri Lanka, Laos, and Pakistan face mounting debt burdens that could lead to defaults, unrest, or proxy confrontations. Beijing itself faces a dilemma: restructure loans, absorb losses, or enforce payment through influence—each with reputational and strategic costs.

The United States must prepare for these ripple effects, particularly across the Global South. Defaults could drive humanitarian crises, migration, and economic disorder, requiring agile diplomatic, development, and defense responses.

China's future may not lie in conquest, but in coercion under constraint. The strategic challenge is not a head-on clash with a rising peer but managing the dangers of a slowing one with shrinking options and heightened insecurity. Preparation must extend beyond the present—anticipating a world where disorder, disinformation, and coercive leverage replace overt confrontation.

The final section offers a set of strategic recommendations for U.S. policymakers to confront this new reality and posture for long-term advantage in an era defined not by China's rise, but by its response to decline.

Strategic Priorities: Operating in the Compression Zone

As China confronts economic strain, demographic decline, and strategic overreach, its leadership may become more brittle, not more restrained. This is not a moment of power transition—but a moment of power compression. A peaking China, constrained by internal limits and external resistance, may seek advantage through risk. The United States must be prepared—not only to deter escalation, but also to shape Beijing's response to its decline. The following six priorities should anchor U.S. strategy in the years ahead:

1. **Forge Credible Forward Deterrence**

   Build an integrated Indo-Pacific deterrence network through persistent forward presence, shared basing,

joint exercises, and regional burden-sharing—especially with Japan, Australia, the Philippines, India, Taiwan, and capable ASEAN states. Intent to confront a violent China must be unambiguous. Implement the Prioritization Imperative[44] while investing in long-range precision fires, undersea warfare, SOF-enabled irregular deterrence, and resilient command and control. Proximity matters.

2. **Exploit Economic and Informational Asymmetries**

   Leverage technology controls, financial tools, and strategic messaging to erode CCP confidence and expose corruption, coercion, and contradictions. Economy and mass are decisive in large-scale combat operations; the U.S. must secure advantage while degrading CCP coercive capacity.

3. **Institutionalize China Monitoring and Red Teaming**

   Establish interagency and academic networks to track Chinese internal dynamics—economic, political, and military. Invest in large language models and real-time narrative intelligence to expand decision space and anticipate risk.

4. **Prepare for BRI Fallout and Destabilization**

   Anticipate second-order effects from BRI stress fractures—defaults, social unrest, and proxy instability. Posture military, humanitarian, and development resources to respond to cascading crises across the Global South.

5. **Encourage Reform while Demonstrating Strength**

   Discreetly support structural reform within China—commercial transparency; legal modernization, and adherence to trade standards—without expecting democratization. Pride is a constraint, and U.S. weakness will be exploited.

6. **Leverage European Experience in Conflict Response**

   Integrate European allies into Indo-Pacific advisory and capacity-building missions. NATO members bring Ukraine war lessons on distributed defense, command integration, and resilience that are highly relevant to the First Island Chain.

Conclusion: Preparing for Strategic Shock

The next decade will reveal China's response to its emerging decline. A brittle power with shrinking options can still be dangerous—but it can also be deterred, dissuaded, and, at times, redirected.

Ultimately, China may lean harder on coercion and nationalism to compensate for internal fragility. The United States must reinforce credibility, cohesion, and readiness within its alliances while denying Beijing easy opportunities for escalation.

The challenge ahead is not to contain a rising China—but to withstand and shape the behavior of a constrained, reactive

one. Strategic clarity—and a coalition prepared for turbulence—will be key to avoiding dangerous descent.

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CHAPTER 4

CHINA'S REUSABLE ROCKET SURGE

Elliot Joseph Fox

Whoever controls space controls the world.

— Lyndon B. Johnson

Introduction

On December 21, 2015, a soot-streaked *Falcon 9* first stage descended in controlled triumph onto Cape Canaveral,[2] transforming what had long been science fiction into operational fact. With that landing, the paradigm of space access shifted—from expendable rocketry and episodic launches to reusable boosters, compressed timelines, and

accelerated industrial learning curves. Reusability did not merely cut costs; it redefined cadence as a core metric of spacepower.[3]

China quickly recognized the implications. In less than a decade, it mobilized a fusion of state research centers, venture-backed firms, and provincial launch hubs to close the gap. By the mid-2020s, Chinese hop tests and precision landings were no longer novelties but signals of a system in rapid maturation, threatening the cost, tempo, and strategic lead that the United States had carved through innovation.[4]

This accelerating contest over reusable launch capability is not just a technical rivalry—it is a strategic realignment with cascading effects. It alters the economics of space exploration, disrupts fledgling space traffic management norms, and exposes the inadequacy of treaties designed for an era of low launch frequency.[5] As the domain grows more contested, congested, and commercially driven, the challenge of ensuring stability—while preserving strategic advantage—intensifies.

Framed through the foundational theories of spacepower—Everett Dolman's strategic realism,[6] David Lupton's doctrinal typologies,[7] and John Klein's maritime analogies[8]—this chapter analyzes China's reusable-rocket surge as both a technological leap and a geopolitical signal. It assesses the implications for U.S. space strategy, alliance structures, and the broader rules-based order in orbit. In doing so, it illuminates a key front in the broader competition for advantage in the emerging multipolar space age.

The Ideas that Shape the Heavens

When Everett Dolman wrote that space could never remain a sanctuary, he was thinking less about satellites than about strategy. However lofty the altitudes, he argued, space would ultimately mirror the competitive instincts found on land and sea. Dolman urged the United States to establish a *benign hegemony*—strong enough to deter adventurism, light enough to let commerce and science flourish.[9]

David Lupton approached the same challenge through doctrinal classification. Some strategists, he noted, envisioned a weapons-free orbital commons—the *Sanctuary School*. Others anticipated conflict and prioritized shielding vulnerable assets—*Survivability*. Further along the spectrum stood advocates of *High Ground* superiority, and ultimately *Control*, which treated space as an arena to be dominated like air or sea.[10]

John Klein extended this analogy with maritime precision. Ocean, he observed, had always been highways for commerce, laboratories for exploration, and—when diplomacy faltered—arenas for strategic rivalry. Space, vast and borderless, would follow a similar arc unless deliberate norms and habits of restraint took root.[11]

What all three theorists emphasized, in different ways, was the critical hinge of *access*. A nation able to reach orbit cheaply and frequently can deploy and replace constellations, experiment at scale, and harden resilience in a way its rivals cannot easily replicate.[12] For a decade, the United States—

primarily through the *Falcon 9* and its successors—held that edge. Today, China's engineers are moving rapidly to close it.

From Doctrine to Launchpad

The theories of Dolman, Lupton, and Klein have not remained in the realm of academic abstraction. They have been internalized—often implicitly—by institutions responsible for translating strategy into capability. Chief among these is the U.S. Space Force, which in its *Space Capstone Publication* (SCP) identifies access to space as a national imperative.[13] Spacelift, as outlined in the *AU-18 Space Primer*, is not merely a technical enabler; it is the bedrock upon which all other space-based capabilities depend.[14] Without the ability to launch, replace, and sustain assets in orbit, no command, control, or communications advantage can be assured.

Spacelift is a strategic infrastructure. It determines whether a country can project power, ensure redundancy, test innovations at scale, and maintain an uninterrupted presence in orbit. Just as harbors and runways once defined the reach of maritime and air forces, launch systems now anchor the projection of spacepower.[15]

Reusable rocketry has transformed launch from a bottleneck to a force multiplier. The United States, through SpaceX's *Falcon* fleet, gained a first-mover advantage, reducing costs and drastically increasing launch cadence. But that advantage is no longer secure. China's emerging suite of reusable boosters threatens to neutralize the U.S. lead in

spacelift, creating new dilemmas for deterrence, alliance coordination, and domain awareness.[16]

As China's launch architecture matures, the strategic calculus shifts. In a domain where responsiveness equals resilience, and cadence confers coercive credibility, the ability to relaunch quickly may matter more than who launched first.

China's Reusable Rocketry Challenge: Technical Parity, Political Disruption

China's push into reusable launch technology poses a dual challenge to U.S. strategic interests—technical in nature, but politically consequential. While reusable rocketry promises broader access to orbit and commercial opportunity, it also threatens to fragment the emerging norms of space governance and test the cohesion of U.S.-led frameworks like the Artemis Accords.

This challenge unfolds along two critical axes: political and technical implications.

Political Implications: Pressure on the Artemis Accords

China's maturing launch capability—still largely state-controlled and often dual-use—complicates the normative ecosystem the United States and its partners have sought to build around the Artemis Accords. Several key provisions are implicated:[17]

- **Peaceful Use of Space (Section 3)**

  The Accords reaffirm the peaceful use of outer space. Yet the overlap between China's space agency and its military raises doubts about its adherence to this principle. Increased launch frequency, powered by reusability, could shift the domain toward securitization and strategic signaling.

- **Interoperability (Section 5)**

  Chinese spacecraft and infrastructure are developed outside Western ecosystems, limiting interoperability during emergencies and complicating joint ventures.

- **Space Resources & Deconfliction (Sec. 10 & 11)**

  Reusability increases cadence, raising the likelihood of orbital congestion, contested resource claims, and operational friction.

- **Orbital Debris (Section 12)**

  The acceleration of launches risks compounding the orbital debris crisis, especially absent best practices and transparency measures.

Technical Implications: Launch Cadence and Catch-Up

China's effort to match SpaceX's capabilities is gaining speed. In 2024 alone, SpaceX conducted 134 launches of the *Falcon* 9 and *Falcon* Heavy platforms, reflecting the maturity of its vertically integrated model.[18] This cadence underscores a technological and operational edge built over a decade through

flight demonstrators like *Grasshopper*, iterative prototyping, and commercial scaling.[19]

Today, Chinese startups—often state-backed and strategically aligned—are emulating this model. Many are reaching the hop-test phase, mirroring SpaceX's trajectory from the early 2010s. While a performance gap remains, the slope of China's progress is steep. The potential for parity, if achieved, would recalibrate strategic timelines and reshape force posture in orbit.

Rocket Factories on the Yangtze: China's Race for Reusability

China's fascination with reusability first drew public notice in 2017, when a Ministry of Science and Technology roadmap pledged "full industrial reusability" by 2035.[20] The ambition was sweeping: methane-fueled engines, flyback boosters, autonomous landing barges, and even nuclear-thermal upper stages to support cislunar logistics. At the time, China lacked a single vertical-takeoff, vertical-landing (VTVL) prototype.

That changed quickly. iSpace broke the starting line in July 2019, when its *Hyperbola-1* became the first privately built Chinese rocket to attempt orbit.[21] Three years later, Landscape's *Zhuque-2* achieved the world's first methane-fueled orbital launch.[22] Neither mission reused hardware, but both triggered a national surge in reusability experiments. By 2023, iSpace's *Hyerbola-2Y* had completed 100-meter and 1,000-meter hop tests.[23] Galactic Energy, CAS Space, Deep

Blue Aerospace, and state conglomerates SAST and CALT soon followed with their own VTVL demonstrations.

The shift was not just technical—it was industrial and cultural. Shenzhen-based venture capitalists began backing rocket startups with the same fervor once reserved for e-commerce and ridesharing. Reusable rocketry had become not only a national objective but a commercial race.

The numbers reveal the momentum. In 2023, SpaceX launched 97 times—already a remarkable cadence, with one booster turning around in just 19 days. By 2024, the company had scaled even further, completing 134 launches. In contrast, China's government-commercial ecosystem managed 37 launches in 2023, all on expendable platforms. Yet by early 2025, Landspace and iSpace each claimed they were within 12 months of achieving orbital reflight. If either succeeds—and if CALT's *Long March 10* reaches partial reusability by 2027—the U.S. launch advantage could narrow significantly before the decade ends.

The strategic implications go beyond raw numbers. Reusability lowers the cost per kilogram to orbit, but it also increases tempo, operational resilience, and technology refresh rates. In a contested domain like space, cadence is capability, and capability shapes deterrence. As China closes the gap, the United States and its partners must reassess how launch frequency, recovery infrastructure, and industrial surge capacity factor into broader strategies of space control and assurance.

China's Thriving Reusable Rocket Industry: A Competitive Landscape

China's push for reusable launch capabilities is no longer the domain of a single state program. It now features a dense constellation of commercial startups, state-backed ventures, and institutional spinoffs[24]—each racing to become the nation's SpaceX. While success is far from guaranteed, the volume and variety of experimentation increase the probability that one or more firms will break through. In an industry where scale compounds advantage, even a single successful venture could dramatically shift global launch dynamics.

Key players include:

- **Landspace**

  Conducted a successful suborbital test of its *Zhuque-3* methalox rocket in January 2024.[25] Orbital launch is targeted for Q3 2025,[26] with a projected payload of 12.5 metric tons (reusable mode).[27]

- **iSpace**

  After a successful *Hyperbola-2Y* hop test in 2023, it aims to launch *Hyperbola-3*—an 8.5 ton reusable vehicle—by mid-2026, supported by a new engine production facility.[28]

- **CAS Space**

  A spinoff from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, CAS Space is developing *Kinetica-2*, with reusability

planned by 2028 and capacity to lift 12 tons low Earth orbit.[29]

- **Galactic Energy**

  Completed a hop test of *Pallas-1* in August 2023.[30] A reusable variant is expected in 2025, followed by a three-core version capable of 14 tons to orbit.[31]

- **Deep Blue Aerospace**

  Building on the *Nebula-1* hop test (2022, 2024), it plans a launch in 2025 and follow-on tests of *Nebula-2* in 2026.[32]

- **Space Epoch (Sepoch)**

  Successfully conducted a hop test of the *Yuanxingzhe-1* (YXZ-1) in May 2025. Designed for soft water landings, higher-altitude tests are planned for late 2025.[33]

- **SAST & CALT**

  State-owned entities under CASC. SAST conducted gimbaled hop tests in 2024[34] and 2025.[35] CALT is developing a crew-rated reusable rocket, currently in the static fire testing phase.[36]

This industrial diversification is strategic. Rather than relying on a single "national champion," China is hedging its bets—accelerating learning curves and spreading development risk. In this model, success by any one actor could decisively expand China's launch capacity, compress timelines, and challenge Western assumptions about lead time and technological dominance.

Beyond Commercial Gains: Strategic Risks, Competitive Stakes

China's rapid advances in reusable launch technology and its expanding commercial space sector are not merely markers of scientific achievement—they are instruments of strategic positioning. While they promise broader access to orbit, they also blur the lines between civil, commercial, and military space programs.

Recent milestones—such as the assembly and sustained operations of the *Tiangong-3* space station, a lunar sample return, and the first robotic landing on the moon's far side—demonstrate a highly capable system driven by long-term ambition. By April 2025, China had completed a flawless crew rotation at *Tiangong*, launching three astronauts aboard a Shenzhou spacecraft that docked with the station after a 6.5-hour flight.[37] The new crew replaced astronauts who had spent 175 days in orbit, reflecting a cadence now comparable to the International Space Station. Far from symbolic, *Tiangong* is expanding: China plans to double its size by the early 2030s, adding inflatable modules, a co-orbital space telescope, and greater docking capacity for future missions and international payloads.[38] Born of exclusion from the U.S.-led International Space Station architecture, it has evolved into a strategic platform for enduring presence and influence in low Earth orbit.

These developments are increasingly dual-use. China's investment in on-orbit satellite servicing, for instance, supports both civilian maintenance and potential counterspace

operations. The same roadmap that outlines commercial launch goals—China's "2017–2045 Space Transportation System Development Roadmap,"—also includes plans for nuclear propulsion and large-scale space resource extraction. These are not notional concepts: they are supported by R&D investments and a pattern of steady delivery against ambitious timelines.

Lunar Resources, Return of Strategic Geography

Among China's most consequential ambitions is its pursuit of lunar resources, particularly water ice at the lunar South Pole. This ice is not just a scientific curiosity—it is an enabler of logistics. Split into hydrogen and oxygen, it provides breathable air, potable water, and, critically, rocket fuel production. Such resources could anchor in-space manufacturing, life support systems, and long-term operations beyond Earth's orbit.

Beijing's *Chang'e* series of robotic missions has steadily expanded its reach, with *Chang'e 7* and Artemis missions intended to operate near Shackleton Crater,[39] where strategic geography meets technological ambition. This terrain is not just desirable—it may become the logistical hinge of an Earth-Moon economy.

International law offers guidance but little precision. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits sovereignty but guarantees access.[40] The Artemis Accords builds on those principles with proposals for transparency and safety zones—but China is not a signatory. If two landers arrive within line of sight of the

same crater, whose prospecting drills take precedence? No precedent exists. In such a vacuum, even the perception of advantage—gained through faster, cheaper launches or earlier emplacement, could harden suspicion into strategic friction. [41]

China's terrestrial behavior further complicates this picture. Its assertiveness in maritime and border disputes has often leveraged ambiguity and aggressive behavior to expand de facto control. If such tactics are exported to the lunar surface, they could fracture the fragile consensus underpinning space governance and accelerate the militarization of the final frontier.

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

The rise of China's reusable launch ecosystem is both a technical achievement and a geopolitical signal. Beijing's pursuit of reusability compresses timelines, erodes Western assumptions of uncontested advantage, and challenges the norms of access, cadence, and control that have defined U.S. dominance in orbit for decades.

The U.S. response must be multidimensional. It blends commercial incentives with diplomatic coalition-building and normative leadership with quiet crisis planning. While China centralizes its space ambitions through state-backed industrial policy, the United States leans on a different model: one rooted in open innovation, alliance cohesion, and institutional resilience. What follows is a survey of the strategic pathways

to sustain U.S. leadership, reinforce a rules-based order in space, and mitigate the risks of unbounded competition.

Sustaining Technological Leadership through Competitive Innovation

To preserve its edge in orbital access, the United States must continue cultivating a dynamic and diversified commercial space sector. While China's state-backed firms pursue reusability through coordinated national investment, the U.S. advantage lies in its entrepreneurial ecosystem, layered competition, and first-mover momentum.

At the heavy-lift end of the spectrum, SpaceX's *Starship* and Blue Origin's *New Glenn* promise significant gains in payload capacity and launch economy. These vehicles could redefine deep space logistics and further consolidate the United States' lead in cadence and scalability. Simultaneously, smaller firms such as Rocket Lab,[42] Relativity Space, and Stoke Space are advancing reusable architectures that increase responsiveness, reduce costs, and harden resilience. Their flexibility and speed—traits often absent in China's top-down system—should be seen as national strategic assets.[43]

Building a Coalition of Space Norms: The Artemis Accords

China's refusal to join the Artemis Accords leaves the United States with both a challenge and an opportunity. While Beijing forges bilateral partnerships and promotes alternatives to Western-led frameworks,[44] Washington can strengthen its hand by expanding and deepening the Artemis coalition.

Launched in 2020, the Accords articulate principles grounded in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, updated for 21st-century realities.[45] They promote peaceful use, interoperability, transparency, debris mitigation, and responsible resource utilization. Just as NATO provides a security architecture for terrestrial cooperation, the Artemis Accords can evolve into the backbone of a normative framework for lunar and cislunar activity.

The task is twofold: expand membership beyond traditional allies, and embed the Accords into operational planning, infrastructure sharing, and technical collaboration. Doing so would raise the cost of norms violations, reinforce collective resilience, and shape a more inclusive—but rules-based—extraterrestrial order. It would also counterbalance China's efforts to define alternative governance structures.

Competing in the "Astropolitical" Domain

The contest over reusability—and over orbital governance—unfolds in what some scholars term the astropolitical domain.[46] It is a domain marked by strategic anarchy but ripe for institutional innovation. Like maritime and cyber domains, space remains underregulated and difficult to police. But this very ambiguity makes it an arena where norms, if established early and reinforced consistently, can shape strategic behavior.

The Artemis Accords reflect a liberal-institutionalist vision of space: one that favors transparency, cooperation, and rules-based stability over opaque bilateralism or coercive control. They embody a "decidedly American" approach to

governance—open, scientifically grounded, built on coalitions, and focused on peaceful dispute resolution. This stands in contrast to China's model, which is more centralized, security-oriented, and state-directed.

Astropolitics will not be won through doctrine alone. It demands sustained diplomacy, public-private alignment, and the strategic use of transparency as deterrence. Just as freedom-of-navigation patrols assert maritime norms, regular publication of launch data, debris mitigation compliance, and lunar coordination protocols can signal U.S. leadership and preempt destabilizing ambiguity.

Washington's Dilemma

For U.S. planners, China's reusable rocket surge lands somewhere between validation and provocation. It vindicates decades of investment in commercial innovation—yet it also compresses warning time. Concepts once confined to strategic theory—space traffic coordination, debris liability, cislunar search and rescue—are now frontline operational concerns.

The response taking shape in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill is multifaceted, if not always cohesive. Funding continues for *Starship*, *New Glenn*, and a slate of independent small-lift and medium-lift vehicles,[47] guided by the logic that redundancy is its own form of deterrence. Diplomatically, Washington is expanding the Artemis coalition—from Europe to Southeast Asia[48]—on the premise that shared rules are cheaper than contested orbits.

Yet even the most enthusiastic multilateralism cannot wish Beijing away. Quiet talks on debris mitigation and lunar deconfliction, tentative as they are, now rank alongside hypersonic hotlines as necessities of great power prudence. The space domain is no longer a sanctuary or a science project—it is a shared operating environment, with all the instability and interdependence that implies.

Competitive Stewardship, Not Containment

The objective is not to contain China's rise in space but to shape the environment in which it unfolds. Reusability is not just about rockets—it is about who sets the tempo, who defines the rules, and who earns the trust of the international community.

By fostering innovation at home and multilateralism abroad, the United States can preserve its strategic edge, safeguard the orbital commons, and prove that leadership in space is compatible with openness, restraint, and shared advancement.

The Way Forward: Balancing Competition and Cooperation in Orbit

China's rise as a space power—marked by its reusable launch surge and expanding lunar ambitions—presents a strategic inflection point. For the United States and its allies, the response must be neither reactive nor rigid. Instead, it must combine innovation with restraint, competition with communication, and coalition-building with foresight.

Sustaining leadership in this domain will require deliberate choices across four key axes:

1. **Invest in Innovation as a Strategic Imperative**

   Preserving U.S. leadership begins with technological primacy. This means continued investment not only in private space lift programs like *Starship*, *New Glenn*, and *Neutron* but also in next-generation technologies: faster turnaround times, reusable upper stages, space refueling, in-orbit servicing, and in-situ resource utilization (ISRU). These capabilities are not just enablers of exploration—they are the foundations of orbital tempo, deterrence, and resilience in an increasingly contested domain.

2. **Strengthen Alliances through Purposeful Cooperation**

   The Artemis Accords provide a framework—but turning principles into practice requires deeper operational integration with allies. Joint research, multilateral missions, and shared standards for space traffic management and resource extraction can convert normative alignment into strategic synergy. Partners like Japan, Canada, Australia, India, and ESA members are not just contributors—they are amplifiers of U.S. credibility and capacity.

3. **Engage China Where Prudence Allows**

   Competition with China is structural—but unmanaged rivalry is unstable. Limited engagement on crisis deconfliction, orbital safety, and shared scientific

interests—whether bilateral or via forums like COPUOS—can reduce miscalculation and signal strategic intent. Engagement is not endorsement; it is insulation against escalation. Even amid distrust, technical dialogue on space debris or planetary defense can serve shared survival.

4. **Adapt to a Multipolar Space Order**

   Uncontested U.S. dominance in space is giving way to a multipolar reality—one where state and commercial actors alike project influence. This demands strategic flexibility: resilient launch infrastructure, enhanced space situational awareness, and clear rules of engagement for potential conflict scenarios. The challenge is not just to deter rivals, but to shape an ecosystem where responsibility outpaces rivalry.

These strategies offer both promise and complexity. Investing in space technology can unlock economic gains but requires sustained political will. Deepening alliances strengthen collective leverage but must navigate divergent national interests. Engaging China may reduce risk—but demands vigilance to protect sensitive capabilities. Preparing for multipolarity requires vision: not just to compete, but to shape.

If pursued with foresight, the United States and its allies can ensure that space remains not just a contested frontier but a domain of shared exploration, strategic stability, and human progress. The stakes are high, but so are the rewards for responsible leadership.

Conclusion: Strategic Leadership in a Reusable Era

China's advancements in reusable rocket technology mark a pivotal shift in the evolution of spacepower. The rapid democratization of launch—faster, cheaper, and more routine—is transforming space from a realm of scientific ambitions into a contested domain of strategic consequence. In this emerging order, cadence and capability are metrics—they are instruments of power.

Beijing's growing space ambitions, fueled by a maturing ecosystem of reusable launch vehicles and long-range propulsion roadmaps, are not merely technical milestones. They reflect a deliberate effort to reshape the balance of power in orbit, redefine norms of behavior, and challenge existing frameworks of cooperation and control. This trajectory carries profound implications for global stability, economic resilience, and the strategic freedom of the United States and its allies.

While the United States retains a decisive lead in launch cadence and commercial innovation, preserving that edge is not automatic. It demands sustained investment in next-generation technologies, robust public-private partnerships, and deeper integration with trusted allies. The Artemis Accords offer a framework for building a values-based coalition—one capable of reinforcing transparency, deterring coercion, and setting the terms of responsible conduct in space.

Limited engagement with China—on debris mitigation, crisis deconfliction, and technical safety—may lower risk. Yet

engagement is not an end in itself. The overriding imperative is leadership: in setting norms, assembling coalitions, and defining the tempo and terms of a multipolar space order.

The stakes are high. The risk of complacency is real. But with resolve, foresight, and alliance-driven strategy, the United States can navigate this inflection point—and ensure that space remains not only a frontier of discovery, but a domain defined by access, stability, and enduring strategic advantage. As Washington charts its course through this moment of strategic transition, one truth endures: in space, timing is power—and clarity is peace.

Afterword: The Cadence Race

History's first space race was linear—a sprint to the Moon in which each side counted milestones and flags. The second, unfolding now, is rhythmic. Victory accrues not to the nation that lands first but to the one that launches again and again until orbital replenishment feels as routine as airlift. On present trends, the United States will keep its lead for several more years, yet China's learning curve slices steeply upward.

Whether that curve bends toward partnership or rivalry will depend less on manifesto language than on launch manifests: who flies, how often, and toward what end. If Dolman's benign hegemony and Klein's maritime model are to coexist with Lupton's more cautionary schools, cadence must be matched by clarity—clear intentions, clear norms, and reliable channels of risk reduction. Space, like the sea before

it, can nourish commerce and discovery only so long as its busiest lanes remain predictable.

The decade ahead, then, is decisive. Rockets lifting off coastal pads in Florida and Hainan already carry that future in their tanks. Somewhere in the echo of their engines lies the answer to a question as old as exploration itself: Can competition pace itself without stumbling into conflict? Humanity's next great frontier awaits the verdict.

Endnotes

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Chapter 5

Terrorism after the Caliphate

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

The changes that have occurred in the global terrorism landscape during the last decade have been profound.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3]

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 explores how these groups have adapted in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on South and Southeast Asia. It traces their evolution across four phases: the rise and fall of the caliphate (2014–2019), the post-caliphate (2019–2021), the Taliban's return in Afghanistan (2021– 2023), and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, beginning in late 2023. The chapter concludes with implications for Indo-Pacific counterterrorism (CT) strategies, emphasizing the need for agile, multifaceted responses that address both operational threats and underlying drivers of 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 onward 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.[4]

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.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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 Türkiye 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.[9] 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.[10]

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.[11] 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.[12]

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.[13] 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.[14] The group was also linked to three relatively minor

attacks, a plot disrupted in the Maldives, and at least three disrupted plots in India.[15]

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.[16]

Just 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.

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.[17]

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.[18]

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).[19] 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.[20]

At the global level, following the attacks in New Zealand, 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.[21] 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.[22]

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."[23]

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.[24]

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.[25] 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.[26]

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.[27] 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.[28] 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.[29] Even some ISIS supporters, most of whom still regarded the Taliban as apostates, begrudgingly celebrated their success.[30]

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.[31] 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.[32] 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.[33]

Under pressure in Afghanistan and eager to make its presence felt across the region, ISK also stepped up its attacks in Pakistan.[34] Between them, the two groups have been responsible for hundreds of attacks and thousands of casualties since 2021.[35]

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.[36] 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.[37]

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.[38]

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.[39]

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, Türkiye, and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.[40] 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.

Conflict in the Middle East: 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.[41]

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, have further enflamed tensions and

provided fertile ground for extremist narratives.[42] 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,[43] 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 former 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."[44]

The leading Palestinian terrorist groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), have maintained a primarily nationalist and regional focus. Hamas has repeatedly encouraged international protests and demonstrations in support of Palestinians after the most recent war began, but has stopped short of calling for attacks.[45]

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.[46]

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 with 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."[47] 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.[48]

Widening Ripples: Extremism beyond the Middle East

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.[49]

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.[50]

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.[51] 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.[52]

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.[53] 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.[54]

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 (which is simultaneously facing a surging, separatist insurgency in Balochistan), 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).[55] However, it is presently unclear whether this effort will be sustained, and, for the most part, the general downward trend has continued.[56]

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.[57]

Resilient Networks and Renewed Risks

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 increasingly preoccupied with other strategic challenges. 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 flare-up of conflict zones, and 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.[58]

Meanwhile, the recent success of the Crocus City Hall attack has renewed terrorists' interest in attacking music concerts, given the potential for mass casualties.[59] 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 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 that 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 contained[60]—has reminded us

once again, terrorists are capable of remarkable patience and repeated strategic surprise.

For countries in the Indo-Pacific, counterterrorism cannot rest solely on security operations. It requires sustained investment in intelligence and law enforcement capabilities, but also a recognition of the deeper structural issues that enables violent extremism to take root. Political instability, interagency rivalries, corruption, social, political, and economic marginalization of communities, and unresolved grievances provide fertile ground for radicalization.

The path forward demands a dual approach: maintain constant pressure on violent actors while addressing root causes they exploit. Governments must reinvigorate regional cooperation mechanisms, strengthen whole-of-society partnerships, and take a robust stand against extremist ideologies.

Strategic patience, backed by a combination of preventive and decisive measures, and built upon a foundation of regional cooperation, will be key to securing a more stable and resilient Indo-Pacific. Not only is this likely to be more successful and enduring, but also more cost-effective.

The United States can and should continue supporting its allies and partners as they continue to grapple with the threat of terrorism. However, ultimately, the solutions must come from within. Now is the time to act—before the next potential wave of violence.

Endnotes

[1] This chapter, originally titled "Jihadist Terrorism in the Indo-Pacific: Resurgence and Resilience in the Post-Caliphate Era," was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,* edited by James M. Minnich (2025), https://doi.org/10.71236/ADRQ3801. The current version has been updated and retitled for publication in this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.

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CHAPTER 6

CHINA'S NUCLEAR RISE

Bill Wieninger

Rational leaders took us to the brink of nuclear annihilation; that peril still exists today.

— Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Defense Secretary, 1961–1968
Interview in *The Fog of War*, 2003

Introduction

Tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have sharpened under Xi Jinping, as long-simmering flashpoints—especially Taiwan and the South China Sea—move to the center of great-power rivalry.[1]

Compounding the risk is Beijing's breakneck nuclear expansion. Satellite imagery released in 2021 revealed three vast missile-silo complexes in Gansu, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, each capable of hosting scores of solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM).[2] In 2024, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) projected that, if construction continues, the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force could field ICBMs in numbers comparable to the U.S. arsenal by about 2030, even though Washington will still retain a far larger warhead stockpile.[3] These developments warrant scrutiny.

This chapter explores how these shifts affect U.S. deterrence strategy, emphasizing the value of a secure second-strike capability. Next, it considers possible motivations behind China's nuclear expansion. It then examines lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war, particularly regarding nuclear signaling, escalation thresholds, and deterrence credibility. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations for the United States, aimed at preserving stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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.[4]

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.[5]

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."[6] The risk of inadvertent escalation through miscalculation, as outlined by Scott Sagan,[7] 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.[8] 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.[9]

While BMD systems offer some protection, they can be easily overwhelmed by a peer competitor with a large arsenal. 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 moral repugnance associated with their indiscriminate and catastrophic destruction.[10] 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 strength of the taboo and China's close relationship with Russia.[11] 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 ICBMs 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.[12] 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.[13]

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 an 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.[14]

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.[15]

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.[16] While many scholars challenge Kroenig's conclusions regarding the bargaining advantage,[17] 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.[18]

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 damage-mitigation 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*.[19]

Lessons from Russia's War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine offers several critical lessons for nuclear deterrence. First, Russia's "escalate to de-escalate" 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, 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.[20]

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.[21]

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.[22] 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.[23] 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 the 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.[24]

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 former 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."[25] For now, the U.S. nuclear arsenal appears sufficient.

The most critical priority is maintaining a secure second-strike capability. Washington'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.

Conclusion

China's evolving nuclear posture presents serious but manageable challenges. Strategic realism—rooted in historical precedent, credible deterrence, and steady alliance coordination—can help the United States navigate this new landscape.

Avoiding arms races and maintaining second-strike capabilities should remain central to U.S. policy. Additionally, the establishment of direct communication channels and recurring senior-level dialogues with Beijing would reduce the risk of miscalculation.

The post–Cold War optimism about nuclear disarmament has faded. Yet the tools and practices that sustained deterrence through more dangerous periods remain available. By adapting these tools to new realities and avoiding reactive overreach, the United States can maintain strategic balance in the face of China's nuclear expansion, helping preserve a stable Indo-Pacific and a more secure international order.

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Part II | Division

CHAPTER 7

MYANMAR ON THE EDGE

Miemie Winn Byrd

The edge of chaos is a dangerous place to dwell.

— Niall Ferguson, adapted from
Civilization: The West and the Rest (2010)

Introduction

Amid Indo-Pacific power shifts and intensifying global rivalries, Myanmar is unraveling.[1] Since the 2021 military coup, the country has descended into civil war, mass displacement, and criminal exploitation, transforming from a fragile democracy into a highly contested battleground. Yet,

the international response remains muted. This silence risks becoming a strategic failure.

Myanmar's crisis is not an isolated tragedy. It is a live demonstration of how authoritarian regimes entrench power, how external actors like China exploit instability, and how strategic neglect invites dangerous vacuums. With more than 3.5 million people displaced,[2] a junta sustained by repression and illicit finance, and a growing resistance alliance that has seized 80% of the territory,[3] Myanmar is a nation on the edge—and a region at risk.

China, meanwhile, has quietly deepened its economic and security foothold. It has secured vital corridors to the Indian Ocean, extracted natural wealth, and leveraged Myanmar's instability to circumvent maritime chokepoints and extend its strategic reach—all while much of the world looks elsewhere.

This chapter contends that Myanmar is no longer a peripheral concern—it is a geopolitical fault line. Understanding the conflict through both realist and constructivist lenses reveals a deeper contest over influence, norms, and order in the Indo-Pacific. What happens in Myanmar will shape not only the future of Southeast Asia but also the credibility of global efforts to support democratic resistance and counter authoritarian expansion across the region.

China's Myanmar Strategy

China's deepening presence in Myanmar is no accident—it is the product of a deliberate strategy to secure access to the

Indian Ocean, extract critical resources, and expand its geopolitical leverage in Southeast Asia. Since the 2021 military coup, Beijing has capitalized on Myanmar's isolation, embedding itself economically, diplomatically, and strategically while others remain distracted or hesitant.

Geostrategic Leverage: Bypassing the Malacca Dilemma

Myanmar's coastline offers China a unique strategic alternative to the vulnerable chokepoint of the Malacca Strait. Through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)—a centerpiece of the Belt and Road Initiative—Beijing has built dual-use infrastructure that includes the deep-water port at Kyauk Phyu, overland oil and gas pipelines to Yunnan, and rail and road links to facilitate direct maritime access.

These corridors reduce China's dependence on contested maritime routes and enhance its logistical agility. For China's western provinces, particularly landlocked Yunnan, Myanmar serves as a critical gateway to the Indian Ocean—expanding trade, enabling forward naval deployment, and supporting broader ambitions of regional encirclement and access denial.

Crucially, China's options in a Taiwan contingency increasingly hinge on securing this land-sea corridor. By bypassing chokepoints like the Malacca Strait, Beijing gains operational depth and resilience. Meanwhile, the reported expansion of dual-use infrastructure on Myanmar's Great Coco Islands—within striking distance of India's Andaman and Nicobar outposts—raises alarms in New Delhi. While hard evidence remains limited, the perception of Chinese

surveillance or military presence underscores Myanmar's growing weight in the Indo-Pacific strategic calculation.

A Maritime Fulcrum for Power Projection

From a defense posture perspective, Myanmar enables Beijing to extend its maritime influence deep into the Indian Ocean. While China does not yet operate a formal naval base on Myanmar's soil, the prospect remains both plausible and problematic. Even without full basing rights, China's growing logistical foothold could support People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy operations for power projection, protection of sea lines, or coercive signaling in future contingencies.

Notably, the presence of Chinese Private Security Company (PSC) personnel at the Kyauk Phyu port signals Beijing's willingness to deploy state-adjacent forces to secure its strategic interests on foreign soil. Though not officially military, these deployments represent a gray-zone presence that could normalize and precondition future military access.

This approach reflects a classically indirect strategy, reminiscent of Sun Tzu's principles: securing advantage without open confrontation. Through incremental infrastructure investment, diplomatic cultivation of the junta, and restrained yet persistent engagement, Beijing has drawn Myanmar deeper into its orbit. By exploiting the country's political disarray—from brokering ceasefires to expanding commercial control—China is steadily entrenching itself. As global attention remains focused on the South China Sea,

Beijing's quiet advance toward the Indian Ocean continues largely unchecked.

Resource Security as Strategic Insurance

Myanmar's vast natural resources provide Beijing with more than economic gain—they offer strategic insulation. Most notably, Myanmar has become China's single largest external source of rare earth minerals, which are critical for green technologies, advanced electronics, and next-generation military systems. Between 2017 and 2021, China imported over 140,000 tons of rare earths from Myanmar, accounting for approximately 38% of its total rare earth imports during that period, valued at more than $1 billion.[4]

In a future defined by resource nationalism, fragmented supply chains, and intensifying great power rivalry, upstream control of critical minerals—especially outside the First Island Chain—offers China a critical advantage. Beijing extractive posture in Myanmar is not opportunistic; it is strategic. By embedding itself in Myanmar's mining sector, China is securing future leverage over critical inputs in both commercial and defense domains.

Calculated Consolidation amid Chaos

China is no longer hedging. Its posture has shifted decisively in favor of the Myanmar military junta. This pivot was underscored by Beijing's recent pressure on the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to relinquish control of Lashio, despite the group's battlefield gains, and by

the deployment of Chinese personnel to monitor a junta-imposed ceasefire. Rather than balancing ethnic groups against the central military, China is now actively working to preserve the junta's hold over key strategic corridors. Regime stability, not ethnic equilibrium, has become Beijing's priority because stability safeguards its own geopolitical and economic interests.

As Western engagement wanes and ASEAN struggles to respond effectively, China has emerged as the dominant external actor shaping Myanmar's trajectory. Its approach reflects strategic patience, positional leverage, and a deliberate belief that influence built through embedded presence—rather than overt intervention—is more durable and less likely to provoke backlash.

Criminal Havens and Strategic Spillover

The breakdown of state authority in Myanmar has transformed the country into a breeding ground for transnational crime, with destabilizing effects rippling across the Indo-Pacific. In the vacuum left by an embattled junta, either unable or unwilling to assert control, criminal syndicates have seized lawless zones to expand human trafficking rings, cyber scams hubs, and narcotics production. These illicit enterprises now do more than enrich crime lords: they finance armed groups, prop up the junta's war chest, and erode the internal security of neighboring countries. What was once seen as Myanmar's internal disorder has become one of the region's most under-recognized and corrosive security threats.

Human Trafficking and Refugee Exploitation

Myanmar now ranks among the world's worst countries for human trafficking.[5] With displacement exceeding 3.5 million,[6] organized criminal networks prey on vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children, using false promises of safety, employment, or transportation. Victims are trafficked into forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude, fueling a shadow economy rooted in coercion and despair.

These trafficking operations increasingly cross borders, enabled by porous frontiers and complicit officials. Neighboring countries such as Thailand, India, and Bangladesh are grappling with rising inflows of trafficked individuals, straining social services, public health systems, and border security. If left unchecked, this expanding criminal ecosystem will further erode regional governance, undermine state legitimacy, and exacerbate the Indo-Pacific's already fragile humanitarian landscape.

Cyber Scam Enclaves: A Profitable Protection Racket

Since the 2021 coup, the Myanmar military has permitted, and in some cases protected, a vast network of scam compounds along its borders with China and Thailand. These enclaves host sophisticated criminal operations,[7] including notorious "pig-butchering" scams, where trafficked individuals are forced to defraud victims worldwide under coercive conditions.

In 2023 alone, such scams generated an estimated $15.3 billion in illicit revenue.[8] Intelligence reports identified 30 scam hubs near the Thai border and nearly 100 along the Chinese frontier.[9] Many are shielded by junta-aligned forces, most notably the Karen National Army (KNA, formerly the Border Guard Force), exposing a collusive nexus between state actors and transnational crime.[10]

China's mounting concerns, particularly over its nationals being targeted, spurred an unusual tactical shift. In late 2023, Beijing tacitly backed resistance forces during Operation 1027, which dismantled a major scam hub in Kokang and triggered mass surrenders.[11] But the crackdown proved temporary. Scam networks simply migrated southeast,[12] reestablishing under junta protection in areas like Shwe Kokko—ironically part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure.

This convergence of BRI projects, criminal syndicates, and junta forces is no coincidence—it is a survival strategy. As legitimate revenues collapse, the junta increasingly relies on organized crime to finance its military operations, effectively weaponizing illicit enterprise as an instrument of authoritarian resilience.[13]

Opium Resurgence and Drug Proliferation

Myanmar has reemerged as the world's leading opium producer, overtaking Afghanistan in the wake of Taliban crackdowns. Exploiting vast ungoverned territories ideal for cultivation and trafficking, narcotics production has surged,[14]

fueling violence, corruption, and cross-border instability. Profits flow to both the junta and select ethnic armed groups, including the KNA, deepening cycles of conflict and entrenching illicit economies.

The proliferation of methamphetamines and synthetic opioids from Myanmar's lawless frontiers has overwhelmed law enforcement across Southeast Asia, strained public health systems, and triggered diplomatic tensions, particularly among the countries of the Golden Triangle: Thailand, Laos, and China. The narcotics trade, once a regional affliction, now constitutes a transnational crisis with escalating strategic consequences.

Strategic Implications

Myanmar's descent into a criminal sanctuary poses a multidimensional threat to regional stability and global order.[15] First, illicit economies now provide the junta with critical financial lifelines, allowing it to circumvent sanctions and sustain military operations despite widespread internal collapse. Second, these networks actively destabilize neighboring states through trafficking, corruption, and economic predation, undermining governance and weakening regional institutions. Third, they create a new form of coercive leverage for external actors, particularly China, which can selectively suppress or tolerate these networks to influence outcomes on the ground.

For the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, confronting this convergence of crime and authoritarianism is

no longer just a humanitarian concern—it is a strategic necessity. Failure to respond risks entrenching state-criminal collusion as a model of authoritarian resilience, weakening democratic norms, and eroding the credibility of regional security architecture.

Myanmar Military: A Regime on the Brink

Despite lifelines from illicit revenue and foreign military backing, primarily from China and Russia, the Myanmar junta is steadily losing control. Beset by armed resistance, battlefield setbacks, and a crumbling chain of command, the regime increasingly resembles a brittle autocracy in terminal decline.

Four years after the coup, the military faces cascading operational failures. Recruitment has faltered, training is haphazard, and morale has collapsed. In desperation, the junta has deployed police forces to frontlines, imposed nationwide conscription,[16] and restricted foreign travel to stem defections[17]—moves that signal exhaustion, not resolve.

Reliant on airpower to compensate for ground losses, the military has unleashed indiscriminate bombings that have failed to break civilian resistance. If anything, they have intensified defiance. In 2024, nearly 90% of Myanmar townships experienced active conflict, mirroring the scale of violence seen in 2023, when 94% were affected.[18] This sustained insurgency reflects both the breadth of resistance and the population's refusal to submit.

Amid a deepening crisis, the junta exploited the 7.7-magnitude earthquake in March 2025 as a political opportunity. It welcomed humanitarian assistance not as relief but as leverage, diverting aid from the hardest-hit areas to reconstruction in Naypyidaw and military provisions. What could have been a moment of national healing became a cynical bid to reframe the regime as a functioning authority.

Corruption and dysfunction within the military compound its decline. Breakdown in command-and-control, mistrust between officers and enlisted ranks, and widespread desertion have paralyzed entire units. Field reports reveal battalions operating at a fraction of their strength, with some commanders abandoning posts altogether.

Increasingly isolated and driven by self-preservation, the junta's senior leadership has rejected compromise in favor of coercion. Yet this repression has backfired, galvanizing a more unified and legitimate opposition that continues to gain momentum.

Given the regime's intransigence and the scale of human suffering, restoring stability will require a calibrated mix of diplomatic, non-lethal, and—when necessary—lethal support to resistance forces. Time is not neutral. The longer the junta clings to power, the greater the humanitarian toll—and the higher the cost of eventual recovery.

Catalysts of the Resistance: How Myanmar's Opposition is Winning

Against formidable odds, Myanmar's resistance movement

has shown extraordinary cohesion, adaptability, and resilience. Despite limited international backing and the junta's overwhelming firepower, opposition forces have steadily expanded territorial control, eroded military authority, and laid the groundwork for a post-junta transition. Five key factors explain the durability and growing momentum of this movement.

Unified Front: From Fragmentation to Coordinated Force

A historic alliance has formed between the newly established People's Defense Forces and long-standing Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO). Groups once divided by mistrust and ethnic lines now fight under a common goal: to dismantle military rule and build a federal democratic union.

This coalition, spanning Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, and other regions, has fused battlefield experience with strategic coordination, forging unprecedented operational trust. A key tipping point came in October 2023, when the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) launched a major offensive in northern Shan State, delivering a decisive blow to junta forces and signaling the resistance's growing territorial and tactical strength.

This unity undermines the junta's long-practiced divide-and-conquer strategy and lays critical groundwork for an inclusive political order rooted in Myanmar's multiethnic identity and federal aspirations.

Defections from Within: The Military's Crumbling Core

Since the 2021 coup, a growing wave of defections has eroded the Myanmar military from within. What began as a civilian-led Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) has evolved into a broader exodus, encompassing military officers, frontline troops, and civil servants alike.

These defections offer more than manpower—they provide critical intelligence. Insights into logistical failures, command breakdowns, and collapsing morale have enabled the resistance to exploit vulnerabilities and launch increasingly effective operations. By 2022, some battalions operated at less than 20% strength; by 2023, entire units had surrendered or switched sides.[19]

Each defection weakens the junta's control and credibility, while reinforcing the resistance's legitimacy and momentum. It is not just a loss of personnel—it is a public unraveling of regime authority.

Popular Will: A Nation that Refuses to Yield

Despite relentless violence and economic collapse, public support for the resistance remains unshaken. Polling and field reports indicate that the overwhelming majority of Myanmar's population continues to reject military rule.[20] This collective defiance sustains the resistance--providing manpower, logistics, and morale.

The junta's coercive tactics—forced conscription, indiscriminate airstrikes, and movement restrictions—have

largely backfired. Communities sabotage military logistics, block supply routes, and shelter resistance forces. The military's failure to reinforce contested zones during key operations, such as Operation 1027, highlights the strategic impact of civilian non-cooperation.

Popular will is not a backdrop to this conflict—it is the engine of in the Myanmar revolution. The regime fights not just an armed resistance, but a nation that refuses to yield.

Diaspora Networks: Transnational Support, Real-Time Impact

Myanmar's global diaspora has emerged as a strategic force multiplier. Across continents and generations, exiles and emigrants have mobilized financial support, technical expertise, and political advocacy to sustain the resistance.

Digital platforms forged during the COVID-19 pandemic—Zoom, Signal, WhatsApp, social media—now serve as the movement's operational backbone. This virtual infrastructure enables real-time intelligence sharing, training, and coordination across borders.

A generational division of labor has taken shape: Gen Z fights on the frontlines, Gen X leads in tech and logistics, and older generations sustain funding streams and diplomatic outreach. Together, they form a multigenerational, globally networked movement with adaptive capacity and strategic reach.

The diaspora's role is not symbolic—it is operational, indispensable, and evolving.

China's Calculated Interference

China has approached Myanmar's civil war not as a crisis to end, but as a dynamic to exploit. While Beijing officially calls for stability, its behavior reveals a more strategic objective: to prevent the rise of a democratic, pluralistic neighbor and ensure that any governing authority in Myanmar remains tethered to Chinese influence.

Beijing's engagement—selectively transactional and opaque—aims less at conflict resolution than at geopolitical insulation. For China, instability is tolerable. Independence is not.

From Passive Bet to Tactical Recalibration

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, Beijing wagered on a quick military consolidation. It extended diplomatic cover to the junta and pressured northern EAOs to remain neutral, seeking to preserve border stability and safeguard its infrastructure investments.

But as Myanmar's crisis deepened, so did China's recalculations. The junta's failure to contain cyber scam syndicates, many of which preyed on Chinese citizens, exposed Beijing to reputational risk and domestic criticism. In response, China loosened its grip on the northern EAOs, tacitly enabling them to launch Operation 1027. This major offensive,

led by the 3BHA, dismantled key scam enclaves and demonstrated the junta's eroding control.

Yet Beijing's alignment with the resistance was short-lived. Once its immediate interests were met, it reversed course, pressuring the 3BHA into a ceasefire and reverting to its broader balancing strategy. China's posture remains transactional, not transformational: it seeks leverage over all sides, not resolution on any.

China's Strategic Hypocrisy

China is no longer hedging—it is actively enabling Myanmar's military junta while maintaining a veneer of neutrality. This is strategic hypocrisy. Beijing's recent moves—including compelling the MNDAA to surrender Lashio and stationing private security forces at Kyauk Phyu—reveal a calculated alignment with the junta. While publicly calling for peace and non-interference, China is in fact shaping the conflict to secure its own interests in access, influence, and control.

To justify its deepening involvement, Beijing outlines three non-negotiables—what it calls its "Three Bottom Lines"—during a 2024 statement by the Chinese Foreign Minister:[21]

1. **Avoiding Civil Strife**

   China seeks to prevent total collapse in Myanmar, which could threaten Chinese investments and border stability.

2. **Remaining within ASEAN**

   Beijing wants Myanmar to remain inside ASEAN to prevent international isolation and maintain regional mechanisms it can influence.

3. **Preventing External Interference**

   China opposes any Western or multilateral intervention that could erode its primacy or embolden democratic actors.

To enforce these bottom lines, China has employed a suite of coercive instruments—subtle in appearance, strategic in effect:

- **Disinformation Operations**

  Chinese-aligned networks sow mistrust among resistance factions through covert messaging and narrative manipulation, aiming to fracture unity and legitimacy.

- **Diplomatic Pressure**

  Beijing uses its weight to discourage Thailand, Bangladesh, and other neighbors from supporting the resistance or offering sanctuary to fleeing civilians and dissidents.

- **Economic Leverage**

  China weaponizes interdependence by selectively halting trade, power, telecom, or cross-border flows to punish defiance, forcing actors like the MNDAA into submission.

- **Military and Security Deployments**

  Joint exercises along the border and the insertion of private security personnel signal readiness to protect core assets and intimidate rivals, without overt troop commitments.

China's role in Myanmar is not a matter of cautious engagement. It is a pattern of coercion masked by diplomacy. Beijing's actions betray its rhetoric—prioritizing influence over peace, control over self-determination, and regime preservation over regional stability.

Backlash for China and Opportunity for the United States

China's support for Myanmar's brutal, illegitimate junta has triggered widespread resentment. Beijing's decision to shut down northern border crossings—punishing EAOs like the MNDAA and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, which have made battlefield gains—has been perceived as siding with repression over reform.

This move disrupted vital supply chains, worsening civilian suffering in conflict zones. For many, Beijing is no longer a neutral broker but a complicit actor in their oppression. Ethnic communities that have long distrusted the central government now view China as aligned with the junta's brutal tactics—militarily, economically, and diplomatically.

China's behavior in Myanmar mirrors a broader regional pattern: support for fractured, authoritarian-aligned regimes that can be economically integrated and politically controlled.

In Myanmar, this translates into a strategy of controlled disorder—tolerating instability so long as it preserves Beijing's long-term influence and legitimacy, particularly if the junta collapses or transitions.

For the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, this discontent presents a unique strategic opening. China's influence is dominant but brittle—conditional, transactional, and increasingly resented. A calibrated policy response—combining—political recognition, non-lethal support to resistance forces, humanitarian aid, and strategic messaging—could: (1) undermine China's narrative of neutrality and non-interference; (2) demonstrate credible alternatives rooted in local legitimacy and international norms; and (3) amplify regional voices calling for democratic transition and human security.

In a region defined by asymmetric influence and contested narratives, Myanmar is where strategic values and strategic advantage align.

Charting a Path Forward

Myanmar's crisis is no longer peripheral—it is a strategic fault line in the Indo-Pacific. Pro-democracy resistance has defied expectations with adaptability, popular support, and territorial expansion. Yet, absent coordinated international support, its momentum may stall, while the junta endures through foreign backing, illicit finance, and brute repression.

The United States and its partners must adopt a calibrated strategy that balances pressure, support, and restraint to shift

the conflict's trajectory and uphold regional stability.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Strategic Communications**

   Support a unified messaging campaign—led by the National Unified Government, diaspora, and civil society—that:

   - Exposes China's complicity, junta atrocities, and criminal collusion;
   - Elevates the resistance's unity, legitimacy, and inclusive democratic vision; and
   - Mobilizes regional and international support via diplomatic outreach, media engagement, and public advocacy.

2. **Build Resistance Capacity and Diplomatic Support**

   Invest in the institutional development of the resistance, including:

   - Civil governance, humanitarian aid, and public services in liberated zones;
   - Cybersecurity, secure communications, and nonviolent resistance training; and
   - Quiet diplomacy with India, Thailand, and Bangladesh to open humanitarian corridors.

3. **Apply Targeted Sanctions and Diplomatic Pressure**

   Expand economic and political pressure on the junta by:

- Targeting junta-linked entities, including financial institutions and foreign enablers;
- Enforcing export controls on surveillance tech, dual-use goods, and jet fuel; and
- Pressuring ASEAN neighbors to restrict diplomatic engagement and limit material support.

4. **Consider Calibrated Lethal Assistance**

   Non-lethal aid should remain the foundation. However, if the junta continues to receive arms and fund its repression through illicit revenue, carefully controlled lethal assistance may be warranted:

   - Supply vetted units with tactical gear, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) capabilities, and defensive systems;
   - Provide training and logistical support conditioned on compliance with humanitarian law; and
   - Maintain rigorous monitoring to avoid escalation or misuse.

Such support must be carefully limited and monitored to avoid unintended escalation.

Strategic Risks and Considerations

These steps carry real risks that must be managed through prudence and foresight:

1. **Escalation of Violence**

   Lethal aid could trigger intensified junta reprisals

against civilians.

2. **Regional Spillover**

   Prolonged conflict risks refugee flows and security crises for India, Thailand, and Bangladesh.

3. **Chinese Retaliation**

   Beijing may escalate support to the junta or intensify pressure on resistance-linked actors.

The Cost of Inaction

The risks of engagement are serious, but the consequences of inaction are greater. Passive observation will entrench criminal governance, embolden authoritarian strategies, and abandon a people fighting for agency, dignity, and democracy. The time to act—with care, clarity, and coalition—is now.

Conclusion: Holding the Line at Myanmar's Edge

Myanmar stands at a critical juncture. Its descent into civil war, state collapse, and criminal capture is no longer a local tragedy—it is a live threat to regional stability and democratic resilience across the Indo-Pacific. The junta, though weakened, clings to power through repression, foreign backing, and transnational illicit finance. Meanwhile, the resistance, diverse and increasingly coordinated, continues to expand its reach.

The stakes are regional. China's calculated interference, the spread of cybercrime and narcotics, and the displacement of millions are straining neighboring states and emboldening

authoritarian governance models. How the international community responds—especially the United States and its allies—will signal whether it can meet the moment when democracy is contested under fire.

Strategic engagement carries risks. But the cost of inaction is far greater: a failed state at the heart of Southeast Asia, a breeding ground for malign influence, and a blow to the credibility of the rules-based order. The time for passive observation has passed. Myanmar is not just on the edge of collapse—it is on the edge of redefining what regional security, sovereignty, and solidarity look like in the Indo-Pacific.

The choices made today will echo far beyond Naypyidaw.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 8

INDIA'S STRATEGIC ASCENT

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, first Prime Minister and founder of Singapore[2]

Introduction

"It is inevitable," said India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 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."[3]

More than seven decades later, India's strategic ascent reflects both those enduring conditions and deliberate choices. Its rise is shaped by geography at the crossroads of critical sea lanes, by the scale of its population and market, and by its expanding military and diplomatic presence across the Indo-Pacific. But India's growing stature is not simply the product of structural advantage—it is also the result of calibrated strategic behavior in a contested regional order.

India has transitioned from its Cold War-era posture of non-alignment to a 21st-century doctrine of strategic autonomy,[4] which enables engagement with competing major powers without alignment to any single bloc. It maintains robust defense and technology ties with the United States, energy and arms dependencies with Russia, and significant commercial interdependence with China—even amid unresolved border tensions.

This chapter examines India's Indo-Pacific strategy as a case study in strategic autonomy under competitive multipolarity. It traces India's evolving approach to regional engagement, assesses the geopolitical constraints and opportunities it faces, and evaluates how New Delhi balances sovereignty, deterrence, and leadership in a fluid strategic environment. By analyzing India's partnerships, defense posture, and regional initiatives, the chapter explores how India seeks to position itself—not as a subordinate in a bloc—

but as a stabilizing power shaping the rules of engagement in a region increasingly defined by competition and complexity.

India's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Region

India's Indo-Pacific strategy has emerged as a central pillar of its foreign policy, anchored in safeguarding national interests, expanding regional influence, and responding to a shifting balance of power. With its geographic positioning astride key sea lanes, its economic ambitions, and its defense imperatives, India views the Indo-Pacific not just as a theater of opportunity but as a crucible of completion.

Strategic autonomy underpins India's approach. Rather than aligning with any major power, New Delhi has adopted a multi-vector strategy that blends bilateral engagements, minilateral platforms, and selective multilateralism. Its Indo-Pacific posture is defined by five core thrusts:

- **Neighborhood First**

  Launched in 2014, this policy prioritizes engagement with South Asian neighbors through trade, infrastructure, and joint security initiatives. While cooperation with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka has deepened, tensions with Pakistan—primarily over terrorism and Kashmir—continue to impede broader regional integration through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In response, India has pivoted toward sub-regional frameworks such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and

Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) framework, where progress is more feasible.

- **Act East**

  Originating in 1991, India's Act East policy has expanded from economic outreach to a strategic partnership with Southeast Asia. India engages in regional forums like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, pursues infrastructure linkages such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and conducts joint military exercises with Vietnam, Singapore, and others—enhancing its presence in a region where China's influence is increasingly assertive.[5]

- **The Quad**

  India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia reflects a convergence around a rules-based maritime order. The Quad facilitates cooperation on issues ranging from maritime domain awareness to emerging technologies, while maintaining a flexible, non-bloc character that aligns with India's strategic autonomy.

- **Maritime Security and Connectivity**

  India has prioritized maritime security as a core element of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Initiatives such as the Sagarmala project aim to modernize domestic port infrastructure.

- **Net Security Provider Role**

  India has expanded its role as a regional security contributor—through humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and defense capacity-building.[6] Operations such as its 2004 tsunami relief mission[7] and its ongoing military exercises with Southeast Asian partners underscore its aspirations to provide public goods without prescriptive alignment.

India's approach reflects a careful balancing act: expanding influence while preserving autonomy, partnering without becoming beholden, and navigating a region increasingly shaped by asymmetries of power. In this environment, India's ability to lead will depend not just on intent but on sustained capability, credibility, and strategic clarity.

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Landscape

The Indo-Pacific has become the epicenter of a geopolitical contestation. This vast region is defined by intersecting ambitions, contested norms, and shifting power alignments. India's geostrategic location—stretching from the western Indian Ocean to the eastern maritime chokepoints—confers both opportunity and exposure. It stands at the fulcrum of regional connectivity and competition.

- **United States**

  Washington's approach centers on preserving its predominant position in the region through a "free and open Indo-Pacific." This involves strengthening

alliances with countries like Japan and Australia through initiatives like the Quad and AUKUS, while expanding defense and economic partnerships with India and key Southeast Asian nations. U.S. activities include enhanced military exercises, increased forward presence, and freedom of navigation operations to contest excessive maritime claims. Economically, Washington seeks to counterbalance China's influence through initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), promoting standards-based regional integration.

- **China**

  China continues to expand its influence via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), using infrastructure investment to deepen political and economic linkages across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Concurrently, it is rapidly modernizing its military and asserting maritime claims in the South China Sea, constructing artificial islands and deploying military assets in disputed areas. These moves have intensified tensions with regional neighbors and raised questions about Beijing's long-term strategic intentions and willingness to use coercion.

- **Other Regional Actors**

  Japan and Australia play increasingly proactive roles, both as U.S. allies and as autonomous security actors. Japan is ramping up defense spending and acquiring long-range strike capabilities, while Australia's

acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS marks a significant shift in regional posture. Southeast Asian nations, meanwhile, pursue strategic hedging—resisting alignment pressures by engaging both the United States and China while prioritizing economic development and regional stability.

In this competitive landscape, India pursues a strategy of multi-alignment anchored in strategic autonomy. It leverages convergence with the United States and other Quad partners to advance security cooperation, while engaging Southeast Asia through is Act East policy. At the same time, India maintains calibrated engagement with China, even as border tensions persist. India is also expanding defense ties with France and Russia and investing in indigenous military modernization—steps aimed at enhancing operational resilience and preserving sovereign agency in a fluid Indo-Pacific order.

Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

India's Indo-Pacific strategy is anchored in cooperative engagement but shaped by a complex and contested security environment. To preserve its strategic autonomy and regional influence, India must navigate a spectrum of threats, including territorial disputes, terrorism, cyber intrusions, and instability in neighboring states. These challenges demand a balanced approach that integrates defense modernization, proactive diplomacy, and economic resilience.

India faces persistent conventional threats, notably territorial disputes and military standoffs. The China-India border remains a flashpoint, with clashes in the Galwan Valley and Tawang sector underscoring the fragility of the Line of Actual Control.[8] In the maritime domain, the broader Indo-Pacific is marked by competing claims and power projection, requiring India to sustain a capable joint force and deepen security cooperation with trusted partners.

China's Expanding Pressure

China's assertive behavior presents the most comprehensive challenge. Its territorial claims in the South China Sea, rapid military modernization, and dual-use infrastructure projects signal an intent to reshape the regional order. Technologically, China's advances in artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and telecommunications (e.g., 5G/6G) carry long-term strategic implications. In the Himalayan theater, continued friction over the border reflects the broader strategic distrust between Asia's two rising powers.

The China-Pakistan Nexus

Pakistan remains a persistent source of instability, a challenge now amplified by its deepening strategic alignment with China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), anchored at Gwadar Port, extends China's reach into the Arabian Sea and strengthens Pakistan's ability to contest

India's maritime posture.[9] Chinese support for Pakistan's naval modernization, including submarines and advanced surface vessels, raises the prospect of enhanced joint operations in the Indian Ocean, directly challenging India's primacy in its near seas.[10]

The possibility of coordinated China-Pakistan action, whether explicit or tacit, complicates India's deterrence calculations and demands sustained vigilance.[11] The April 2025 terror attack in Indian-administered Kashmir—followed by a sharp military exchange across the Line of Control—brought these risks into sharp relief. Pakistan's use of Chinese-origin J-10C fighter jets, reportedly downing two Indian aircraft, revealed not only the operational depth of the China-Pakistan defense cooperation but also Beijing's growing role in South Asian conflict dynamics. Although China sought to distance itself diplomatically, its defense transfers and growing interoperability with Pakistan underscored the challenge India faces in managing escalation under the conditions of indirect Chinese involvement.

In response, India is recalibrating its defense strategy by deepening engagement with key Indo-Pacific partners—enhancing interoperability, diversifying defense supply chains, and building credible security partnerships that reinforce deterrence without compromising strategic autonomy. This approach allows India to remain flexible while positioning itself as a reliable regional security provider capable of responding to multidimensional threats.

The Afghan Variable

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has rekindled concerns over terrorism and regional instability. India views the resurgence of groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) as a direct threat, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. The risk of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for anti-India actors remains acute. Moreover, Taliban rule may facilitate ideological spillover that could destabilize India's internal security environment.

Instability in Afghanistan also carries downstream effects for India's maritime security. The Arabian Sea-Indian Ocean corridor is vital for energy imports and trade. Any disruptions, whether due to terrorism, piracy, or Chinese strategic inroads via infrastructure investments, could adversely impact India's economic security. Thus, India must account for the intersection of continental and maritime threats as it shapes its Indo-Pacific security posture.

Non-Traditional Security Challenges

India's Indo-Pacific security calculus increasingly extends beyond traditional military threats to encompass a range of non-traditional security challenges. Issues such as terrorism, transnational crime, and maritime insecurity transcend borders and demand integrated, multilateral responses. Addressing these challenges is essential to sustaining the region's stability, prosperity, and rule-based order.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO)

The Indo-Pacific remains vulnerable to violent extremist organizations that exploit regional fault lines,[12] economic disparity, and porous borders. Groups such as LeT and JeM have long targeted India, with the 2008 Mumbai attacks underscoring the reach and lethality of such networks. In response, India has expanded counterterrorism capabilities, including intelligence fusion, specialized force readiness, and cross-border interdiction. Bilateral and trilateral cooperation with partners like the United States and Israel enhance India's ability to track, disrupt, and dismantle extremist networks through joint training, technology transfers, and information sharing.[13]

Transnational Criminal Networks

The Indo-Pacific is increasingly affected by illicit networks that operate across land and maritime domains, often intersecting with terrorist financing and regional instability.

- **Maritime Piracy**

  Although global hotspots have shifted, Southeast Asia remains a piracy-prone region.[14] Indian vessels and fishermen have been direct targets. India has responded by strengthening its naval presence, conducting coordinated patrols, and enhancing maritime domain awareness in collaboration with regional partners.[15]

- **Drug Trafficking**

  India sits astride key narcotic trafficking routes, with Afghanistan and Myanmar serving as major supply hubs. The flow of heroin and methamphetamines not only fosters domestic criminality,[16] but also finances armed insurgent and extremist groups.[17] A landmark seizure in 2024, 3,300 kilograms of narcotics from a vessel linked to Iran,[18] demonstrates India's growing interdiction capabilities and operational coordination.

- **Human Trafficking**

  Economic disparities and lax enforcement have made South and Southeast Asia major source and destination zones for human trafficking. Victims, often women and children, are trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation, and servitude across industries and borders.[19] This phenomenon erodes social stability and generates illicit revenue streams that often intersect with other criminal enterprises.

These transnational threats—piracy, drugs, trafficking—form a dangerous nexus that undermines governance, fuels armed actors, and erodes public trust. India's strategy emphasizes regional cooperation to enhance law enforcement, maritime surveillance, and judicial capacity. Joint efforts with ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and other multilateral forums are critical in this regard.

Challenges in Democratic Practices

However, counterterrorism and anti-crime strategies risk strategic backfire when perceived as tools for political suppression. The misuse of security laws, whether by India and regional partners, can deepen societal cleavages and inadvertently create openings for extremist recruitment.[20] Ensuring that rule-of-law response upholds civil liberties and inclusivity remains a key condition for sustainable security.

India's Cooperation Partnerships

To advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has carefully built a network of strategic partnerships spanning across security, economics, and diplomacy. These relationships are not merely transactional; they reflect a convergence of interests, shared values, and mutual determination to manage regional challenges and reinforce a stable balance of power.

India-U.S. Relationship

The transformation of the India-U.S. relationship is perhaps the clearest expression of India's broader strategic ascent. Once marked by Cold War-era skepticism, ties between New Delhi and Washington have steadily deepened since the late 1990s, with every U.S. administration from President Clinton onward strengthening the relationship. Today, both nations recognize that their partnership is not simply bilateral—it is

central to maintaining regional stability and shaping the Indo-Pacific strategic landscape.

The partnership has taken concrete form through a series of high-impact mechanisms. The 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, launched in 2017, has institutionalized high-level foreign and defense coordination, elevating bilateral strategic discussions to a standing framework.[21] The Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), launched in 2023 and renamed in February 2025 as TRUST,[22] links both nations in cutting-edge collaboration on artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, and biotechnology, underlining the intersection of technological innovation and national security.[23] Meanwhile, the India-U.S. Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) connects defense industries and accelerates joint development, promoting co-production and advanced technological cooperation.[24]

Together, these efforts reflect not only the growing depth of India-U.S. ties but also their expanding strategic breadth,[25] anchored in shared goals of shaping a resilient, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

India-Japan Relationship

The India-Japan relationship has evolved into one of India's most significant comprehensive strategic partnerships, driven by converging interests across security, economics, and regional governance. While the foundation was initially economic, today the partnership extends well beyond trade and investment, reflecting shared concerns over maritime

security, Chinese assertiveness, and the need to uphold a stable, rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

Economically, the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic and Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has provided a framework for expanding bilateral trade, investment, and technological cooperation,[26] particularly in areas such as clean energy, digital innovation, and semiconductors. This economic interdependence has laid the groundwork for a more expansive strategic alignment.

Security ties have deepened markedly, especially since the establishment of the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in 2019, which brings together foreign and defense ministers from both countries to coordinate strategic and defense priorities[27]—a format India shares only with a select few partners like the United States and Australia. This institutional dialogue has reinforced practical defense cooperation, exemplified by the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which enhances logistical support and operational interoperability between the two militaries.

Maritime security has emerged as a critical pillar of the partnership. India and Japan now regularly conduct joint military exercises, including the Malabar naval drills, and engage in ongoing maritime dialogues aimed at safeguarding sea lines of communication and countering coercive behaviors in regional waters.[28]

Above all, the India-Japan relationship is bound by a shared strategic vision: both nations are deeply committed to maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, anchored

in respect for international law and freedom of navigation. As active members of the Quad, India and Japan amplify each other's regional influence, making this partnership a cornerstone of India's Act East policy and broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

India-Philippines Relationship

India's partnership with the Philippines has gained significant momentum in recent years,[29] driven by shared concerns over China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and a mutual commitment to upholding a rules-based maritime order. What was once a modest relationship has now expanded into a more consequential strategic alignment.

A landmark moment came in 2022, when India signed a contract to supply BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines—the first major Indian defense export to Southeast Asia.[30] This deal signaled not only deepening defense ties but also India's emergence as a credible security partner in the region. Both countries now see greater value in collaborating on maritime security, freedom of navigation, and efforts to resist unilateral changes to the status quo.

While defense cooperation has taken center stage, economic and cultural ties are also steadily expanding, providing a broader foundation for bilateral engagement. This evolving relationship positions India and the Philippines as increasingly aligned middle powers—working together to balance China's regional influence and strengthen the collective resilience of the Indo-Pacific order.

India-Vietnam Relationship

In recent years, the India-Vietnam relationship has matured into one of New Delhi's most strategically important partnerships in Southeast Asia,[31] marked by robust defense, political, and economic collaboration. Shared concerns over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea—where Vietnam faces direct territorial disputes and India maintains economic stakes through offshore energy projects—have drawn the two nations into closer alignment.[32]

At the core of the partnership lies a deepening defense relationship anchored in military training, equipment transfers, credit lines, and regular joint naval exercises. A landmark moment came in 2023 when India gifted an operational Indian Navy missile corvette to Vietnam—the first time India has transferred an active warship to a partner nation, highlighting the strategic depth and trust between the two countries.[33]

Elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, Vietnam joins a select group of India's top-tier security and economic partners, alongside South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Australia.[34] Both India and Vietnam are among the fastest-growing economies in the region, attracting investment from global actors seeking alternatives to China's economic dominance.[35]

The bilateral relationship is further enriched by dynamic economic and cultural ties. By 2023, bilateral trade had reached $15 billion, making India Vietnam's seventh-largest

trading partner.[36] In 2024, both governments signed a series of agreements covering cooperation in culture, tourism, broadcasting, and agriculture—broadening the foundation of a relationship that now extends across security, economic, and societal domains.[37]

Regional and Multilateral Initiatives

Beyond bilateral partnerships, India actively expanded its role in regional and multilateral frameworks to advance its Indo-Pacific vision and address shared challenges. These efforts are central to India's ambition to act not just as a regional power but as a net security provider and stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific.

India's maritime security role has grown substantially, with the Indian Navy increasingly engaged in safeguarding key sea lanes, conducting anti-piracy operations, and participating in multinational naval exercises. India's maritime leadership is further strengthened by its investments in maritime domain awareness infrastructure, notably through the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) and the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR),[38] which enhances surveillance, information sharing, and coordination across regional partners.

These actions reinforce India's reputation as a reliable partner for regional security, especially in ensuring the safety of commercial shipping and upholding freedom of navigation. India contributes to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—including disaster response operations and post-crisis

support—further highlighting its leadership role, enhancing goodwill, and deepening defense cooperation with affected states.

India's regional influence is also shaped by its leadership on resilience and disaster preparedness. The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), launched by India in 2019, brings together governments, international organizations, and the private sector to promote resilient infrastructure standards worldwide.[39] Complementing this, the ASEAN-India Green Fund, established in 2007, supports regional projects focused on adaptation, renewable energy, and environmental conservation.[40] Together, these initiatives reflect India's recognition that environmental threats and natural disasters can undermine long-term regional stability just as much as traditional security challenges.

India's expanding engagement in economic integration efforts further reinforces its Indo-Pacific strategy. As an active participant in IPEF, India works alongside regional partners to strengthen supply chain resilience, accelerate clean energy transition, and shape the digital trade landscape.[41] Additionally, India's network of free trade agreements with ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and Mauritius positions it as an increasingly influential economic actor, capable of anchoring regional growth and reducing overdependence on any single economic partner.

Taken together, India's bilateral partnerships, regional engagements, and multilateral initiatives form the backbone of its Indo-Pacific strategy, allowing it to advance national

interests while shaping the regional order. Far from acting in isolation, India is leveraging these relationships to amplify its influence, strengthen its strategic autonomy, and project itself as a stabilizing force in an era of intensifying competition. By combining military modernization, diplomatic agility, economic integration, and soft power, India is not merely responding to the Indo-Pacific's challenges—it is helping define the region's future balance of power.

Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

While India's Indo-Pacific vision is ambitious and multifaceted, its pursuit is constrained by significant domestic and external challenges that threaten to limit its ability to fully realize its strategic objectives.

Domestic Constraints

India's internal economic pressures—ranging from uneven growth and fiscal deficits to persistent unemployment—place clear limits on its capacity to project power abroad. These constraints ripple across several key domains.

First, they directly affect defense modernization.[42] Despite facing a complex regional security environment, India's FY 2024–2025 defense budget accounts for just 12.9% of the total national budget, a reduction compared to the previous year. This underinvestment limits India's ability to update critical military capabilities, acquire advanced technologies, and sustain long-term force readiness.[43]

Second, diplomatic engagement is constrained by limited resources. Financial pressures curtail India's ability to expand its diplomatic footprint, sustain development assistance, and fully participate in the growing number of regional and multilateral platforms shaping the Indo-Pacific.

Third, India's own domestic infrastructure gaps, including underdeveloped transport networks, energy systems, and digital connectivity, pose challenges to its participation in regional economic and connectivity initiatives. Without addressing these foundational weaknesses, India's efforts to anchor itself in regional supply chains and trade corridors remain hampered.

These economic and political pressures also shape India's cautious approach to regional trade agreements. Its 2019 withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) reflected deep concerns over exposing domestic industries to external competition, particularly from China.[44] Similarly, India has shown little appetite to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), wary of the agreement's demanding standards and the potential disruption to domestic sectors.[45]

Taken together, these examples highlight a persistent tension within India's Indo-Pacific strategy; while its strategic interests point toward deeper regional integration, domestic political and economic concerns frequently pull in the opposite direction. Reconciling these competing imperatives will be essential if India is to translate its Indo-Pacific ambitions into durable influence and leadership.

Strategic Autonomy and Global Positioning

India's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy remains a defining feature of its foreign policy, enabling it to maintain flexibility, avoid rigid alliances, and pursue national interests across a complex global landscape. This approach has historically allowed India to sustain balanced relations with major powers—even those in competition or conflict with each other. For example, New Delhi continues to deepen cooperation with the United States through the Quad while simultaneously maintaining strong defense ties with Russia, including its high-profile acquisition of the S-400 missile system despite the threat of U.S. sanctions.

Yet this approach, while providing valuable diplomatic space, also presents significant challenges, especially in the Indo-Pacific context.

Externally, India's cautious posture can create a perception of ambiguity about its commitment to the very rules-based order it claims to champion. Its reluctance to openly criticize the actions of actors like Russia or Iran, or to take firm stances on major global conflicts, risks eroding its credibility among like-minded partners. This ambiguity can diminish India's influence in shaping regional and global security frameworks and limit its ability to position itself as a consistent advocate of international norms.[46]

This caution also leads to missed opportunities. By holding back from decisive leadership on global flashpoints, India has undercut its potential to play a more prominent role in steering

the Indo-Pacific's security architecture. For example, India's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn criticism from partners who see the stance as inconsistent with India's historical support for sovereignty and territorial integrity.[47] Similarly, India's abstentions at the United Nations on issues like human rights abuses in Iran and military repressions in Myanmar have signaled a reluctance to challenge authoritarian behavior,[48] even when doing so would align with its democratic identity and bolster its image as a responsible regional leader.[49]

While strategic autonomy affords India considerable diplomatic maneuvering room, it requires careful recalibration to avoid signaling tolerance of anti-democratic or revisionist actions. To sustain its ambitions as an Indo-Pacific leader, India will need to balance independence with principled positions on key global issues. Aligning its actions more closely with its professed democratic values would not only strengthen its credibility but also enhance its ability to shape the evolving Indo-Pacific order as a trusted and influential actor.

Regional Volatility

India's efforts to foster regional cohesion under its Neighborhood First policy continue to face persistent and interlocking challenges. Longstanding tensions with Pakistan—driven by territorial disputes, cross-border militancy, and political distrust—have effectively stalled meaningful bilateral cooperation. At the same time, India's

relationships with other neighbors, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, are frequently strained by border disagreements, domestic political shifts, and perceptions of Indian overreach or heavy-handedness.

Compounding these bilateral frictions is the steady expansion of China's influence in South Asia, particularly through BRI, which has significantly deepened Beijing's economic and strategic footprint across the region. China's engagement with India's neighbors directly complicates New Delhi's ability to sustain its traditional leadership role, adding competitive pressures on both its diplomatic and economic resources.

The broader geopolitical environment has further heightened regional instability.[50] The military coup in Myanmar, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, Pakistan's internal fragility, the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh, and shifting political alignments in Sri Lanka and the Maldives all create cascading risks with direct implications for India's security and economic interests.[51] To effectively navigate this volatile landscape, India must devote sustained diplomatic energy and resources to stabilizing its periphery, while also tempering its approach to regional disputes and demonstrating greater responsiveness to its neighbors' concerns. Yet these necessary efforts inevitably divert attention, focus, and capacity away from India's broader Indo-Pacific ambitions, forcing difficult trade-offs between neighborhood management and wider strategic engagement.

Ultimately, India's Indo-Pacific ambitions are shaped not only by great power dynamics but also by the weight of internal constraints and regional entanglements. Economic pressures, cautious diplomatic positioning, the imperative of strategic autonomy, and persistent neighborhood volatility all combine to constrain India's ability to fully realize its strategic potential. To emerge as a credible Indo-Pacific leader, India must strike a delicate balance—aligning domestic priorities with external ambitions, reconciling its independent foreign policy with the expectations of like-minded partners, and managing neighborhood instability without sacrificing its broader strategic vision. How effectively India manages these intertwined challenges will determine whether its aspirations translate into a durable influence in the Indo-Pacific's evolving security and economic order.

India's Aspiration for Leadership in the Global South

India's increasingly assertive role in global affairs reflects not only its ambition to shape the Indo-Pacific but also its determination to challenge the traditional Western-dominated rule-making structure of the international system. While India has consistently voiced support for a rules-based international order—first prominently articulated at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue and now a regular feature of its diplomatic language[52]—it has also been vocal in criticizing the exclusionary nature of many global institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN).

At the 2024 UN summit, India's Intelligence Bureau Director underscored this view by pointing to Africa's limited representation on the UN Security Council, despite the continent accounting for over half of the Council's active agenda.[53] India's position reflects its broader advocacy for a more inclusive and representative global governance structure.

India is actively leveraging its rising influence to serve as a bridge between the Global South and Global North, championing issues such as equitable economic development and expanded access to technology. Its leadership role in key multilateral forums like the United Nations, G20, and BRICS demonstrates a consistent commitment to amplifying the voices and priorities of developing nations. Notably, India played a prominent role in the historic induction of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023,[54] reinforcing its position as a leading advocate for Global South inclusion. Furthermore, the expansion of BRICS to incorporate Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates has bolstered India's ambitions to shape the agenda on critical global issues and strengthen its leadership role within the Global South.

The BRICS Expansion: Implications for India

India occupies a distinctive and strategic position within BRICS. As the bloc's most Western-aligned member, India seeks to act as a bridge between the Global South and established Western powers, leveraging BRICS not as an anti-Western platform but as a vehicle for advancing alternative,

non-Western approaches to global governance.[55] This balancing act has positioned India as arguably one of the primary beneficiaries of BRICS' recent expansion, enabling it to amplify its global influence while simultaneously maintaining constructive ties with Western partners.

Indian leaders have consistently framed BRICS as a pluralistic, non-confrontational coalition rather than an adversarial bloc. This framing was reaffirmed at the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, where President Vladimir Putin echoed India's view, emphasizing that BRICS is "not anti-Western; it's just non-Western."[56] Such a positioning allows India to align with a broad range of partners and advocate for the interests of the Global South without adopting a purely oppositional stance toward the West.

At the same summit, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar underscored India's leadership ambitions within the Global South, declaring, "The Global South has a high degree of trust and expectation from India." However, India's regional ambitions are tempered by significant challenges at home. Persistent issues—poverty, unemployment, infrastructural shortfalls, and internal social divisions—complicate its ability to project leadership consistently. Externally, India must also navigate the expanding regional influence of China, whose own assertive outreach within BRICS and the Global South presents both competition and constraint for India's aspirations.

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 Narendra Modi held sideline talks to address their prolonged border tensions.[57] This dialogue marked a cautious step toward rebuilding trust following the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash—a deadly confrontation that shattered longstanding confidence-building mechanisms and intensified bilateral mistrust.

India and China represent two competing visions for the Asian order. While Beijing's BRI advances a China-centric model of regional connectivity and influence, India champions a multipolar Asia where power is more evenly distributed among states. This divergence fuels New Delhi's deepening concerns about China's intention, particularly as Beijing consolidates influence over smaller South Asian and Indo-Pacific neighbors. India's push to position itself as a leader of the Global South is, in part, a strategic counterweight to China's regional dominance, allowing it to challenge Beijing's influence without resorting to direct military confrontation.

Yet the India-China relationship is further complicated by significant economic interdependence. In FY 2024, China accounted for 5.8% of India's exports and 14.8% of its imports, making it India's largest trading partner.[58] This entanglement necessitates diplomatic caution: any move toward economic decoupling or confrontation would carry substantial costs for India's growth and supply chain resilience.

In response, India has pursued an active diversification strategy—strengthening diplomatic and economic ties beyond China. Engagement in multilateral frameworks like the Quad provides New Delhi with critical avenues to balance Beijing's influence while hedging against overdependence. By cultivating a broad network of regional and global partnerships, India aims to enhance its security and economic resilience and position itself as a credible alternative to China in infrastructure, technology, and regional leadership.

However, despite these efforts, India has yet to fully translate its strategic positioning into sustained foreign investment inflows or comparable regional influence in sectors like infrastructure development, where China remains dominant. As the Indo-Pacific continues to evolve, India's challenge will be to navigate this competitive environment with agility, adapting its strategies to seize emerging opportunities, manage risks, and help shape a more inclusive and balanced global order.

The Future of India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's ascent as a major Indo-Pacific power is reshaping regional dynamics. Its multifaceted approach—rooted in strategic partnerships, regional initiatives, and a commitment to a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific—holds significant promise for advancing regional stability and prosperity. Yet, India's ambitions face real constraints: domestic economic and social challenges, the demands of balancing strategic autonomy, and the persistent volatility of its neighborhood.

Addressing these challenges effectively will be essential if India is to solidify its role as a leading regional power and actively shape an inclusive, rules-based order.

Strong regional and global partnerships will be critical to India's success. A failure to assert its position on key issues risks undermining India's role as a stabilizing force and diminishing its ability to counter China's growing influence. Reaffirming its commitment to a rules-based international system will preserve India's stature and influence across regional and global arenas.

As the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, India must adapt to meet new challenges and seize emerging opportunities. Several key factors will shape the future trajectory of India's Indo-Pacific engagement:

1. **Navigating the Evolving Regional Order**

   The Indo-Pacific is marked by a fluid interplay of forces, including the rise of China, intensifying U.S.-China competition, and persistent regional flashpoints. India will need a nuanced strategy that preserves its strategic autonomy while forging strong alignments with like-minded partners to safeguard its interests and promote regional stability.

2. **Harnessing Emerging Technologies**

   Advances in AI, cyber capabilities, and space technologies will increasingly define the Indo-Pacific security and economic contours. India must invest in developing these capabilities—not only to maintain its

strategic edge but also to play an active role in shaping the emerging norms, rules, and governance frameworks surrounding their use.

3. **Advancing Global Aspirations**

   India's rising economic and military power brings heightened global expectations. As it takes a more prominent voice in global governance institutions, India will need to strengthen its diplomatic capacity, increase its engagement in multilateral forums, and demonstrate sustained commitment to upholding international norms and a rules-based order.

4. **Strengthening Domestic Foundations**

   India's ability to sustain its Indo-Pacific ambitions will ultimately hinge on its success at home. Promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, enhancing social cohesion, and modernizing infrastructure are not just domestic priorities—they are prerequisites for sustaining defense modernization,[59] diplomatic outreach, and regional connectivity projects.

5. **Deepening Security Cooperation**

   Robust security partnerships will be central to navigating the Indo-Pacific's competitive environment. Priority areas for India include:

   - **Maritime Security:** Advancing joint domain awareness, conducting complex naval exercises, and facilitating technology transfers.

- **Counterterrorism**: Enhancing intelligence sharing, expanding capacity-building programs, and conducting joint operational exercises.
- **Cybersecurity**: Establishing information-sharing frameworks, developing regional cyber codes of conduct, and conducting joint cyber drills.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy remains a work in progress—but its success will depend on how effectively New Delhi can navigate the region's shifting power dynamics, leverage technological advancements, address domestic challenges, and deepen cooperation with key partners. If India can rise to meet these complexities, it will not only advance its vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific but also secure its place as a central architect of the region's future stability and prosperity.

Conclusion: Navigating Complexity in the Indo-Pacific

India's emergence as a major power is reshaping and influencing global dynamics. Its approach blends active multilateral engagement, a professed commitment to rules-based order, and an increasingly proactive response to shared global challenges. This was exemplified by India's 2023 G20 presidency, where it championed initiatives on digital transformation and sustainable development under the theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future."[60] India's leadership in the G20 demonstrated its determination to position itself as a responsible global actor, capable of advancing cooperative solutions on issues of transnational significance.

The current era of polycrisis—marked by the convergence of pandemics, geopolitical tensions, environmental emergencies, and economic disruptions—presents India with both profound challenges and unprecedented opportunities. Programs like *Vaccine Maitri*, which delivered COVID-19 vaccine support to over 90 countries,[61] and India's co-founding of the International Solar Alliance to act as a stabilizing force and a champion for sustainable, inclusive development, particularly for the Global South. These initiatives reinforce India's positioning as not only a regional power but also as a globally engaged problem-solver in an unpredictable world.

At the diplomatic level, India's posture of strategic autonomy allows it to engage with a diverse array of global actors while preserving policy independence. This balancing act is evident in India's simultaneous participation in the Quad alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, and its longstanding defense and energy ties with Russia. Is also reflects the pragmatism underpinning India's foreign policy, where deepening partnerships—such as the India-U.S. strategic relationship—coexist with continued economic engagements with Iran and Russia, including high-profile defense acquisitions like the S-400 missile system.[62] India's rising role as a defense exporter further signals its ambition to shape the global security landscape, with the United States, France, and Armenia among its growing list of defense clients.[63]

Yet India's global ambitions face significant domestic headwinds.[64] Social fractures rooted in religion,[65] caste,

regional disparities,[66] and economic inequality risk undermining the internal cohesion needed to sustain long-term international leadership.[67] Externally, shifting geopolitical fault lines—such as the Ukraine war, intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, and global concerns over democratic backsliding[68]—complicate India's efforts to maintain broad-based partnerships. While the United States has supported India's rise, historical tensions and lingering skepticism within India remain, fueled by past U.S. policies, including sanctions and military ties with Pakistan.[69] Conversely, Russia's consistent diplomatic support has fostered a perception of reliability, adding further complexity to India's geopolitical balancing act.

As India's global profile expands, it must adapt its diplomatic strategies to navigate an increasingly multipolar, competitive, and contested world. This will require investment in institutional capacity, a sustained commitment to multilateralism, and the cultivation of partnerships that enable India to exercise its influence responsibly and effectively. India aspires to shape a multipolar order that upholds sovereignty, respects international law, and promotes regional cooperation, all the while preserving its cherished strategic autonomy.

However, the path to enduring leadership demands more than material power; it requires principled stances on democracy, human rights, and international norms. Lasting credibility is built not just through military and economic strength but through the consistent application of values, even when doing so entails diplomatic costs. For India, striking the

right balance between strategic restraint and principled engagement will be crucial in building the soft power and global reputation necessary to consolidate its role as both a regional anchor and a respected global actor.

India's Indo-Pacific engagement reflects its broader aspirations: to advance regional stability, assert leadership among developing nations, and help shape a rules-based order responsive to today's interconnected challenges. By skillfully balancing autonomy with active multilateralism, India is positioning itself as a central player in navigating the complexities of an Indo-Pacific region that is fast becoming the geopolitical and economic fulcrum of the 21st century.

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Chapter 9

South Asia's Strategic Edge

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,
Remarks upon returning from a state visit to China,
Velana Airport, January 2024.[1]

Introduction

South Asia's smallest states find themselves on unstable ground—caught between regional rivalries, shifting alliances,

and global uncertainty.[2] From Himalayan buffers like Bhutan and Nepal to maritime pivots like the Maldives and Sri Lanka, these nations face persistent external pressures with limited resources but considerable strategic leverage.[3] Their geographic positioning and political agility bring both risk and opportunity in a region where power is constantly contested.

The aftershocks of the pandemic, conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, and rising debt burdens have deepened vulnerabilities across the region. Yet even amid coercion and constraint, South Asia's smaller states are finding room to maneuver. By fostering regional cooperation, engaging selectively with external powers, and asserting themselves in multilateral forums, they are crafting a strategic edge that defies their size.

This chapter contends that South Asia's lesser powers are not merely caught between giants—they are actively shaping outcomes.[4] In the face of intensifying great-power rivalry, economic fragility, and internal volatility, these states are asserting agency: leveraging geography, cultivating multilateral partnerships, and pursuing strategic autonomy to safeguard sovereignty and advance national interests.

Historical Context: The Shifting Landscape of Powers and Influence

South Asia's smaller states have long sought to shape their own futures—but often under the weight of larger powers' ambition. India, as the region's dominant actor since

independence, built its influence through bilateral agreements and economic assistance.[5] Yet this approach, while stabilizing in some cases, also constrained the foreign policy options of neighboring states. India's tendency to resist third-party involvement and its sporadic political assertiveness have fueled long-standing resentment, particularly when neighbors perceive its actions as intrusive or domineering.

This dynamic began to shift with China's emergence as a global economic power. While China's strategic ties with Pakistan date back to the 1960s,[6] its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) accelerated Beijing's regional footprint.[7] Six of South Asia's eight countries—excluding only India and Bhutan—joined the BRI, drawn by promises of fast-tracked infrastructure and deep capital flows. Roads, ports, power plants, and fiber-optic networks were not just economic ventures—they were entry points for long-term strategic alignment.

China's rise introduced a new calculus. Unlike India, China operates without colonial baggage or direct historical friction with South Asia's smaller states.[8] Its transactional, non-interference approach appeals to governments seeking alternatives to India's influence. Yet concerns about sovereignty, debt dependency,[9] and transparency have grown, especially as Chinese investments deepen political linkages and reshape domestic decision-making in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Maldives.

Ironically, many of the grievances that South Asian states have long held against India—high-handed diplomacy,[10] economic conditionality, and political interference—are echoed in India's own rhetoric about China. For smaller states, both giants present trade-offs. But their growing assertiveness has also opened space for maneuver. By playing one power against the other, smaller nations have gained leverage—securing aid, investments, and policy flexibility from both sides.

South Asia's strategic environment is now defined less by a single hegemon and more by a fluid contest for influence.[11] As India and China vie for regional primacy—through trade, diplomacy, military outreach, and infrastructure finance—South Asia's lesser powers are navigating this competition with growing sophistication.[12] Their challenge is not simply to avoid domination, but to turn great-power rivalry into strategic opportunity.[13]

Small States, Strategic Places: South Asia's Geopolitical Landscape

Strategic influence in South Asia is not measured solely by size or power—but by position, resilience, and agility. The region's smaller states command critical terrain: high mountain passes, deep-water ports, and vital sea lanes. Their geography grants leverage, and their foreign policy decisions carry weight far beyond their borders.

- **Nepal and Bhutan**

  Tucked between China and India, Nepal and Bhutan function as Himalayan buffers—but their strategies diverge. Bhutan practices deliberate restraint, maintaining close defense and economic ties with India while limiting its diplomatic footprint.[14] Its emphasis on sovereignty has kept China at arm's length. Nepal, by contrast, engages both giants, leveraging their rivalry to exert economic and strategic concessions. Despite periodic instability, Katmandu has pursued infrastructure deals with China while remaining tethered to India through trade and transit dependence.

- **Sri Lanka and Maldives**

  As island states in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka and Maldives sit astride key maritime chokepoints—making them indispensable to regional and extra-regional powers. China's investment in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port and India's maritime security assistance to the Maldives exemplifies the geopolitical stakes. Yet both nations have shown they can play balancing roles. Sri Lanka has opened its ports to Chinese infrastructure while reaffirming defense ties with India and the West. The Maldives, meanwhile, has demonstrated how even a small state can influence major powers through symbolic gestures and assertive

diplomacy—while leading global advocacy on environmental resilience.

- **Bangladesh**

  Positioned on the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh serves as a connective node between South and Southeast Asia. It has sustained a pragmatic policy of equidistance—maintaining cultural and political ties with India while welcoming Chinese investment in infrastructure and defense. At the same time, Bangladesh has elevated its international standing through peacekeeping deployments, global environmental advocacy, and steady economic growth. Its textile exports, connectivity potential, and diplomatic balancing have made it a pivotal player in the Indo-Pacific calculations.

These cases underscore a shared reality: South Asia's smaller states are not passive zones of contestation. Their geographic positioning and diplomatic choices are shaping regional alignments. By remaining agile, resisting coercion, and diversifying partnerships, they are asserting influence in a region where margins matter.

The Strategic Dilemma: Navigating Regional Dynamics

South Asia's smaller states face a persistent dilemma: how to extract benefits from competing powers without becoming beholden to either.[15] The intensifying rivalry between India

and China—across economic, political, and military domains—offers opportunities for strategic maneuvering, but also sharpens the risks of dependency, coercion, and entrapment.

Economic Competition

India has traditionally held economic primacy in South Asia through aid, trade, and technical cooperation. Programs like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) have built capacity and fostered ties.[16] India also wields soft power through cultural diplomacy and shared heritage. But its recent tilt toward muscular foreign policy—marked by blockades, political intervention, and perceived arrogance—has strained relationships with several neighbors.[17]

China, meanwhile, has expanded its economic influence at scale. Through BRI, it has financed ports, roads, energy projects, and digital infrastructure across South Asia. These investments fill vital infrastructure gaps and offer rapid delivery,[18] but they often come with long-term financial entanglements.[19] Sri Lanka's debt crisis and loss of operational control at Hambantota Port exemplify the risks of overreliance on Chinese capital, especially in weak governance environments.

Smaller states have learned to navigate this contest by leveraging both sides. Bangladesh secures Indian market access while courting Chinese infrastructure investment. Nepal balances trade dependence on India with development

deals from Beijing. The economic contest has become a space for negotiation and hedging—not just vulnerability.

Political Influence and Sovereignty Pressures

India and China project influence in divergent ways. India invokes shared identity and regional leadership, often framed through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Global South. But its tendency to intervene in domestic affairs[20]—such as Nepal's constitutional crisis[21] or the Maldives' internal politics[22]—has bred resentment and pushed some states closer to China.[23]

China's approach is more transactional. It maintains strategic partnerships—most notably with Pakistan—to avoid overt interference in domestic politics. This non-interference model appeals to regimes wary of external judgement, allowing Beijing to deepen influence without overt entanglement.[24] While India critiques China's growing reach, smaller states see an opening to play both powers off one another.

Security Dynamics and Strategic Entrapment

The China-India military competition has added a third layer of pressure. China's defense ties with Pakistan,[25] dual-use port access of Gwadar and Jiwani (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and naval presence in the Indian Ocean challenge India's traditional dominance.[26] India, in turn, is building

capacity through defense partnerships, joint exercises, and Quad cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia.

For smaller states, this hard-power buildup presents acute risks. Choosing sides could provoke retaliation or lead to strategic entrapment. Remaining neutral requires deft diplomacy and credible balancing acts, ensuring security without alienating either pole. Overdependence on one security partner can restrict freedom of action; diversification is essential.

Foreign Policy Pathways of South Asia's Smaller States

South Asia's smaller states—Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan—pursue foreign policies shaped by geography, economic necessity, and the pressures of navigating life between two assertive giants: India and China. Their approaches reflect a blend of caution and ambition, balancing domestic priorities with the realities of strategic competition.

Rather than retreating into neutrality or dependency, many are adopting calibrated hedging strategies—diversifying relationships, seeking multilateral platforms, and leveraging their unique positions to extract political and economic benefits. What follows is a survey of how each country charts its own course within an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

Nepal

Nepal balances India's historical and cultural proximity with China's economic engagement. Traditionally aligned with India, Kathmandu has increasingly turned to Beijing for infrastructure and investment under BRI. This has enabled Nepal to reduce its overdependence on India, though India remains its dominant trading partner (72% of exports, 63% of imports).[27] Nepal also actively engages with international donors and partners to support development, especially in hydropower and tourism.

Bhutan

Bhutan practices strategic restraint. It maintains diplomatic ties with only 57 countries and avoids formal relations with the permanent members of the UN Security Council.[28] Its deep relationship with India—underpinned by the 1949 Treaty of Friendship—includes economic dependence and Indian responsibility for Bhutan's defense training.[29] However, India's withdrawal of fuel subsidies before the 2013 elections sparked backlash and triggered calls within Bhutan to diversify partnerships.[30] While wary of Chinese border claims, Bhutan has cautiously explored negotiation without formal diplomatic ties.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has emerged as a model of pragmatic hedging. It

maintains strong cultural and economic ties with India while attracting significant Chinese investment in seaports, energy, and military hardware.[31] At the same time, Dhaka is expanding relations with the United States, Japan, and the European Union. The textile and garment industry, which accounts for 80% of exports,[32] drives economic stability. Its growing stature in peacekeeping and environmental diplomacy reinforces Bangladesh's international credibility and strategic flexibility.

Pakistan

Pakistan's foreign policy is shaped by enduring hostility with India and strategic alignment with China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remains a flagship of Beijing's BRI vision and a cornerstone of Pakistan's development strategy.[33] Islamabad also maintains strong defense and economic ties with the Gulf States and the United States.[34] While it relies on China for imports (23%) and the U.S. for exports (20%),[35] Pakistan seeks to balance these relationships to preserve strategic space amid domestic instability.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka exemplifies both the opportunity and risk of balancing great powers. It has welcomed Chinese infrastructure investment, notably the Hambantota Port,[36] while seeking to maintain historic ties with India and engage new partners like Japan and the United States.[37] A debt crisis

linked in part to Chinese loans led to sovereign default in 2022, prompting Colombo to diversify financing and partnerships. Strategically located in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's geostrategic value remains high, provided it can maintain political and fiscal stability.[38]

Maldives

The Maldives plays a high-stakes balancing game. It receives Indian security assistance while courting Chinese infrastructure projects. Recent "India-Out" rhetoric under President Mohamed Muizzu reflects domestic unease with India's perceived overreach.[39] To avoid overdependence on either power, the Maldives has strengthened ties with the United States and the European Union.[40] Its leadership in environmental diplomacy and maritime security initiatives gives this small island nation an outsized voice on global platforms.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan's foreign policy remains constrained by internal conflict and a lack of international recognition. Under Taliban rule since August 2021, Kabul has sought pragmatic ties while holding ideological commitments.[41] India offers limited humanitarian engagement;[42] China has moved closer, appointing an ambassador and pursuing resource projects.[43] Pakistan remains both a critical trade partner and a source of tension, given its historic interference.[44] With trade

accounting for over half of GDP in 2021, Afghanistan depends on regional ties—but its uncertain future limits its foreign policy bandwidth.

These country cases highlight the varied ways South Asia's smaller states are navigating a competitive multipolar landscape. Though constrained by geography and power asymmetries, they are asserting autonomy where possible—hedging, balancing, and shaping outcomes on their own terms.

The Strategic Case for Multilateral Engagement

For South Asia's smaller states, multilateral and minilateral platforms are more than diplomatic venues—they are strategic lifelines. In a region dominated by two powerful neighbors, engaging collectively with broader networks allows these states to diversify partnerships, amplify their voices, and reduce vulnerability to bilateral coercion.

Multilateral engagements offer a practical mechanism to assert autonomy, build resilience, and shape outcomes in ways that would be impossible through bilateral relations alone. Three strategic benefits stand out.

Diversifying Alliances

Multilateral and minilateral forums provide smaller states with options beyond India and China. Platforms like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) enable countries such as Bangladesh

and Nepal to deepen economic links with Southeast Asia. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) offers maritime states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives access to partners as varied as Australia, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates—diluting reliance on regional hegemons.

By pooling interests and building coalitions, these nations create diplomatic buffers that reduce the risk of external overreach.

Amplifying Collective Influence

Acting together, smaller states can elevate their strategic visibility. Regional forums such as the Colombo Process on labor migration enable countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh to coordinate efforts and press for improved labor conditions in host nations,[45] particularly across the Middle East. These efforts ensure continued remittance flows—vital to their economies—while reinforcing collective bargaining power.

Other groupings, including cross-regional coalitions, have enabled small states to spotlight development concerns and secure targeted assistance. Whether advancing equitable access to global financing, ensuring fair trade terms, or defending maritime and resource rights, these alliances offer a multiplier effect. United by shared interests, smaller states can assert priorities and shape agendas in ways that would be unattainable in isolation.

Enhancing Global Standing

Active participation in global forums enhances the credibility and relevance of South Asia's smaller states. The Maldives, through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), has shaped international discourse on environmental and existential risk.[46] Bangladesh through the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), has attracted investment and positioned itself as a connector between regions.[47] These platforms not only open economic channels but reinforce the narrative that smaller states are capable, responsible actors in global governance.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations in Multilateral Engagements

While multilateral engagements offer vital opportunities, South Asia's smaller states face persistent constraints that limit their ability to fully leverage these platforms. These challenges fall into three broad categories: capacity gaps, political instability, and structural dependencies.

Capacity Constraints

Limited financial, human, and institutional capacity weakens the ability of smaller states to engage meaningfully in regional and global forums. Bhutan, for instance, often lacks the technical bandwidth to lead initiatives or absorb complex development programs, even when the political will exists.[48]

Similarly, Sri Lanka's fiscal distress has reduced its ability to contribute to regional cooperation and limited its bandwidth to shape outcomes in bodies like IORA or BIMSTEC.

Participation requires more than presence—it requires consistency, negotiation skills, and follow-through. Without targeted investment in institutional capacity, smaller states risk becoming reactive participants rather than strategic shapers.

Internal Political Volatility

Domestic instability undermines continuity in foreign policy. In Pakistan, repeated leadership changes and power struggles have stalled regional cooperation and eroded trust in forums like SAARC. Afghanistan, both before and after the Taliban's return, has been hindered by weak governance and fragmented authority—making sustained multilateral engagements nearly impossible.

For multilateral diplomacy to be effective, smaller states must project internal coherence. Without stable institutions and policy continuity, even the best-intentioned initiatives falter.

Asymmetry and Structural Pressure

Despite multilateral aspirations, structural asymmetries persist. China's financial power and India's regional presence often dominates smaller forums, limiting the maneuvering

space for other powers. Initiatives like BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) or SAARC often reflect the priorities of the most powerful actors in the room. For smaller states, resisting agenda capture while securing meaningful outcomes remains an ongoing challenge.

Pathways to Overcome These Challenges

Rather than retreat from multilateral engagements, smaller states must adopt targeted strategies to enhance their agency:

- **Invest in Diplomatic Capacity**

  With external support countries can build the bureaucratic and negotiation skills needed to lead and shape initiatives.

- **Pool Resources and Expertise**

  Regional minilaterals BBIN offer manageable formats for cooperation, allowing states to share burdens and amplify impact.

- **Stabilize the Political Core**

  A credible foreign policy begins at home. Reducing corruption, increasing policy continuity, and empowering foreign ministries are prerequisites for multilateral leverage.

While the barriers are real, they are not insurmountable. By addressing these constraints head-on, South Asia's smaller states can strengthen their multilateral influence, resist

coercion, and expand their strategic options in a rapidly shifting global order.

Conclusion: Embracing Strategic Autonomy through Multilateral Engagement

In an era of competitive multipolarity, South Asia's smaller states are neither passive observers nor inevitable pawns. They are strategic actors working to assert autonomy, safeguard sovereignty, and shape their own futures—often from positions of geographic vulnerability and resource constraint. Their path forward lies not in isolation but in selective engagement, diversified partnerships, and collective influence.

Multilateral and minilateral platforms offer these states critical tools. Through such forums, smaller nations can resist binary alignments, elevate shared priorities, and assert norms that reflect their interests—not just those of larger powers.

Still, autonomy is not guaranteed. A more unified South Asian bloc—one that counters the gravitational pull of India and China—will likely provoke resistance. Coercive economic tools, political interference, or divide-and-rule strategies could test the cohesion and resolve of these nations. The success of their multilateral engagements will depend on their ability to overcome internal political volatility, invest in institutional capacity, and collaborate across boundaries of language, ideology, and geography.

Strategic autonomy is not the absence of pressure—it is the ability to navigate pressure with clarity, resilience, and purpose. For South Asia's smaller states, this is the edge they must sharpen. By asserting influence collectively, engaging globally, and diversifying diplomatically, they can turn vulnerability into leverage—and geography into opportunity.

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CHAPTER 10

ASEAN LEADERSHIP IN FLUX

Scott D. McDonald

Anyone who fights for the future, lives in it today.

– Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, 1969

Introduction

The end of the Cold War's bipolar order ushered in a new era for Southeast Asia, bringing both opportunities and strategic uncertainty. Amidst the shifting landscape, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—an organization of relatively small powers—emerged as a pivotal vehicle for regional peace and stability.[1] Through its convening power,

ASEAN brought major powers together in dialogue and established itself as a central platform for managing regional economic and security affairs.[2] Initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) reinforced ASEAN's role as an indispensable hub for regional engagement.

Building on these early successes, ASEAN deepened its integration, expanded its membership, and formalized its aspirations through the 2008 ASEAN Charter. This new foundational document outlined a vision for regional cohesion across political, security, economic, and socio-cultural domains.[3] In the relatively stable environment of the early 2000s—underpinned by a dominant and engaged United States (U.S.)—ASEAN helped build a soft normative order rooted in consensus and dialogue.[4] Yet today, ASEAN's consensus-based model and widening internal divisions increasingly strain its ability to lead.[5]

The vision of ASEAN centrality gained currency with the rollout of the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework in 2017. However, intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has raised concerns about ASEAN's ability to maintain autonomy and relevance in shaping the region's future. To safeguard its interests and preserve agency, ASEAN must evolve from promoting centrality to exercising leadership.

This chapter begins by assessing the current regional environment and highlighting the interplay of ASEAN, U.S., and PRC ambitions. It then examines the imperative for ASEAN to assume a more assertive leadership role, while identifying structural challenges and institutional constraints. Finally, the chapter introduces the concept of Communities of Common Interest (CCI) and explores how ASEAN can use this approach—together with the theory of cross-cutting cleavages—to build resilient minilateral partnerships and secure its position as the regional leader and cooperative security architect.

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.[6] Faced with a globally preoccupied 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 U.S. "Pivot to the Pacific" signaled an intent to challenge China's pursuit of regional dominance. The escalating rivalry left ASEAN member states caught in the middle and disrupted ASEAN's role as the principal 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.[7] The challenge for ASEAN is to leverage this interconnectedness to maintain its central and strategic role in shaping and managing this evolving landscape.

The United States: Engaged, Yet Distant

The United States remains a vital security partner in Southeast Asia and a valued presence in ASEAN's regional architecture. As Evelyn Goh notes, following the Cold War, "many Southeast Asian states proved to be more concerned about potential United States withdrawal than anything else."[8] This highlights the longstanding importance ASEAN places on continued U.S. engagement in the region.

While ASEAN's inclusive and dialogue-based approach has facilitated U.S. participation, the challenge has been maintaining its consistent attention amid a multitude of shifting priorities. Occasional gaps in high-level U.S. representation at ASEAN-led forums have raised concerns about the depth of commitment. These concerns were reinforced by moments of perceived ambiguity in U.S. support for regional partners and allies during past maritime disputes.[9] This leaves regional states uncertain regarding the alignment between rhetoric and future actions.

The 2017 articulation of the FOIP framework initially aligned with ASEAN's values, emphasizing openness, sovereignty, rules-based order, and cooperation. Early outreach suggested a U.S. interest in working with regional

mechanisms and supporting a regional security architecture centered on ASEAN.[10] Yet over time, the U.S. focus appeared to shift toward broader strategic competition and U.S.-centered minilateralism, as reflected in initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States). While not designed to exclude ASEAN, these arrangements have created uncertainty about ASEAN's central role in shaping the Indo-Pacific's evolving security architecture.

People's Republic of China: Asserting Dominance

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has become increasingly assertive, 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] To put this into practice, the PRC 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] Former Permanent Representative to ASEAN for the Philippines, 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 a 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 Potential of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision initially reinforced ASEAN's centrality, receiving broad endorsements from regional partners and U.S. allies. Early consultations reflected a welcome U.S. effort to align strategic priorities with ASEAN values such as openness and sovereignty.

Yet despite positive momentum, FOIP never fully materialized into a cohesive strategy with concrete implementation. While the foundational principles resonated with regional aspirations, successive U.S. policy statements often emphasized strategic competition without providing a long-term framework for cooperation or regional integration.[21]

Initiatives like "Partnerships for a Purpose," introduced in June 2019, gestured toward deeper collaboration with regional states on shared interests.[22] Such concepts suggested a way for ASEAN to tie great powers to its own security architecture. Although the initiative seems to have faded, the fact that FOIP continues to be discussed across U.S. administrations suggests

an opportunity exists for ASEAN to pick up the values and vision of the initiative and leverage them in its exercise of regional leadership.

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. In the absence of a regional security architecture, the United States, while not seeking to displace ASEAN, will shape the region according to its interests. 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:

> 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.[23]

However, ASEAN's mechanisms remain broadly consultative, relying heavily on dialogue forums like the East

Asia Summit (EAS).[24] In the face of renewed U.S. organization building and Sino-centrism, 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 its principle of non-intervention. Moreover, the member states vary significantly in economic development, political systems, and strategic priorities. This 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.[25]

This tradition is, in part, an attempt to protect members from outside actors by projecting the appearance of unity.[26] However, leadership requires being decisive when time does not exist to build a consensus.[27] 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 a leadership role. 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.[28] 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. 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. To be a leader, ASEAN must find a way to act.

By establishing a norm of enabling action within the framework of its foundational principles, as outlined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC),[29] 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 by every state agreeing with every action of the organization.

When consensus can be reached, the organization will benefit from ASEAN becoming the agent of regional security. At times, operationalizing the organization will be carried out by individual states in areas where they have comparative advantages. 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.

However, when the time for action comes, all members have an interest in supporting ASEAN's institutional centrality and leadership by ensuring those actions are

discussed and taken within the organization's regional consultative framework.

Building trust and reducing miscalculations are crucial for maintaining regional peace, and ASEAN's forums play a vital role.[30] 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

While the United States has not always met ASEAN's expectations for sustained engagement, 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.[31] 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.[32]

Relatedly, in his study of the early United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the average citizen had many interests, manifested in a number of associations with other citizens.[33] As they become enmeshed in these associations and find benefits in them, individuals establish an interest in maintaining the system.[34] When these associations are cross-cutting, and an individual's interactions touch many other individuals who also have different associations, it reduces the number of 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—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."[35] 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 is limited, and stability is obtained.

Robert Goodin highlights extensive research that supports the hypothesis that cross-cutting cleavages moderate social conflict.[36] 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, enmesh 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.[37] 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 organizing framework of 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 an ASEAN forum. 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.[38]

Maritime Security (CCI-MarSec)

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific specifically identifies maritime cooperation as an area it seeks to promote.[39] A CCI-MarSec could build on existing initiatives like the Malacca Straits Patrol Framework, in which Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand jointly patrol the Malacca and Singapore Straits.[40] This could involve 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. Management and coordination of the CCI could be conducted by the ADMM+.

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. Neither do they require regional consensus to act.

By serving as the clearing house that links regional ASEAN requirements to extra-regional disaster response experts who want to assist, AHA Centre can prove a leader in coordination and become 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.[41] With a CCI-DR, AHA Centre can pick up this initiative and turn it into an example for the region to follow and a vehicle for ASEAN leadership.

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.[42] 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 establish a CCI simply by unilaterally offering 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 free trade. 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 to this concept 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, in building a cooperative framework, it is of central importance that the benefits of cooperation outweigh the incentives to act unilaterally. This is achieved through frequent repetition of interaction, greater communication, increased transparency, and the construction of institutions, which enable cooperative patterns.[43]

If ASEAN acts first and creates the conditions through which its members and external actors agree to act in concert, it encourages integration and cooperation on their terms. Basing each initiative in an ASEAN-led forum 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 each 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 aspired to be more than a forum for regional dialogue, yet it has often been constrained by external actors pursuing their own strategic aims. While ASEAN has sought to engage these powers, it has lacked the influence to shape regional dynamics on its own terms.

The United States—though a valued presence—has at times been inconsistent in supporting ASEAN in competition with its own priorities. On the other hand, China, advances a Sino-centric order that departs from ASEAN's pluralistic, values-based approach.

Situated between these divergent visions and at the nexus of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, ASEAN is uniquely positioned to lead. By implementing the Communities of Common Interest concept, ASEAN can transform its existing fora into instruments of regional leadership—linking dialogue to meaningful action. This is not simply about reinvigorating ASEAN's role, but anchoring it in concrete efforts to advance regional cooperation and address security and economic challenges.

Through such initiatives, ASEAN can progress from being merely a convener and assume regional leadership—shaping a stable, prosperous, and cooperative Indo-Pacific grounded in its own principles and priorities.

Endnotes

1 This chapter, originally titled "Beyond Centrality: ASEAN's Path to Regional Leadership," was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,* edited by James M. Minnich (2025), https://doi.org/10.71236/NONX4999. The current version has been updated and retitled for this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.

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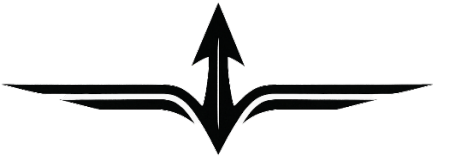
Chapter 11



Pacific Small States, Big Stakes

Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban

The United States engages Pacific Island countries to support their ability to protect their sovereignty and sovereign rights against external threats and aggression.

– Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2025

Scattered across Oceania's vast blue, the Pacific microstates may be small in size, but they are strategically indispensable.[1] From Palau to the Cook Islands, these sovereign states form a

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vital arc in the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly defined by intensifying competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Once a peripheral to global power politics, these microstates now stand at the center of a shifting strategic landscape.

Yet this contest in Oceania transcends the U.S.-China rivalry. It is also a struggle over diplomatic recognition, influence, and legitimacy—seen in Taiwan's efforts to retain allies, China's campaign to isolate it, and Australia and New Zealand's initiatives to anchor regional stability. With their geostrategic location, sovereign agency, and equal standing in global institutions, Pacific microstates are no longer on the sidelines—they are swing states in a crowded geopolitical arena.

Historically overlooked by Washington, these nations have been actively courted by Beijing through infrastructure projects, financial inducements, and persistent diplomatic outreach. To remain competitive, the United States must move beyond episodic gestures and overreliance on allies. What is needed is a sustained, sovereign-centered strategy secured in long-term partnerships and shared priorities.

Adopting the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's 1967 definition of microstates—sovereign countries characterized by exceptionally small populations and limited resources[2]—this chapter focuses on the 13 Pacific microstates recognized by the United States with populations under one million: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, the Solomon Islands,

Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Niue, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. Despite their scale, these states wield significant influence in domains from maritime governance and fisheries to undersea cables and strategic basing.

This chapter argues for a U.S. strategy that effectively matches its presence with its promise in the region. It proposes a four-pillar framework for sustained security cooperation: (1) robust maritime governance led by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), (2) strengthened U.S.-European Union collaboration on maritime domain awareness, (3) a strategic expansion of Civic Action Teams (CAT) across the region, and (4) targeted deployments of U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs units. These initiatives represent a durable, sovereignty-respecting approach to building resilience and trust—one designed to meet the challenges of the moment and reinforce America's strategic advantage.

Strategic Importance of Oceania in the Sino-U.S. 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 wield the same sovereign rights and privileges as larger nations under international law. Their voting power in global institutions—especially the United Nations—amplifies their diplomatic weight, while their location astride key sea lines of communication enhances their military and commercial relevance. They are not merely passive terrain; they are strategic agents capable of shaping, enabling, or disrupting regional alignments.

In this evolving contest for influence, Pacific microstates leverage their sovereignty and global voice to shape international conversations around development, recognition, and environmental sustainability. As custodians of vast maritime zones, they are stewards of oceanic resources and gatekeepers of critical transit routes. Their role in defending international norms—from freedom of navigation to sustainable resource management—places them in the crosshairs of today's most consequential geopolitical contest.

To secure an enduring edge in the Indo-Pacific, the United States must recognize that relationships with these microstates are not peripheral—they are central. Their engagement is not optional—it is essential. And the path forward requires moving beyond episodic attention or third-party delegation to sustained, bilateral, and strategically minded cooperation.

Diplomatic Influence and UN Engagement of Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest size, Pacific microstates possess full sovereignty under international law and wield influence in global governance far beyond their geographic footprint. Each holds equal voting rights in the UN General Assembly, allowing them to help shape international norms and decisions, particularly on issues central to their interests, such as sustainable development, environmental resilience, and maritime governance.

A recent example illustrates their significance: in the 2023 UN General Assembly vote calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, five Pacific microstates—Fiji, Tonga, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Nauru—joined the United States and a small group of nations in voting against the resolution.[3] While General Assembly outcomes are non-binding, they are widely interpreted as expressions of international consensus and carry political and diplomatic weight. Building international coalitions in a forum that counts each vote equally illustrates the Pacific microstates' capacity to influence major international decisions and underscores their strategic importance.

Beyond the UN General Assembly, Pacific microstates also serve on influential bodies such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), where countries like the Solomon Islands have shaped global development discussions.[4]

Through these roles, they influence policy agendas, secure resources, and advocate for issues that affect small island developing states. Their active engagement across the UN system ensures they are not merely observers but contributors to international governance.[5]

Additionally, their membership in other multilateral institutions—such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the Commonwealth, and specialized regional groupings—expands their diplomatic footprint and reinforces their collective voice.[6] These platforms amplify their ability to negotiate aid, forge strategic partnerships, and shape the future of the region.

Taiwan's Recognition and Sovereignty

The strategic autonomy exercised by Pacific microstates is especially visible in their approach to diplomatic recognition—most notably regarding Taiwan. Despite concerted efforts by China to isolate Taiwan diplomatically through infrastructure investment and economic inducements, several Pacific Island microstates continue to maintain formal ties with Taipei.[7] This decision reflects the sovereign agency of these nations and their capacity to exercise independent foreign policy choices despite considerable external pressure.

Currently, three Pacific Island countries recognize Taiwan as a sovereign entity (Table 11.1), and this recognition grants Taipei meaningful diplomatic access and influence in international forums. The enduring support of these

microstates provides Taiwan with both symbolic and practical legitimacy, especially in multilateral institutions where each country holds equal voting rights. Their decisions challenge Beijing's strategic calculus and demonstrate that even the smallest states can play pivotal roles in shaping diplomatic alignments.

These dynamics also highlight the region's significance as a diplomatic battleground—not just for the United States and China, but also for the Taiwan-China contest over international recognition. The ability of microstates to act as swing votes in global governance institutions elevates their importance in shaping not only bilateral ties but also the broader strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific.

Table 11.1: Pacific Microstate Participation in International Forums and Diplomatic Recognition of Taiwan

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

Source: Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban, created for this publication

Geopolitical Positioning and Strategic Routes

Beyond their diplomatic relevance, Pacific microstates occupy territory of enduring strategic importance. Situated across the maritime expanse between East Asia, Australia, and the Americas, these nations lie along the sea lanes of communication that underpin Indo-Pacific trade and military mobility. Their geographic location—between the first and second island chains that shape strategic planning across the region—grants them outsized importance in peacetime competition and potential contingencies.

Historically, the concept of the first and second island chains was central to Cold War containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific. These maritime corridors continue to shape regional defense architectures today.[8] Any expansion of adversary influence or physical presence beyond these chains would complicate U.S. and allied operations, creating operational depth for coercion or force projection into the Central Pacific.

Emerging concerns over potential basing arrangements, dual-use port development, and airfield modernization underscore how geographic positioning is once again becoming a lever of influence. For example, a 2023 PRC delegation to Kanton Island in Kiribati raised questions about China's interest in revitalizing dormant infrastructure for a potential strategic purpose.[9] Just 3,000 kilometers from Hawaii, the site would offer proximity to U.S. installations in

the Central Pacific, complicating regional defense planning if access were granted to a peer competitor.

In this context, the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) serve as a cornerstone of U.S. access and presence in the region. These treaties—linking the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—provide Washington with exclusive military access and denial rights while offering economic assistance and migration privileges in return.[10] Facilities such as the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll and the emerging over-the-horizon radar system in Palau illustrate how geography and partnership converge to shape strategic advantage.[11]

By virtue of their location, Pacific microstates are more than diplomatic voices—they can be either geostrategic enablers or obstacles in the evolving Indo-Pacific security competition. U.S. security cooperation with these nations must therefore account not only for their sovereignty and development needs but also for their growing relevance in shaping access, presence, and influence in a contested region.

Undersea Cables and Transmission Security

The Pacific microstates sit astride the vital arteries of global communications: undersea fiber-optic cables. These cables, often overlooked in traditional security discussions, carry the majority of the world's internet and financial data and are increasingly viewed as critical infrastructure in both the

economic and military domains. Many of the main cable routes connecting North America, East Asia, and Oceania traverse the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Pacific Island countries—giving these microstates a key role in maintaining the integrity of global communications.

These routes link major economies through narrow corridors, threading through the EEZs of Pacific microstates. The network's physical vulnerability, however, is an underappreciated risk. Cables can be damaged by seismic activity, deep-sea trawling, accidental anchor strikes, or deliberate interference—each with potential consequences for regional stability and global markets.[12]

Recent reports of Chinese survey vessels operating near cable routes, including within Palau's EEZ, have drawn scrutiny.[13] These activities raise concerns not only about mapping and surveillance, but also about the future risk of disruption—whether as an act of gray-zone coercion or in the early stages of conflict. Similar operations have been observed elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, notably in Taiwan, further validating the view that submarine cables are emerging targets in an era of strategic competition.[14]

The precedent for targeting these systems is not hypothetical. During the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia has been accused of tampering with undersea cable infrastructure, exposing how non-kinetic disruption can serve broader strategic aims.[15] This underscores the need for greater resilience, situational awareness, and cooperative monitoring.

Recognizing the strategic value of these cables, the Quad countries—Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—launched the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience. This initiative aims to promote best practices, enhance shared awareness, and support legal and regulatory frameworks that protect undersea infrastructure.[16] While early in implementation, it signals growing alignment among like-minded partners on a threat that is increasingly transnational in scope.

For Pacific microstates, this infrastructure presents both a risk and an opportunity. Their geography makes them stakeholders in this evolving security domain. Proactive engagement with trusted partners, especially through technical collaboration and situational monitoring, will be essential to preserving their sovereignty and enhancing national resilience. For the United States and its allies, strengthening undersea cable security must become a pillar of broader security cooperation within the Pacific.

Economic Relevance and Resources in Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest landmasses and populations, Pacific microstates command vast and strategically significant maritime territories. Thanks to their dispersed islands and atolls, these nations exercise sovereign rights over expansive EEZs. 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 essential to global fishing industries, particularly for tuna, a commodity that significantly bolsters regional economies and international food supplies.[18] Approximately one-third of the world's tuna catch is sourced from this region, including from the waters of Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Tokelau, a territory of New Zealand.[19] For countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, fishing access fees can constitute over 45% of government revenue.[20]

In response to concerns over illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, the South Pacific Tuna Treaty—linking the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the 13 Pacific Island countries—plays a critical role in regulating access, ensuring sustainability, and reinforcing sovereignty.[21] These partnerships underscore the geopolitical and economic stakes of fisheries management in an increasingly competitive region.

The Pacific microstates also sit astride sea lanes critical to regional trade. Maritime routes connecting Japan, South

Korea, and China with Australia and New Zealand pass through their waters. With Japan ranking among Australia's top trading partners, and the region's maritime traffic increasing in both volume and strategic significance, maintaining freedom of navigation through these waters is vital not only to regional allies but to the broader international system.

Mineral Resources and Deep-Sea Mining

Beneath the seabed of the Pacific lies significant mineral deposits—especially polymetallic nodules rich in cobalt, manganese, and rare earth elements. These materials are essential for the advanced manufacturing of high-performance batteries and next-generation electronics. While regulatory frameworks remain under development, international interest in these resources is accelerating.[22]

Exploratory mining research has occurred, sampling locations within the EEZs of Fiji, the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Palau, and others.[23] The area between Hawaii and Guam, particularly within the Marshall Islands' maritime domain, has emerged as a promising site for cobalt extraction.[24] As terrestrial sources of critical minerals face supply chain challenges and political instability, particularly in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, these undersea reserves represent a potential strategic alternative.[25]

However, interest in seabed mining has sparked debate over environmental stewardship and regulatory oversight.[26] Balancing resource extraction with fragile marine ecosystems will require cooperative governance, scientific transparency, and regional agency.

Maritime Trade and Strategic Chokepoints

In addition to their natural resource wealth, Pacific microstates control access to critical sea lanes of communication. These maritime corridors facilitate the movement of goods across the Indo-Pacific, including energy supplies and manufactured goods. Their positioning within the first and second island chains elevates their strategic relevance, not just for economic security but also for regional military posturing and power projection.

Maritime chokepoints surrounding the Solomon Islands, for example, are critical to the commercial lifelines of U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia.[27] Should these waters become restricted or militarized, it could severely impact the regional balance of power. For this reason, Pacific microstates are increasingly recognized not only as economic stakeholders but as guardians of freedom of navigation in one of the world's most strategically consequential maritime zones.

U.S. Policy Neglect and Recalibration

In the aftermath of the Cold War, U.S. engagement with the Pacific microstates declined significantly. With global attention diverted to other regions, these strategically located island nations received minimal policy focus from Washington. Into this vacuum stepped China, steadily expanding its diplomatic, economic, and security presence across Oceania.[28]

The shift became starkly visible in 2019 when the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. This diplomatic pivot—and the broader perception of rising PRC influence—prompted a reassessment of U.S. posture in the region.[29]

Shifts in Diplomatic Recognition

The most jarring wake-up call came in 2022, when the Solomon Islands signed a security pact with China. While the full terms remain undisclosed, a leaked draft suggested the potential for Chinese security forces to operate within the islands "to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects."[30] Given the country's proximity to vital sea lanes and Australia's east coast, the agreement triggered concern in both Washington and Canberra.

This development occurred against the backdrop of a turbulent history. From 2003 to 2017, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), led by Australia and

supported by several Pacific states, worked to stabilize internal unrest.[31] Yet, just two years after RAMSI ended, violence returned. In 2019, widespread protests erupted over the government's decision to recognize Beijing,[32] and by 2021, political and ethnic unrest flared again, with rioters targeting Honiara's Chinatown.[33] A multinational police intervention—primarily from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand—was once again required to restore calm.[34]

This context lends gravity to the Solomon Islands' alignment with Beijing. While the agreement ostensibly addresses internal security, it opens the door to a broader PRC military presence in the South Pacific, with long-term implications for regional balance.

Renewed U.S. Engagement Strategies

In response, the United States began recalibrating its Pacific strategy, including diplomatic gestures like former Secretary Blinken's 2022 visit to Fiji—the first by a U.S. Secretary of State in nearly 40 years—and President Biden's historic address to the Pacific Islands Forum.[35] Additionally, the U.S. reopened or established embassies in Tonga and Kiribati, and a new envoy was appointed to the Pacific Islands Forum.[36]

In parallel, the United States unveiled its first-ever Pacific Partnership Strategy and convened the inaugural U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit. These efforts signaled a new intent: to move beyond episodic engagement and toward sustained, multidimensional partnerships focused on mutual priorities.[37]

Yet, as former diplomats and analysts have noted, speeches and symbolism alone will not secure influence. As Dr. Anne-Marie Schleich, a former German ambassador to several Pacific microstates, observed:

> The U.S. re-engagement with Pacific Island countries will not be judged by high-ranking visits or new embassies but by its willingness to address their primary concerns … and contribute towards sustainable development [in tangible ways].[38]

The Need for Credible, Sustainable Commitments

While traditional U.S. engagement—through foreign assistance, development initiatives, and security partnerships—has long supported stability in the Pacific, today's strategic environment calls for adaptive approaches. Evolving national priorities and institutional restructuring, including changes to agencies historically active in infrastructure development and resilience initiatives, present both challenges and opportunities for recalibrating U.S. efforts in the region.

Pacific partners consistently express interest in long-term collaboration focused on maritime security, fisheries governance, infrastructure connectivity, and employment-generating initiatives. These are domains in which the United States brings substantial experience and trusted capabilities, particularly through institutions such as the U.S. Coast Guard,

civic action programs, and multilateral security cooperation mechanisms.

Pacific microstates are not passive actors in global competition. They are active and capable stewards of their own national interests, seeking partnerships that respect their sovereignty and support their aspirations. As strategic rivalry intensifies, the United States can reinforce its standing by demonstrating credible commitment, not only through shared values but also through continuous, tangible delivery.

Security Cooperation Recommendations for The United States

The Pacific's strategic geography—marked by dispersed island nations, expansive maritime domains, and contested lines of communication—places Pacific microstates at the forefront of geopolitical maneuvering. These nations may be small in population and territory, but they sit astride critical sea lanes, submarine cables, and resource-rich EEZs. Their voices carry weight in international forums, and their partnerships have become central to shaping regional norms.

To build enduring influence and reinforce regional stability, the United States must adopt a comprehensive security cooperation strategy tailored to Pacific contexts. This approach should be rooted in respect for sovereignty, a shared commitment to resilience, and pragmatic engagements in areas where U.S. capabilities align with Pacific priorities.

A four-pillar strategy is proposed:

Pillar One: Maritime Security Cooperation Led by USCG and NOAA

The USCG, in coordination with NOAA, is well-positioned to lead a maritime cooperation initiative that advances shared priorities in fisheries governance, maritime law enforcement, and environmental stewardship. This approach emphasizes civilian-led engagement in a region where conventional military presence can raise sensitivities.

IUU fishing, vessel tracking violations, and unauthorized resource exploitation remain serious concerns for Pacific microstates.[39] USCG and NOAA can help enhance partner-state capacity through combined patrols, vessel monitoring systems, training exchanges, and institutional support for maritime governance.

NOAA's technical expertise in ocean monitoring, fisheries management, and maritime resilience offers critical tools to Pacific Island partners seeking to safeguard marine resources. Collaboration, such as the April 2024 USCG-Samoa agreement that enables joint enforcement activities within Samoa's EEZ, reflects a model for scalable engagement.[40]

Pillar Two: U.S.-EU Strategic Collaboration on Maritime Governance

Building on shared interests and for burden-sharing, the United States should deepen maritime cooperation with the European Union (EU), particularly in capacity-building, information sharing, and domain awareness. The EU has a demonstrated track record of technical assistance, including vessel surveillance and maritime domain integration, and maintains a strong normative framework on sustainable fisheries and resource security.

Joint U.S.-EU maritime initiatives could include rotational patrols, shared satellite surveillance, regional enforcement mechanisms, and training support for Pacific Island law enforcement agencies. The EU's experience in multilateral maritime partnerships—especially through its Critical Maritime Routes program[41] and *Operation Atalanta*—could be adapted to the Pacific to support stability and the rule of law at sea.[42]

France and Germany, with their strategic interests and diplomatic presence in Oceania, can serve as anchors for trilateral U.S.-EU-Pacific cooperation.[43] Their participation in the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) ministerial underscores their long-term engagement in the region.

Pillar Three: Civic Action Teams (CAT) Expansion

Expanding U.S. joint-force Civic Action Teams (CAT) across the Pacific microstates would deepen bilateral relationships and build local capacity. These teams, comprised of U.S. service members with engineering, medical, and logistics expertise, have operated successfully in Palau for over five decades.[44] Their nonintrusive, community-based development projects exemplify the kind of sustained presence Pacific partners value.[45]

CAT programs strengthen civil-military relations, enhance local infrastructure, and increase preparedness for natural disasters or emergencies. In addition, they reflect the United States' commitment to capacity building over coercion—an approach that resonates strongly across Oceania.

A region-wide expansion of CATs would offer consistent, visible, and community-oriented U.S. engagement, while reinforcing local resilience and government capacity.

Pillar Four: USAR Civil Affairs Deployment

Civil Affairs (CA) units, drawn primarily from the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR), possess expertise in governance, public health, economic stabilization, and infrastructure development.[46] Their deployment to Pacific microstates could complement CATs by delivering specialized support aligned with partner-nation development goals.

In particular, CA teams can support health system resilience, emergency planning, governance advisory services, and public outreach campaigns.[47] These efforts are essential to microstates where national institutions are often stretched thin and local government capacities are limited.

Strategically, CA deployments foster trust, reinforce norms, and counter malign influence without the visibility of hard-power posturing. Their presence enhances day-to-day collaboration and long-term institution-building, both of which are vital in strengthening Pacific security architectures.

These four pillars—maritime cooperation, alliance coordination, civic action, and civil affairs—form a cost-effective, durable, and relationship-based strategy for the Pacific. They align with partner-state priorities and U.S. strategic interests, providing an alternative to transactional aid or episodic diplomacy.

Conclusion: Securing Influence through Strategic Engagement

Pacific Island microstates occupy a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. Their diplomatic independence, expansive maritime zones, and control over critical sea lanes and seabed resources make them important actors in a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. While their geographic remoteness and small populations often obscure their strategic value, they stand at the crossroads

of regional influence, institutional legitimacy, and maritime governance in Oceania.

For the United States, the imperative is clear: sustained and sovereign-centered engagement, not episodic gestures, will determine future alignment in this contested arena. The era of rhetorical partnership must yield to a strategy grounded in presence, partnership, and practical cooperation.

A security cooperation approach focused on maritime enforcement, alliance coordination, civic action, and civil affairs offers a durable and respectful framework. These efforts must not be seen as temporary interventions, but as long-term investment in regional stability, national resilience, and mutual credibility. Pacific microstates are not passive terrain in a strategic rivalry—they are sovereign decision-makers with rising expectations.

As other powers—including China—seek to secure influence through infrastructure, inducement, and information operations, the United States must respond by demonstrating a reliable partnership, not dependency or paternalism. Success will not be measured by footprint size or aid volume, but by the quality, consistency, and sincerity of cooperation.

The Pacific is not a peripheral theater—it is emerging as a central test of strategic alignment and rules-based governance in the 21st century. If the United States intends to maintain credibility and influence across this expanse of oceanic states,

it must bring more than policy—it must bring presence, trust, and the political will to match promise with delivery.

Endnotes

1 This chapter, originally titled "Pacific Island Microstates and U.S. Security Cooperation: A Strategic Reassessment," was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, edited by James M. Minnich (2025), https://doi.org/10.71236/AXJT2495. The current version has been updated and retitled for publication in this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.

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Chapter 12

Korea's Strategic Clarity

Lami Kim

If one does not know to which port one is sailing,
no wind is favorable.

— Seneca, 65 CE

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is entering a moment of compression: trade relies on China's scale, security on the United States' reach, and middle powers are expected to pick—or be picked apart.[1] For the Republic of Korea (South Korea or ROK), that choice has long oscillated between *strategic ambiguity* and *strategic*

clarity. Ambiguity preserved economic access to China while hedging against coercion. Clarity promised firmer alignment with the rules-based order but invited near-term costs.

President Yoon Suk-yeol's 2022–25 term tilted decisively toward clarity, anchored by Seoul's first Indo-Pacific Strategy. Yet his 2025 impeachment, followed by the election of progressive successor Lee Jae-myung, reopens the debate. This chapter argues that strategic ambiguity is losing value faster than its risks are receding. Clear alignment is now the lower-cost option—if Seoul matches words with capabilities and if public opinion anchors policy beyond partisan swings.

From Wartime Ally to Global Pivotal State

Since its founding in 1948, South Korea has relied on U.S. deterrence to ensure national security. During the Cold War, alignment was binary: Washington shielded Seoul; Beijing backed Pyongyang. Formal recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1992 unlocked trade, and by 2003, China had overtaken the United States as South Korea's top trading partner. Progressive and conservative presidents alike courted Chinese markets while leaning on the U.S. alliance for defense, a low-cost hedge so long as the two giants avoided open confrontation.

Choices under Fire: Two Test Cases

The middle ground narrowed once China began turning

economic weight into strategic leverage. As U.S.-China competition intensified, South Korea increasingly found itself caught between its two largest partners.

THAAD 2016

The first major test came in 2016, when the United States moved to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system to South Korea, triggering sharp opposition from China. This was not only because of the system's radar, which it feared could monitor Chinese territory, but also because of broader concerns. Beijing viewed THAAD as a step toward integrating South Korea into the U.S. global missile defense system, and symbolically, as a sign that Seoul was siding with Washington over Beijing.

This episode laid bare South Korea's internal divide: conservatives supported the deployment as a necessary alignment with the United States; progressives warned of unnecessary escalation and urged balance. Notably, prior to the THAAD crisis, conservative President Park Geun-hye had pursued closer ties with Beijing, even attending its 2015 military parade marking the end of World War II. But THAAD proved indivisible—partial compromise was not an option. Park approved the deployment, and China retaliated with sweeping economic measures that crippled South Korea's tourism, entertainment, and retail sectors.

The Three Nos, 2017

When progressive President Moon Jae-in took office in 2017, his administration quickly sought to repair relations with China. It did so through the "Three Nos" policy: no additional THAAD deployments, no integration into a regional U.S. missile defense system, and no trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan.[2] The gesture was meant to reassure Beijing and signal Seoul's return to a more balanced posture.

The Moon administration also allowed Chinese tech firms like Huawei to participate in South Korea's 5G infrastructure, diverging from the path taken by many Western governments. It avoided joining the Quad and steered clear of regional military initiatives perceived as anti-China.

Critics viewed these choices as signs of vulnerability within the U.S.-led coalition. Supporters argued that strategic ambiguity preserved economic ties with China while keeping channels open on North Korea—all without abandoning the U.S. alliance.

Yoon's Indo-Pacific Turn: Clarity in Rhetoric, Limits in Practice

President Yoon Suk-yeol's 2022 inauguration marked a sharp shift in South Korea's foreign policy—from hedging to clear alignment with the United States. He advanced a vision of South Korea as a "global pivotal state," committed to

upholding liberal democratic values and proactively contributing to global stability.[3] His early actions reinforced this shift: strengthening the U.S. alliance, joining global forums, and—at the 2022 NATO summit—aligning more openly with Western coalitions.[4]

In December 2022, Yoon's government released South Korea's first-ever *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*.[5] The document echoed U.S. language on preserving a rules-based order, resisting unilateral changes to the status quo, and ensuring stability across the Taiwan Strait. Simply adopting the term "Indo-Pacific Strategy" signaled a break from prior caution and earned approval from Washington and other regional partners.

Yet the gap between vision and implementation was stark. The strategy lacked operational detail—no timeline, no budget, no defined roles. South Korea declined to participate in freedom of navigation operations (FONOP), avoided articulating its role in a Taiwan contingency, and conspicuously declined to meet U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during her 2022 visit, days after her stop in Taipei. Similarly, when Chinese vessels injured Filipino sailors in the Second Thomas Shoal, Seoul expressed concern but avoided naming Beijing despite having recently elevated its partnership with the Philippines.

These omissions cast doubt on Seoul's strategic resolve. Even an administration publicly committed to strategic clarity could not fully enact it, underscoring the persistent constraints

on South Korean policy. Furthermore, with the return of a progressive president in 2025, ambiguity may resurface. Beijing, sensing an opportunity, has already resumed cultural engagement and signaled goodwill to ROK opposition figures.[6]

The Weakening Case for Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity has long served South Korea as a pragmatic hedge: preserving economic ties with China while sustaining its security alliance with the United States. However, in the current era of geopolitical bifurcation, the advantages of ambiguity diminish while the risks mount. Four trends are accelerating its decline, making strategic clarity less costly and more compelling.

Global Polarization: The Cost of Sitting Out

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and intensifying U.S.-China rivalry have deepened global ideological divides, eroding the space for neutrality. In 2022, Seoul's delay in sanctioning Moscow drew criticism from the United States and Europe,[7] underscoring the reputational cost of fence-sitting. Shortly after, the United States excluded South Korea from a list of 32 countries exempt from licensing restrictions aimed at Russia—signaling consequences.[8]

Pressure to choose has only grown. The invitation to join the U.S.-led "Chip-4 alliance," targeting China's

semiconductor sector, left Seoul little room to maneuver.[9] Meanwhile, North Korea's overt military support for Russia, including munitions and personnel, has forced Seoul to reassess its positioning. In a polarized world, ambiguity is increasingly read as indecision or unreliability.

Diminished Chinese Leverage on North Korea

One of the strongest arguments for ambiguity was China's presumed role as a moderating force on Pyongyang. That leverage is now in doubt. Beijing has refused to condemn North Korea's missile tests, blocked new United Nations sanctions,[10] and permitted illicit oil transfers and overseas labor to persist—all in violation of existing resolutions.[11]

With the UN Panel of Experts suspended and China drawing closer to North Korea through high-level visits,[12] Seoul cannot rely on Beijing to help stabilize the peninsula. The situation is further complicated by North Korea's deepening ties with Russia. Their June 2024 mutual defense pact[13] and wartime cooperation—including suspected nuclear assistance[14]—highlight a shifting axis of threat that ambiguity cannot defuse.

Economic Rebalancing: Diversification Reduces Risk

China's remains South Korea's largest trading partner,[15] but its role is no longer irreplaceable. After the THAAD backlash in 2016—costing Seoul up to $15.6 billion[16]—South Korea

accelerated efforts to diversify through initiatives like the New Southern Policy, which expanded ties with ASEAN and India.

Trade data underscores this shift. In 2023, South Korean exports to the United States surpassed those to China for the first time in 20 years.[17] In 2024, China retook the top spot, but the margin between the two narrowed to its lowest level since 2003. While exports to China rose 6.6%, shipments to the United States jumped 10.45%, continuing a record-breaking streak.[18] This trend, driven by China's internal slowdown, rising domestic production, and U.S. market opportunities,[19] suggests that deeper alignment with the United States would no longer trigger the economic collapse once feared. Ambiguity's supposed economic buffer is losing its foundation.

Coercion Targeting the Weakest Link

South Korea's reputation as the "soft spot" in the U.S.-led coalition has made it a prime target for China's pressure. After the THAAD deployment, China punished Seoul far more aggressively than it did Japan or Australia for similar alignments.

Yet in recent years, China has pursued warmer ties with Tokyo and Canberra, signaling that Beijing may be shifting away from blanket coercion. President Xi's November 2023 meeting with Prime Minister Kishida and the resumption of high-level dialogue with Australia indicate a recalibrated

approach.[20] In contrast, Beijing continues to treat Seoul as pliable.

This pattern suggests risk, but also opportunity. A more consistent and resolute South Korean posture could reduce Beijing's incentive to single it out. Clarity may not provoke greater punishment; it may actually invite respect. The more Seoul acts like a pivotal state, the harder it becomes to pressure.

Strategic Opportunities for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

While strategic ambiguity is losing value, strategic clarity will only deliver if South Korea turns intention into action. Seoul has multiple avenues to do so, leveraging its industrial strengths, technological leadership, and geostrategic location to advance a rules-based regional order. The following five domains offer immediate opportunity.

Defense Exports: Arming Allies, Shaping Alignments

South Korea's emergence as a major arms exporter presents an opportunity to align its growing defense industrial base with its broader strategic aims in the Indo-Pacific.[21] According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), South Korea has become the world's 10th largest arms provider,[22] gaining recognition for producing cost-

effective, reliable systems well suited to coalition partners' needs.

Seoul should recalibrate its primarily commercial arms export strategy toward one that is more strategically aligned with geopolitical objectives. By prioritizing transfers that strengthen deterrence and build resilience, particularly among countries seeking to diversify away from Russian or Chinese systems, South Korea can transform its defense exports into instruments of influence, not merely trade.

Upholding Maritime Order: Time to Join FONOPs

South Korea's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific cannot remain declaratory. It must be operationalized—especially in the contested waters of the East and South China Seas, where China continues to erode international maritime norms through incremental encroachment. Beijing's use of maritime militia and Coast Guard vessels to assert unlawful claims—so-called gray-zone tactics—seeks to normalize a coercive maritime order in place of one grounded in international law.

In response to China's challenges to the rule-based maritime order, the United States and its allies have maintained a regular tempo of FONOPs, now joined by extra-regional actors such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the European Union.[23] This signaling was further reinforced by multilateral naval exercises in April 2024 involving Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the United

States, demonstrating a growing consensus around the defense of open sea lanes and airspace.[24]

Although Seoul endorsed these principles rhetorically, it has yet to act. Participation in FONOPs would bring its Indo-Pacific Strategy into closer alignment with its behavior, underscore its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and a rules-based maritime order, and reduce its vulnerability to China by embedding its action in a broader coalition. While Beijing may object, collective participation dilutes the impact of retaliation. By stepping forward, South Korea would signal not only alliance solidarity but also the seriousness of its regional vision.

Technological Edge: Partnering for Security Innovation

The rapid evolution of emerging technologies—artificial intelligence, 5G and 6G communications, cyber capabilities, and autonomous weapons—is reshaping both economic power and military competition. In these domains, the strategic rivalry between the United States and China is especially pronounced. While the United States maintains an edge in core technologies, China benefits from sweeping data access, a vast talent pool, and aggressive investment under its "Military-Civil Fusion" strategy, which blurs the lines between civilian and defense applications.

To sustain its advantage, the United States increasingly depends on collaboration with capable and trusted allies. South Korea is among the most critical of these partners. With

globally recognized strengths in AI, memory chip manufacturing, and 5G infrastructure[25]—anchored by firms like Samsung—South Korea is well-positioned to reinforce the technological foundation of the U.S.-led coalition.

Seoul has already taken steps in this direction, including trilateral agreements reached at the 2023 Camp David summit and emerging dialogues with AUKUS members on defense technology cooperation.[26] Building on this foundation, South Korea should deepen joint development efforts in next–generation technologies, contribute to interoperable systems and shared innovation platforms, and help craft operational concepts that integrate emerging capabilities into future force structure. In doing so, South Korea will not only bolster its own security but also shape the broader contours of technological leadership and military effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific.

Critical Infrastructure Alternatives

China's growing dominance in key infrastructure sectors—especially 5G telecommunications and nuclear energy—poses strategic risks for many nations. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE have secured a significant share of the global 5G market,[27] offering low-cost, state-backed packages that are difficult to match on price alone. In the nuclear energy sector, Beijing has extended similarly attractive financing for power plant construction, positioning itself as a go-to provider for emerging markets.[28]

However, the strategic costs of this dependency are becoming more apparent. Nations that adopt Chinese infrastructure often find themselves exposed to economic coercion and potential cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Concerns surrounding 5G equipment include allegations of embedded surveillance mechanisms and data exfiltration.[29] In the nuclear space, reliance on Chinese reactors and fuel cycles can translate into long-term political leverage.

This is where South Korea has an opportunity to step forward. With globally competitive firms like Samsung leading its telecommunications industry and a proven record of safe, efficient nuclear power construction, South Korea offers a viable and trusted alternative. Its 5G and nuclear energy capabilities are not only technically advanced but also geopolitically reliable qualities that many countries increasingly prioritize.

Moreover, South Korea's infrastructure offerings complement those of the United States. By combining Korea's construction efficiency and technology deployment with U.S. leadership in nuclear safety protocols and microchip design, the two allies can jointly field infrastructure packages that are both competitive and secure. Through coordinated export initiatives, they can counterbalance China's dominance and offer recipient countries a clear alternative.

Equally important is South Korea's role in helping shape global standards. Working with the United States and other like-minded partners, Seoul can contribute to setting the

international norms that govern the safe and responsible use of these critical technologies. Doing so will not only safeguard the global infrastructure landscape from exploitation but also solidify South Korea's role as a key provider of secure, future-oriented development in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Indigenous Deterrence: Missiles and Space

A robust and forward-leaning defense posture is essential to South Korea's emergence as a regional security contributor. In recent years, Seoul has taken meaningful steps to develop military capabilities that extend well beyond the Korean peninsula. Chief among these is the advancement of intermediate-range missile systems capable of striking across Northeast Asia. While officially designed to deter threats from North Korea, these dual-capable systems implicitly strengthen South Korea's ability to address broader regional contingencies, including those involving China, though the government deliberately avoids highlighting that dimension to preserve diplomatic balance with Beijing.

This missile modernization followed a pivotal shift in policy. In May 2021, the United States lifted longstanding bilateral restrictions on the range and payload of South Korean ballistic missiles—limits originally imposed in 1979 to prevent nuclear-capable delivery systems.[30] The lifting of these constraints enabled Seoul to independently shape its own deterrence architecture and reduce pressure on Washington to deploy U.S. intermediate-range missiles in the region, a move

that has faced political resistance in allied countries like Japan and the Philippines.[31] South Korea's enhanced missile capabilities now serve both national autonomy and alliance burden-sharing, while contributing to a more distributed and resilient deterrence posture across the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, South Korea's growing space program is expanding its strategic toolkit. With successful satellite launches in December 2023 and 2024, as well as additional launches for 2025, Seoul is rapidly enhancing its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and precision-strike capabilities. These advances not only improve homeland defense but also deepen technological and operational integration with the United States, especially in space-based situational awareness and targeting.[32]

Together, these investments mark a significant shift: from a traditional shielded security recipient to an active contributor to regional stability. South Korea's missile and space advancements reinforce the credibility of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, not just as a diplomatic gesture, but as a material commitment to shaping the regional balance of power.

Yet, realizing the full potential of these initiatives will require policy continuity and political will across administrations. In a polarized domestic landscape, the central question remains: Can Seoul maintain a steady course and fulfill its growing role in the Indo-Pacific's evolving security order?

Domestic Politics: Public Opinion as Keystone

With the June 2025 election decided and Lee Jae-myung securing a decisive victory, questions have naturally emerged about the future of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Lee's Democratic Party has traditionally favored a more cautious foreign policy—often described as strategic ambiguity—in contrast to the strategic clarity pursued by the outgoing conservative People Power Party.

Yet a change in leadership does not necessarily signal a reversal in direction. On the contrary, a convergence of domestic public sentiment and regional geopolitical pressure suggests that the core tenets of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy may well endure under Lee's presidency.

Public opinion is the most stabilizing force behind continuity. A 2023 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) survey showed that 88% of South Koreans favored an active international role for their country, with more than half supporting expanded engagement beyond Northeast Asia.[33] These attitudes align with the broader vision of South Korea as a "global pivotal state," a concept that has gained traction across party lines.

Equally significant is persistent unease with China across the South Korean electorate. In a 2021 Chicago Council survey, 56% of South Koreans predicted that China would become the greatest security threat within the next ten years, surpassing even North Korea.[34] That perception has only

intensified.[35] By 2024, fewer than one in ten South Koreans reported a greater affinity for China over the United States,[36] and a 2025 study by the Asan Institute found record-low levels of support for China as a key economic partner. In contrast, American favorability and alignment continue to trend upward.[37]

These trends are not likely to be reversed by a single administration. If anything, they narrow the room for a sharp policy pivot. While Lee's government may recalibrate tone and tactics, especially in how it engages Beijing, the strategic architecture established under Yoon is likely to persist, anchored by public consensus and reinforced by a rapidly evolving regional environment.

Looking ahead, the Lee administration faces a clear opportunity to preserve the Indo-Pacific Strategy while making it more politically sustainable and operationally credible. Codifying the strategy through a presidential directive could increase policy durability. A publicly issued clear action plan—complete with budget lines and assigned ministries—would enhance transparency and implementation. Participation in multilateral FONOPS, beginning in 2026, would demonstrate consistency between policy and posture.

Further actions could include launching an Official Security Assistance Fund modeled after Japan's OSA, designed to deliver hardware, spares, and training to Southeast Asian partners. A U.S.-ROK Emerging Technology Forum could align export controls and joint research priorities, while

coordinated infrastructure packages in 5G and civil nuclear energy could offer trusted alternatives to Chinese systems in key third countries. Finally, fielding an intermediate-range missile brigade and deploying a full constellation of ISR satellites by 2028 would further institutionalize South Korea's role as a net contributor to Indo-Pacific stability.

In short, the geopolitical momentum behind the Indo-Pacific Strategy is unlikely to dissipate, and Lee Jae-myung's administration, if it chooses to build rather than dismantle, has the chance to make this strategy its own.

Conclusion: A Strategy Worth Sustaining

South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy emerged at a moment of sharpening geopolitical friction—an effort to navigate rising uncertainty with principled alignment. While the outgoing Yoon Suk-yeol administration articulated the strategy with rhetorical clarity, its full implementation remained uneven and incomplete. Now with a new president in office and shifting political winds at home, the question is no longer whether South Korea will choose between ambiguity and clarity, but how it will define its role within a more divided and contested Indo-Pacific.

Lee Jae-myung's victory offers both a challenge and an opportunity. His administration inherits a strategy that enjoys strong public support, growing international expectations, and a clear strategic rationale. Yet turning vision into lasting architecture will require more than continuity—it will demand

codification, resourcing, and demonstration. Words must be matched by posture. Principles must be backed by presence. Partnerships must yield operational alignment.

South Korea has the industrial capacity, technological sophistication, and regional credibility to act not merely as a balancer but as a builder of regional stability. Whether through defense exports, technology collaboration, secure infrastructure, or indigenous deterrence, the tools are already at hand. The task now is to integrate them into a coherent and sustained whole.

Strategic clarity is no longer a choice between risk and reward. In the Indo-Pacific of today, it is the cost of credibility. For South Korea, the opportunity is real, the foundation is set, and the future depends on follow-through.

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Part III | Competition

CHAPTER 13

CONTESTING THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Denny Roy

The South China Sea is far more dangerous than the Taiwan Strait.[2]

— Retired PLA Senior Colonel Zhou Bo, 2023

Introduction

Xi Jinping's People's Republic of China (PRC) is aggressively pursuing territorial ambition, often veiled as irredentism, presenting significant challenges to the United States and its

partners. This is most prominently manifested in the South China Sea.

The essence of the issue is that Beijing is attempting to compel the international community, through means that include military intimidation, to accept the Chinese claim that the South China Sea is PRC territory rather than an international waterway. China is not the only claimant that has taken controversial actions, but China's claims are by far the most expansive, and its behavior the most forceful.

The situation is disruptive in several ways. China interferes with other countries in the region carrying out what should be normal activities, such as peaceful military patrols on the high seas and the extraction of resources by countries in their own exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

China's actions violate and therefore undermine international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS or Law of the Sea), to which Beijing itself is a signatory. While up to now remaining in the gray zone, Chinese actions contribute substantially to an atmosphere of high tension that makes the South China Sea a possible flashpoint for a war that would cause global economic hardship, not to mention the possibility of combat between two nuclear-armed major powers.

The problem of how to deal with this PRC expansionism has divided the region. The Philippines and Vietnam have taken the strongest positions. The governments of Malaysia

and Indonesia have pushed back more quietly. At the other end of the spectrum is Cambodia, which has partnered with Beijing to suppress criticism of China.[3] The issue seriously compromises the cohesion and effectiveness of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Governments that would prefer not to choose sides are under conflicting pressures from Washington and Beijing.

The South China Sea dispute exacerbates the competition for regional leadership between China and the United States. Beijing has said its policy relies on historical arrangements that precede and therefore take precedence over modern international law, which the Chinese complain disproportionately reflects the outlook and interests of Western countries. The PRC's position supports suspicions that today's Chinese government hopes to restore a modernized version of the ancient Sino-centric tributary system. Washington, on the other hand, promotes a system that will keep U.S. friends and allies in the region free from Chinese military and economic coercion, and that more generally upholds U.S. security interests and commercial opportunities.

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.

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,"[4] 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 UNCLOS as other countries' EEZs. Despite being one of 170 parties to ratify UNCLOS,[5] 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.[6]

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 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,"[7] "lawfare,"[8] 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, reneging 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.[9]

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.[10] 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,[11] 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.[12]

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 (2013) reserves of 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.[13] 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 hundreds of thousands of Filipino fishermen losing their livelihoods in the last decade due to Chinese interference.[14] 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 seaborne 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.[15]

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" (FONOPs) 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.[16] 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.[17]

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.[18]

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.[19] 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.[20]

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.[21] 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."[22] 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.[23] 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,[24] indicating a strategic move by China to change the status quo in its favor by targeting the viability of the outpost.

Beijing is playing both defense and offense. Chinese actions near Second Thomas Shoal represent an attempt to force a rival claimant to de-occupy a feature. At the same time, the Chinese government is seeking to occupy previously unoccupied features. In addition to the 2012 case of Scarborough Shoal, we have the example of the Sabina Shoal incident of 2024. The Philippine government discovered crushed coral in the shoal, suggesting the beginning of a Chinese effort to reclaim land preparatory to permanently occupying the feature. The Philippines stationed a large PCG ship to guard the shoal, but it suffered blockade and repeated rammings from Chinese vessels before withdrawing due to dehydration among its crew.

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.[25]

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.[26]

Furthermore, the artificial islands constructed by China in the South China Sea and access to the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia significantly enhance China's military advantage in the region.[27] 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.[28]

Thailand's interest in opposing China's actions is minimal, as it leans toward a closer security relationship with Beijing.[29] Malaysia and Indonesia exhibit concerns over China's actions in their EEZs but generally avoid taking sides in the U.S.-China rivalry. This, despite the fact that a Chinese Coast Guard vessel patrolled near Malaysia's Luconia Shoals every day of 2024, a reminder that Beijing opposes Malaysian exploration for oil and gas there.

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.[30] 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.

If China can practice lawfare, so can its rivals. Analyst Gregory Poling argues that the Philippines would be "almost certain" to win a vote in the UN General Assembly challenging China's claims and requesting an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice.[31]

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.[32]

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.-led coalition, 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.[33] 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.[34]

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.[35]

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.[36] 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 that the Chinese government briefly floated the idea of characterizing the South

China Sea as a "core interest,"[37] but the idea never took hold in official policy statements.[38] 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 the 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 14

SAFEGUARDING INDIA'S SUBMARINE CABLES

Divya Rai

Connectivity is the new geography

— Parag Khanna, *Connectography*, 2016

Introduction

In the Indo-Pacific's evolving strategic landscape, the contest for digital dominance is playing out beneath the sea.[1] Submarine cables—carrying 95% of the world's international data—form the unseen backbone of the global economy,

financial systems, and military communications. As states seek to control information flows and assert influence in the digital domain, these cables have emerged as critical infrastructure and strategic targets.

India stands at the center of this high-stakes environment. Its geographic position in the Indian Ocean Region is at the crossroads of vital global data routes, linking Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. India's ambitions to become a global digital hub are accelerating through projects such as the 2Africa Pearls, India-Asia-Express (IAX), and India-Europe-Express (IEX) submarine cable systems. These initiatives will significantly expand its bandwidth capacity and deepen its integration into the world's digital economy.[2] But with this opportunity comes heightened vulnerability—and responsibility.

Recent sabotage incidents—from the Nord Stream pipeline attacks to cable disruptions in the Red Sea—underscore the emergence of undersea infrastructure as a new frontier in geopolitical competition. A growing concern in the strategic landscape is the potential for seabed warfare. In particular, the weaponization of seabed assets, including by state-backed actors operating in legal gray zones, highlights the fragility of global connectivity.[3] India's limited repair capabilities and reliance on foreign-owned infrastructure expose a critical gap at a time when secure, resilient communications are paramount to national power.

The chapter explores the strategic importance of India's submarine cable network within the broader context of Indo-Pacific competition. It examines the composition and vulnerabilities of these systems, identifying gaps in international and domestic legal protections, and evaluates India's current infrastructure posture and the importance of Quad initiatives on cable repair partnerships. Most importantly, it outlines a roadmap for India to transform its submarine cable ecosystem—from a soft target to a pillar of strategic advantage. Through legal reform, alliance coordination under its SAGAR initiatives,[4] and domestic capability development, India can assert itself as a rule-shaper in securing the Indo-Pacific's digital arteries.

Strategic Stakes in Subsea Connectivity

The global submarine cable network, spanning nearly 1.5 million kilometers (km) beneath the oceans, forms the digital foundation of 21st-century power.[5] These cables carry nearly $10 trillion in daily financial transactions and enable virtually all international traffic.[6] From global banking to real-time intelligence sharing, their uninterrupted function underpins modern economies, diplomacy, and defense.

Control over these digital arteries is increasingly viewed as a strategic advantage. The system's physical fragility—where a single severed cable can disrupt millions of lives—starkly contrasts its critical importance. As states and private

actors race to build, secure, and influence subsea routes, the geopolitical significance of cable networks has surged.

India's role is central. Positioned at the maritime crossroads of Asia, its waters host vital east-west data routes that connect Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and beyond. This location gives India more than connectivity—it gives it leverage. Whether through economic interdependence or digital deterrence, India's stewardship of submarine cable infrastructure is becoming a decisive factor in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

India at the Crossroads of Digital Power

India's geographic position at the heart of the Indian Ocean gives it more than geographic relevance—it grants strategic leverage in the global competition over digital infrastructure. With east-west data cables converging off its coasts, India serves as a digital fulcrum between Europe, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. This convergence makes Indian waters a critical artery in the global data bloodstream—and a potential point of failure if left unprotected.

The stakes are rising. India's major undersea cable initiatives, including 2Africa Pearls and India-Asia-Express (IAX) systems, and India-Europe-Express (IEX), are not merely infrastructure projects—they are instruments of economic ascendancy and strategic signaling. Both cable systems are owned by Reliance Jio, where the IAX connects Chennai and Mumbai with major Southeast Asian hubs

including Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia. The IEX connects with France, Greece, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Djibouti. These systems will elevate India as a primary conduit for intercontinental data flows, reinforcing its value to global tech giants, regional governments, and security coalitions alike.

But with strategic centrality comes strategic risk. As cable volume increases in Indian territory, so does exposure to sabotage, espionage, and disruption. India's credibility as a digital power will increasingly rest on its ability not just to expand cable capacity but also to secure it.

Through mechanisms like the Quad, India is beginning to translate its geographic advantage into strategic influence, pushing for norms, partnerships, and infrastructure resilience in a contested domain. To understand how India can protect this emerging edge, it is first necessary to examine the cables themselves—their structure, fragility, and the actors who build and maintain them.

Beneath the Surface: Anatomy of a Strategic Vulnerability

Despite appearing impervious from the surface, submarine cables are physically fragile. Just 70 to 210 millimeters in diameter—no thicker than a garden hose—these fiber-optic lines carry enormous volumes of data across continents.[7] Bundles of glass strands, thinner than human hair, transmit light pulses that enable everything from international banking

to secure military communications. Insulated and armored, the cables vary in thickness depending on water depth and proximity to human activity.

To maintain signal strength, repeaters—optical amplifiers—are embedded every 40 to 80 kilometers along the cables route.[8] These devices, critical to long-distance transmission, are among the system's most sensitive components and require uninterrupted power and precise calibration.

Despite these protections, submarine cables remain vulnerable to both environmental and deliberate interference. Their complex construction makes them expensive to produce, challenging to install, and even harder to repair. The very factors that make them essential to global function—submerged location, long-distance span, and reliance on specialized hardware—also render them soft targets in a world of intensifying competition below the surface.

Who Owns the Seafloor? Strategic Control in the Cable Industry

While submarine cables are global assets, their development, ownership, and maintenance are controlled by a narrow group of powerful players. Historically led by Western telecommunications firms, the landscape is now being reshaped by a new breed of actors—private tech giants and strategic state-backed companies.

As of 2021, four companies accounted for 98% of global submarine cable production and installation:[9] SubCom (U.S.), Alcatel Submarine Networks (France), Nippon Electric Company or NEC (Japan), and HMN Technologies (China).[10] The latter, formerly Huawei Marine, has raised alarm among Western security officials for its deep integration into China's Digital Silk Road strategy. In this concentrated market, supply chain security and geopolitical influence are inseparable.

Meanwhile, private tech firms are becoming digital superpowers in their own right.[11] Amazon, Google, Meta, and Microsoft now own or lease over 50% of global subsea bandwidth,[12] making them both infrastructure providers and strategic actors in global governance. Their growing control over global information flows reflects a deeper shift, where dominance in the digital economy increasingly depends on physical infrastructure beneath the oceans.

India's major contributors—Tata Communications, Reliance Jio, Bharti Airtel, and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited or BSNL—remain dependent on foreign manufacturing and repair capabilities. This reliance, combined with the absence of a domestically flagged cable repair fleet, exposes India to strategic coercion and operational delays in the event of a crisis.

India's path to strategic autonomy in the digital domain will require more than investment—it will demand ownership, industrial capacity, and trusted partnership. As great powers

race to harden and weaponize the digital commons, India must treat undersea cable sovereignty as a pillar of national security.

The Strategic Gap: Repair as a Measure of Resilience

Owning cable infrastructure is only half the equation: maintaining and repairing it swiftly under stress is what defines a state's digital resilience. Submarine cable repairs are technically complex, financially costly, and time sensitive. Each kilometer of cable costs $30,000 to $50,000 to lay,[13] and a single repair can run between $1 million and $3 million.[14] These operations require specialized ships and highly trained crews—assets that only a handful of countries possess.

Globally, cable repair capabilities are concentrated in nations with longstanding maritime infrastructure and industrial depth: France, Japan, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and the United Kingdom.[15] Their vessels – often stationed across multiple ports – enable rapid response to disruptions that could cripple financial systems, delay military communications, or destabilize public services (Table 14.1).

Table 14.1: Global Submarine Cable Repair Ships and Their Base Ports

Country of Registration	Base Port	Cable Ship Name
Canada	Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada	IT Integrity

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

India, by contrast, owns no cable repair ships flagged or stationed domestically. In the event of a cable break near its shores, India must wait for foreign vessels to reroute, sometimes taking days or weeks. During the 2008 Mediterranean cable disruption, this lack of readiness led to an 80% loss of India's international internet capacity, affecting

more than 60 million users.[16] Therefore, threats to India's communication infrastructure is a timely reminder of the critical value of India-flagged and -crewed submarine cable repair ships.

These cables face risk not only at sea or on land, but also in cyberspace. This vulnerability is not merely logistical—it is strategic. In a gray-zone crisis, where attribution is murky and timelines are compressed, delayed repairs can translate into economic dislocation, diplomatic weakness, and military disadvantage.

Similarly, cyberattacks against network management systems that oversee cable infrastructure could give hackers a kill switch to the connectivity of entire regions. India's ambition to be a digital power cannot rest on borrowed tools. Without sovereign repair capacity, the country risks ceding control over its most critical communications infrastructure.

Building a domestic cable repair fleet and regional repair protocols is not just a technical upgrade—it is a strategic imperative in an era where time, access, and economy determine advantage.

Exposed Lines: The Strategic Vulnerability of Submarine Cables

Power in the digital era flows not only through trade routes and air corridors, but also through glass fibers under the sea. Submarine cables carry almost all international data traffic, yet

their physical structure and geographic routing make them among the softest targets in the global infrastructure.[17]

Natural hazards like earthquakes, volcanic activity, and submarine landslides account for less than 10% of all documented cable faults. The remainder is overwhelmingly man-made.[18] International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) records from 1959–2022 attribute about 87% of faults to human activity, with anchoring and fishing alone responsible for nearly 40%. A further 48% are logged as "unspecified,"[19] yet industry audits reveal most of these cases also involved accidental human interaction, such as stray dredges, trawls, or dragged anchors.

These statistics expose the vulnerability of India's cable corridors—especially the crowded approaches to Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi—where intense trawling, dredging, and commercial shipping converge on key landing stations.

More alarming is the rise in deliberate interference,[20] a gray-zone tactic that seeks strategic effect without triggering overt conflict. Bangladesh's nationwide blackout in 2007, triggered by the severing of its lone international cable, offered an early warning.[21] Since then, similar probes have struck the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait (where Chinese vessels allegedly tampered with links to the Matsu Islands),[22] the Baltic Sea, and in 2022, the Asia-Africa-Europe 1 (AAE-1) system.[23]

The tempo increased in 2023–2024, when suspected state-

backed Chinese and Russian vessels targeted fiber lines and the Balticconnector gas pipeline, employing anchor-dragging and GPS spoofing to mask their operations. These incidents show seabed warfare evolving into a multi-domain contest that mixes advanced sensors, unscrewed submersibles, and information operations to hold critical infrastructure at risk.

India's position at the nexus of regional connectivity magnified both its opportunity and its exposure. Most of its cables land in at three sites; a coordinated strike on any one node could cripple financial transactions and international communications. Limited route diversity and the absence of a domestic cable-repair fleet.

Safeguarding this infrastructure will require more than passive defense. Adversaries are increasingly willing to exploit these weak points for strategic leverage, signaling the urgent need for enhanced surveillance, international coordination, and resilient infrastructure against hybrid threats. It also demands proactive legal reform, all of which are now essential elements of the national security strategy in a contested Indo-Pacific.

Law Beneath the Waves: Gaps in the Legal Armor

International law for submarine cables was drafted for the age of Morse code, not for the terabit traffic that now powers the global economy. The 1884 Paris Convention[24]—the first instrument to address undersea wiring—treated a cable cut as an inconvenience to telegram delivery, not a threat to financial

markets or military command and control.[25] Almost a century later, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) updated the script by affirming the right to lay and maintain cables in exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and on the high seas,[26] while obliging flag States to police vessels flying their flag (Art. 94), punish willful damage (Art. 113), and exercise penal jurisdiction over maritime incidents, including cable damage (Art. 97).[27] UNCLOS was a considerable advance—but it still framed cables as commercial convenience, not strategic terrain.

This framing is now badly outdated. UNCOLS offers no doctrine to address hybrid or gray-zone coercion, and no mechanism for tackling sabotage executed from the victim's shoreline. It omits three elements modern security planners need most: (1) explicit protection in armed conflict, (2) clear rules for attributing and prosecuting non-state proxies, and (3) enforcement tools that reach beyond the narrow lens of flag-state jurisdiction.

Attribution illustrates the problem. Under the customary rules codified by the International Law Commission, a state is responsible for a private actor's misconduct only if that actor exercises "governmental authority" under domestic law, operates under the state's "instructions, direction, or control," or has its deed formally "adopted" by the state after the fact.[28] These are intentionally high thresholds, and sophisticated saboteurs know how to stay below them—masking intent behind leased trawlers, rented remotely operated vehicles, or

spoofed AIS tracks. The evidentiary gaps that frustrate criminal courts also blunt diplomatic response, allowing hostile actors to deny culpability long enough for the strategic effect to sink in.

Jurisdictional limits deepen the vulnerability. UNCLOS Article 113 assigns prosecutorial authority solely to the vessel's flag State and to the saboteur's State of nationality. If either government lacks the will or capacity to act, the investigation stalls and the countries that actually suffer the outage are become powerless spectators. This narrow prosecutorial aperture—coupled with the fact that many States Parties have never transposed Article 113 into domestic law—means that most cases never reach court. Even where statutes exist, they often track back to the 1884 Cable Convention and top out at modest fines, a penalty grossly inadequate with the billions of dollars a prolonged data blackout can erase.

Territorial waters offer no safe haven. UNCLOS rules in the 12-nautical-mile zone, territorial seas, hinge on whether sabotage renders a vessel's passage "non-innocent," a test that fits poorly when a through-running trunk line merely skirts the coast without serving it. A hostile actor can therefore damage a transit cable and still claim the protection of innocent passage, leaving coastal states unsure whether they may interdict, arrest, or simply protest.

Multilateral efforts to patch these defects have inched forward but delivered little. The International Law Association created a Submarine Cables and Pipelines Committee in

2018;[29] several UN General Assembly resolutions[30] and a 2019 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) experts meeting have warned of rising criminal threats, yet all remain non-binding and lack operational follow-through.[31] In this normative vacuum, state and proxy vessels increasingly employ gray-zone tactics—anchor dragging, AIS spoofing, remotely operated vehicles—to create rivals without crossing the legal threshold of armed attack.[32]

Nowhere is the risk-reward calculus starker than for India. Sitting astride the Indo-Pacific's data crossroads, it gains leverage from every new landing but also exposes itself to cascading disruptions. Closing the legal gap is therefore more than a compliance exercise; it is a strategic imperative. By championing tougher bilateral accords, pressing for a Quad-led cable security regime, and modernizing its own statutes with extraterritorial reach and meaningful penalties, New Delhi can both shield its networks and position itself as a rule-setter in a stronger era when the boundary between peace and conflict runs along the ocean floor.

India's Legal Framework: Still Under Construction

India aspires to be the Indo-Pacific's digital fulcrum, yet the legal scaffolding supporting that ambition is incomplete and inconsistent. Responsibility for undersea cable security is scattered across a quartet of statutes drafted for other purposes. The Maritime Zones of India Act (1976) asserts general jurisdiction at sea but offers no cable-specific safeguards. The

Information Technology Act (2000) tackles cybercrime while ignoring the physical infrastructure that carries India's data. The Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against Safety of Maritime Navigation Act (2002) could, in theory, be applied to sabotage, but in practice, it rarely is.[33] Finally, the Telecommunications Act (2023) modernizes licensing rules without classifying cables or landing stations as critical infrastructure or prescribing strategic measures.[34]

This regulatory lag has real-world consequences. India's undersea cable landing points – clustered in Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi – serve as high-value digital nodes, yet they remain legally indistinct from other infrastructure. In the absence of clear mandates, jurisdictional ambiguity can delay response, hinder coordination, and limit deterrence.

This patchwork has tangible costs. Most of India's 17 international landings are concentrated in Mumbai, Chennai, and Kochi—high-value targets that remain legally indistinguishable from ordinary commercial frameworks.[35] No statute grants extraterritorial reach to prosecute foreign saboteurs, clarifies agency roles during hybrid attacks, or synchronizes domestic response with alliance partners such as the Quad. Nor does current law streamline the thicket of pre-repair and post-repair clearances that private operators must secure from separate ministries.

The absence of a Critical Information Infrastructure (CII) designation for cables further weakens deterrence. Without CII status, landing stations fall outside India's highest tier of

cybersecurity monitoring and response and receive no priority for intelligence support or armed protection. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has already recommended an end-to-end, single-window procedure for cable installation and maintenance; until that reform is enacted, bureaucratic friction will remain a strategic liability.[36]

India's network is growing faster than the laws that govern it. New systems such as the India-Europe-Xpress (IEX) and India-Asia-Xpress (IAX) will extend the country's reach across three continents, just as domestic demand approaches one billion users.[37] Unless legislation evolves to match this scale, by consolidating statutory authority, introducing robust penalties, granting extraterritorial jurisdiction, and embedding cable security in multilateral agreements, New Delhi's digital rise will rest on fragile legal grounds. A forward-looking strategy must therefore combine streamlined permitting, indigenous repair capacity, CII designation, and alliance-based contingency planning. Only then can India transform its undersea arteries from soft targets into pillars of national power in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific.

Strategic Roadmap: From Vulnerability to Advantage

India's digital rise depends on transforming its undersea cable network from a latent vulnerability into a strategic asset. No longer mere technical infrastructure, submarine cables are now

contested terrain—vital to national power and regional influence. Safeguarding them requires a deterrence architecture grounded in three pillars: denial (through redundancy and rapid repair), detection (via persistent seabed awareness), and response (through legal, diplomatic, and coercive means). The roadmap below outlines a phased approach across three horizons, sequencing actions that build toward long-term resilience and regional leadership.

Immediate Priorities (0–2 Years):
Fortify the Foundation

1. **Designate Cables as Critical Infrastructure**

   Classify submarine cables and landing stations as CII under the IT Act of 2000. This enables priority protection, expedited prosecution of sabotage, and integration into national cyber defense strategy.

2. **Operationalize the Quad Repair Partnership**

   Move beyond summit statements. Translate the 2024 Quad Cable Connectivity and Resilience Partnership into actionable protocols: prepositioned spares, cross-trained repair crews, and joint repair exercises across the Indo-Pacific.[38]

3. **Formalize Partnerships with Big Tech**

   Hyperscale cloud firms—Google, Amazon, Meta, Microsoft—own and operate the majority of global undersea cable capacity. India should formalize

partnerships with these actors for co-investment, real-time threat sharing, and coordinated recovery plans.

4. **Charter an Indian-Flagged Repair Vessel**

   Establish a domestically flagged, India-based cable repair capability via public-private financing. Even one vessel slashes reliance on foreign operators, ensures sovereign repair response, and demonstrates India's strategic seriousness.[39]

5. **Establish a National Cable Security Center**

   Centralized responsibility for cable threat intelligence, incident response, and legal coordination under a new unit housed within the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC). Empower it to lead domestic and international coordination. [40]

6. **Deploy Underwater Domain Awareness Systems**

   Adopt a robust Underwater Domain Awareness (UDA) framework, which is essential for effective monitoring and defense of the seabed.[41] Deploy a multi-platform detection network—combining AI-powered seabed sensors, UUVs, and satellite-linked data buoys—enabling rapid detection of anchor drags, ROV incursions, and sabotage attempts within minutes.[42] Seabed-to-Space Situational Awareness (S3A) will define the future of defensive operations, making real-time situational awareness the first line of deterrence.

Medium-Term Goals (2–5 Years):
Expand Reach and Influence

7. **Create Cable Protection Zones**

   Gazette no-anchor, no-trawl zones around high-risk cable corridors and lading sites. Modeled on Australian practices, CPZs reduce accidental damage and impose political friction on would be gray-zone actors.

8. **Geographically Diversify Cable Landing Points**

   Reduce chokepoint risk by expanding cable landings beyond Chennai and Mumbai to locations like Kochi, Trivandrum, and Tuticorin. Geographic dispersions insulate the network from single-point failure.[43]

9. **Secure Government Representation in ICPC**

   India's voice at the International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC) must go beyond corporate representation. Government delegates can shape global norms, influence enforcement standards, and drive international reforms.[44]

10. **Integrate Cable Security in Regional Dialogues**

    Make undersea infrastructure protection a standing item in Quad, ASEAN, and IORA security forums.[45] Deepen links with Australia's Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre and push for region-wide

information-sharing and crisis coordination mechanisms.[46]

Long-Term Strategic Investments (5+ Years): Cement Strategic Autonomy

11. Develop a Full-Capable Domestic Repair Fleet

India must possess an Indian-flagged cable repair vessel—not just for resilience but to signal strategic independence, as it will provide it with the capability to respond swiftly to any cable disruptions.[47] This fleet would also enable India to use repair vessels as a diplomatic tool under SAGAR policy to assist Indian Ocean littoral countries and friendly states as part of its broader Indo-Pacific engagement.

12. Enact a Comprehensive Cable Security Act

Codify a modern, deterrent-oriented legal framework. The statute should mandate redundancy planning, define cable-related crimes, clarify public-private roles, and authorize extraterritorial pursuit of foreign saboteurs.

This roadmap is not a checklist—it is a strategic transformation agenda. India's future as a digital hub depends not just on connectivity, but on control. The seabed is a new frontier of national security. By acting decisively, India can shape Indo-Pacific norms, deter malign actors, and

demonstrate that infrastructure security is central to sovereignty in the 21st century.

Conclusion: Securing the Backbone of Digital Power

Submarine cables are no longer invisible infrastructure. They are contested terrain—critical to economic continuity, national security, and geopolitical signaling. As digital interdependence deepens, so too do the threats: accidental damage, hybrid attacks, sabotage, and espionage by state-backed actors.

For India, the stakes are escalating. As it rises as a central node in the global digital network, legal ambiguity, technical gaps, and operational dependencies are no longer acceptable. The 2008 internet blackout and the absence of a domestic repair fleet exposed the cost of underpreparedness. In today's more volatile landscape, the consequences of inaction would be far greater.

Yet the challenge brings opportunity. India has the scale, capacity, and partnerships to not only secure its own cable infrastructure but to shape global norms for submarine cable protection. Strategic advantage will come not from exclusive ownership, but from enabling faster, more secure deployment and maintenance—by harnessing the capabilities of operators, leveraging international best practices, and accelerating zone-based protections using experienced, specialized crews.

By formally designating cables as critical infrastructure and embedding cable resilience into alliances such as the Quad, India can transform digital fragility into strategic strength. Securing the seabed is not just a technical task—it is a geopolitical imperative.

In an Indo-Pacific defined by competitive multipolarity, the contest for control beneath the waves will shape the balance of power above them. The state that can detect, defend, and deter threats to connectivity will wield outsized influence.

India possesses the geography, the momentum, and the mandate. What remains is action—bold, coordinated, and sustained—to convert vulnerability into resilience, and resilience into regional leadership.

Endnotes

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Chapter 15

Dissuading Sea Slavery

Anny Barlow

I see labor as a very big ship to steer, and you probably need a lot of tugboats pushing at different spots to get it to go in the right direction.

– Dr. Elizabeth Selig, Deputy Director at
Stanford's Center for Ocean Solutions
Interview with the Author: October 18, 2022

In the contested maritime spaces of the Indo-Pacific, sea slavery is more than a humanitarian crisis—it is a strategic vulnerability.[1] Forced labor aboard fishing vessels is enabled

by fragmented governance, opaque supply chains, and deliberate economic asymmetries. It is exploited by malign actors—state-affiliated and commercial—who gain a competitive advantage through impunity, secrecy, and systemic abuse. These practices not only devastate human lives but also undercut rules-based order, erode state legitimacy, and distort fair maritime commerce. In a region where influence is increasingly contested, addressing forced labor is essential to restoring balance and trust at sea.

This chapter examines the brutal and persistent exploitation of forced labor in the global fishing industry—what many call "sea slavery." Hidden far offshore, this abuse generates ripple effects that stretch across human dignity, environmental sustainability, and food security. It reflects a broader crisis of accountability in the maritime domain, where competition often outpaces law enforcement, and profit is too easily divorced from responsibility.

To counter this, this chapter proposes a form of civilian-integrated deterrence: an *integrated dissuasion strategy* that raises the cost of exploitation by deploying the full range of tools—legal, economic, technological, diplomatic, and grassroots.[2] Drawing conceptual inspiration from integrated deterrence in security affairs, and narratively from the collaborative model of Marvel Comics' Avengers Team, this approach envisions transdisciplinary "task forces" uniting diverse expertise to strategize and confront systemic abuse beyond the reach of any single actor.[3]

This chapter proceeds in four parts. It first details the global impact of forced labor in fishing, highlighting the interlinkages between exploitation, illegal fishing, and ecological decline, and the effects these linkages have on communities. It then identifies the economic and structural forces that allow sea slavery to persist, followed by a discussion of existing but underleveraged tools for dissuasion—from sanctions to blockchain traceability to community watchdogs. Finally, it proposes a governance structure through which a coordinated effort can be implemented methodically.

At its core, this chapter argues that the fight against sea slavery is a strategic imperative. Ending forced labor in the fishing industry will require shifting from fragmented compliance to integrated dissuasion, from isolated initiatives to synchronized networks. By doing so, the Indo-Pacific can begin to close a dangerous gap in maritime governance and reclaim a more just, stable, and rules-based oceanic future.[4]

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.[5] Seafood represents a vital source of protein for a significant portion of the global population, accounting for roughly 17% of animal protein consumed

globally.[6] In some communities, it constitutes over 50% of their dietary protein intake.[7] 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.[8] 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, dignity, and fundamental 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.[9] 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 vital role as a carbon sink. Shifting ocean temperatures, rising sea levels, and increasing acidification further accelerate this degradation, jeopardizing the livelihoods of coastal communities and the resilience of the marine environment.

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.[10] The tragic story of Supriyanto, an Indonesian fisherman, is a

harrowing illustration of the human cost of these exploitative practices.[11]

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 on board 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.[12] Fishers are forced to work grueling hours under hazardous conditions, often with little to no rest or compensation.[13] They endure physical and verbal

abuse and deprivation of food and water, and are sometimes even coerced into taking drugs to enhance productivity.[14] 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 these abuses.

Blurred Lines and Interconnected Challenges

The challenges of forced labor in fishing are deeply entangled with broader networks of illicit maritime activity. Operations that engage in forced labor often intersect with organized criminal enterprises involved in activities such as trafficking in persons, drug smuggling, and small arms proliferation.[15] These networks exploit systemic gaps in governance and enforcement, particularly in remote maritime regions, undermining legal frameworks, economic stability, and regional security.

One of the most persistent challenges is the boundary between forced labor and IUU fishing. While legally distinct, these practices frequently co-occur aboard the same vessels and are sustained by similar economic incentives and enforcement gaps. Yet they are often addressed separately by different agencies, legal frameworks, and policy regimes. This fragmentation inhibits coordinated action and limits deterrence.

As Greg Poling of the Center for Strategic and International Studies notes, "You get fined for illegally fishing; you get arrested for modern-day slavery."[16] This stark difference in enforcement outcomes, even when crimes overlap, reveals a gap in maritime governance. While the U.S. Congress has moved to include forced labor within the legal definition of IUU fishing,[17] this is not an international standard and does little to harmonize enforcement across jurisdictions.

Bridging these divides requires a multidimensional strategy that cuts across legal, institutional, and disciplinary silos. Recognizing the systemic nature of maritime exploitation, this chapter advocates for an integrated dissuasion approach—one that aligns legal pressure, economic tools, technological innovation, and community-based monitoring. Only by linking efforts across sectors can we elevate the cost of exploitation and restore a measure of integrity and justice to the global seafood supply chain.

Structural Incentives for Sea Slavery

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, which are further exacerbated by shifting ocean conditions, stressing habitats.[18] 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.[19]

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.[20]

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.[21] This ever-growing demand puts immense pressure on the industry to increase production, often at the expense of ethical labor practices. 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 inflames 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.

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."[22] 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 remits working on the same issue.[23] 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

Tackling the complex challenge of forced labor in fishing demands a new model of cooperation. The proposed solution draws narrative inspiration from the Avengers—Marvel Comics' iconic team of diverse heroes who combine their unique strengths and superpowers to defeat threats too great for anyone to face alone. In policy terms, this translates into a *transdisciplinary task force*: a coalition of professionals from economics, technology, law, and community engagement, united by a shared mission. The following roles represent essential "superpowers" needed to dismantle forced labor at sea:

- **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, developing 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 maritime law, labor standards, and fisheries governance, these experts would play a critical role in identifying applicable legal frameworks, advising on 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 contributor in this space brings a core competency—an essential capability that, when integrated with others, enables more than any one actor alone can achieve.

Tech 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.[24] 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 abuse 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. Coastal 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 activities. Initiatives like the Philippines' *Bantay Dagat* program have demonstrated the effectiveness of empowering fishers to act as watchdogs.[25] 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-based resilience, we can create a synergistic effect that reinforces efforts to address labor exploitation in the maritime domain. These two pillars of the integrated dissuasion strategy contribute to a more secure, transparent, and sustainably governed ocean space.

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 are also exploited by traffickers to lure unsuspecting victims into 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.

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 15.1 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.

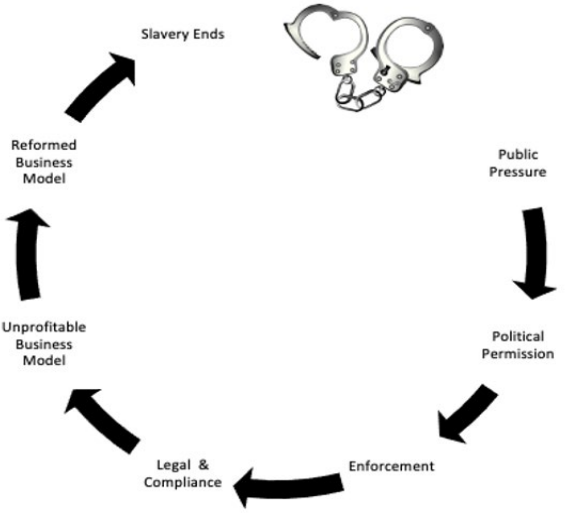

Figure 15.1: Strategic Pathway to Combat Forced Labor in Offshore Fishing

Source: Anny Barlow

However, the challenge lies in the hidden nature of forced labor at sea. Unlike land-based slavery, 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 concept, the transdisciplinary task force model, illustrated in Figure 15.2, demonstrates how

diverse experts can align their core competencies to confront forced labor from multiple directions.

This structure enables collaboration across institutional mandates, synchronizing actions, raising awareness, building capacity, advancing problem characterization, and strengthening governance—all while aiming to account for unintended consequences.

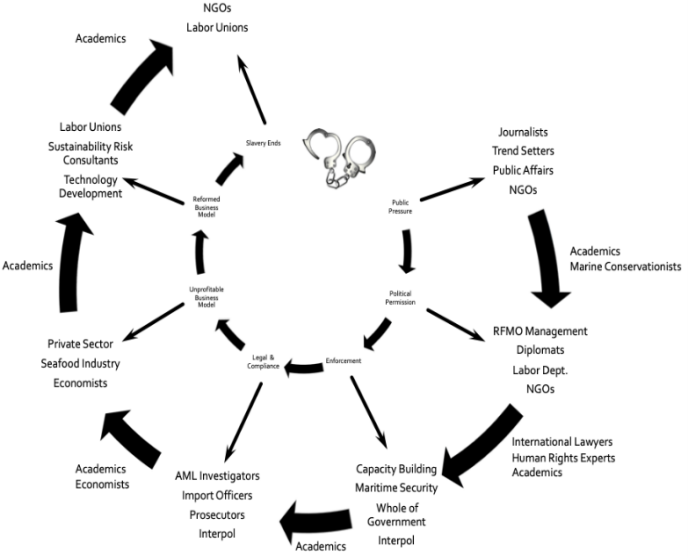

Figure 15.2: Integrated Roles within a Transdisciplinary Task Force

Note: Outer-arrow roles support stage transitions. "Academics" include researchers and thought leaders who are engaged throughout.

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.[26] 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.[27] 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.[28]

Global Network Proposed

Given the transnational nature of forced labor in fishing, this chapter proposes a global network of transdisciplinary task forces operating across four levels of governance: international, regional, national, and local. This structure enables strategic coordination while preserving the flexibility to address local conditions through context-specific interventions. As illustrated in Figure 15.3, the model

promotes alignment across governance levels to ensure consistent and effective application of the integrated dissuasion strategy.

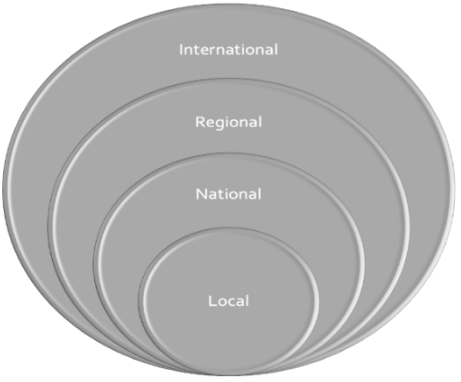

Figure 15.3: Governance Levels for a Coordinated Task Force Network

Source: Anny Barlow

By creating alignments 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 and 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 implement coordinated efforts, while providing 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 and regional realities.

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, employment opportunities (or lack thereof),

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, which was 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.[29] 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,[30] which successfully prompted fishery reforms, illustrates the effectiveness of this approach. However, the effect of these reforms remains to be studied.
- *Legal Compliance and Enforcement*: Existing legal frameworks, such as the U.S. Tariff Act of 1930, Section 307 (19 U.S.C. § 1307), use WROs to detain goods suspected of being produced with forced labor and launch investigations. 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 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 vulnerable communities, reducing their reliance on migratory work and creating more resilient livelihoods. This can reduce individuals' vulnerability to forced labor and strengthen communities' economic well-being.

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 maritime governance, regional stability, and the resilience of coastal economies. Its devastating consequences extend far beyond the individual victims, undermining the rule of law, distorting markets, degrading marine ecosystems, and weakening the security and prosperity of entire communities.

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, traceability and accountability, 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 professional remits, 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, fairness, and sustainability is not merely a lofty aspiration; it is an urgent strategic 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 only a fundamental rights concern—it is a strategic imperative for upholding international norms, maritime security, and sustainable development. Addressing this issue requires coordinated action across governments, industries, and civil society to close enforcement gaps, disrupt illicit networks, and safeguard the integrity of global supply chains. By advancing the integrated dissuasion strategy and fostering a spirit of

collaboration and innovation, we can forge a brighter future for the fishing industry—one that reinforces accountability, protects the ecosystem, and contributes to a maritime future anchored in security and lawful commerce.

Endnotes

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Chapter 16

Battlerace for Industrial Power

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We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war.

– Franklin D. Roosevelt
Fireside Chat, December 29, 1940

Introduction: The New Industrial Battlerace

In the twenty-first century, industrial policy has reemerged—not as a relic of past economic planning but as a central instrument of geopolitical strategy.[1] Once dismissed as

inefficient or outdated, state-directed efforts to shape industrial capacity, control supply chains, and accelerate technological innovation are now essential to national power.[2]

Driving this shift is not merely the pursuit of growth, but a recognition that industrial strength is inseparable from national security, global influence, and strategic autonomy.

At the forefront of this battlerace[3] stands China, whose rise as a technological superpower has upended assumptions about globalization and liberal market primacy. Through initiatives like *Made in China 2025* and the *dual circulation* strategy, Beijing has moved from low-cost manufacturing to industrial dominance, challenging U.S. and European leadership across key sectors—from semiconductors to green energy.

In response, the United States and Europe are recalibrating. Washington is investing heavily in domestic production and technological leadership through landmark legislation like the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. Europe is pursuing a strategy of "de-risking": aiming to reduce strategic dependence on China while preserving trade openness and sustainability.[4]

Beyond national efforts, alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS are evolving into industrial security coalitions, linking economic resilience with defense cooperation. These partnerships signal a world in which economic and security competitions are no longer distinct; they are overlapping theaters of strategic rivalry.

This chapter contends that today's industrial policy revival marks the emergence of a new global battlerace, one that will define not just who leads in key technologies, but who sets the rules in international systems. At stake is the architecture of global trade, innovation ecosystems, and the geopolitical balance of the 21st century.

Why Industrial Policy is Back

The resurgence of industrial policy is one of the defining shifts of the twenty-first-century global landscape.[5] For decades, advanced economies relied on market-driven approaches, confident that globalization, free trade, and private-sector innovation would ensure prosperity and stability. Today, that confidence has eroded. Governments are stepping back into the economic field—not merely to stimulate growth, but to secure national survival, technological leadership, and geopolitical advantage.

Four Converging Forces Drive the Industrial Policy Revival

A powerful shift is underway. Four converging forces are driving governments across the world to reassert state influence over industrial strategy, transforming what was once seen as economic management into a core pillar of national security.

1. **Geopolitical Competition**

   The rise of China as an economic and technological

challenger has shattered the post-Cold War assumption that economic integration would reduce strategic rivalry. Industrial capacity has become a frontline domain of great power competition. Control over sectors such as semiconductors,[6] artificial intelligence,[7] aerospace,[8] and renewable energy now determines not just economic outcomes,[9] but also military readiness, intelligence superiority, and diplomatic leverage.[10]

2. **Supply Chain Fragility**

   The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of a hyper-globalized production system.[11] Disruptions in medical equipment, semiconductors, rare earths, and other goods revealed the dangers of concentrated supply chains and dependency on unstable or adversarial regions.[12] Countries now face an urgent imperative: rebuild domestic capacity and forge more resilient, diversified production networks to withstand future shocks.[13]

3. **Technological Disruption**

   Breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology are accelerating the pace of change, raising the costs of falling behind.[14] No longer content to leave these critical domains to market forces alone, governments are investing strategically through public-private partnerships,

targeted R&D, and regulatory frameworks to secure leadership in the industries of the future.

4. **The Resilience Imperative**

   From energy insecurity and cyber threats to pandemic preparedness and infrastructure vulnerability, states now confront a spectrum of systemic risks that demand integrated responses. Industrial policy has reemerged as a key instrument, not just to drive economic performance, but also to harden critical infrastructure, align development with security priorities, and build national resilience in an era of uncertainty.[15]

Together, these forces are propelling China, the United States, and Europe into an intensifying race for industrial dominance. While they face shared pressures, their strategies differ in critical ways—differences that will shape the emerging global order.

National Approaches: Competing Models of Industrial Power

The return of industrial policy is reshaping the global economy.[16] Across major powers, industrial strategies are being recalibrated to account for rising geopolitical competition,[17] fragile supply chains, and accelerating technological disruptions. While China, the United States, and Europe all aim to secure their industrial bases, their

approaches diverge sharply—each shaped by distinct histories, strategic cultures, and governance models.

China's Model: State-Led Technonationalism

China has embraced the most sweeping and assertive form of industrial policy among the world's major powers: state-led technonationalism.[18] Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Beijing has treated industrial capacity as a foundation of national power. That strategy has evolved dramatically, from Maoist central planning to Deng-era liberalization to today's fusion of authoritarian governance with cutting-edge innovation.[19]

In its early decades, China's economy was dominated by rigid central planning and heavy industry—steel, coal, and military production—often disrupted by political upheavals such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Reforms initiated in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping began shifting the system toward market mechanisms, foreign investment,[20] and export-led growth, laying the groundwork for China's global rise.

The decisive transformation, however, has come in the past two decades. China no longer aims merely to catch up with the West but to surpass it in critical technologies. This ambition is encoded in flagship programs such as the *Medium- and Long-Term Program of Science and Technology Development* (2006–2020),[21] and, most prominently, *Made in China 2025*, which identified ten strategic sectors—from

advanced IT and robotics to aerospace, biomedicine, and new energy vehicles—where China seeks not just to compete, but also dominate.[22]

Today, China's technonationalist model is characterized by vast state subsidies, directed R&D investments, preferential treatment for domestic firms, and the cultivation of national champions capable of shaping global markets.[23] Equally important is Beijing's control over key supply chains, particularly in rare earths, lithium batteries, and solar components, creating chokepoints that can be leveraged in geopolitical negotiations.[24] The 2020 *dual circulation* strategy reinforced this approach by aiming for self-sufficiency in high-tech sectors while maintaining global export leadership.[25]

Yet China's model faces mounting resistance. Major economies increasingly view China's industrial ascent as a threat to fair competition and technological sovereignty.[26] Allegations of forced technology transfers, cyber-enabled intellectual property (IP) theft, and opaque state subsidies have triggered a wave of defensive measures: export controls, investment screenings, and retaliatory tariffs.[27]

At the heart of this backlash is deeper concerns: China's model poses not just an economic challenge but also a systemic one. By blending authoritarian control with rapid industrial innovation, Beijing presents an alternative to liberal capitalism—one that accelerates technological advancement

while raising fundamental questions about global governance, transparency, and trust.

America's Strategy: Security-Centric Industrial Realignment

Since early 2025, Washington has redefined industrial policy as a central instrument of national security. Rejecting both the hands-off economic orthodoxy of previous decades and the centralized state-planning model typified by China, the United States has adopted a hybrid approach. This combines targeted domestic intervention with alliance-based coordination to strengthen critical sectors, mitigate vulnerabilities, and safeguard technological leadership.

Domestically, the federal government has expanded the use of Defense Production Act (DPA) authorities, accelerated permitting processes, and introduced new tax incentives to stimulate investment in strategic industries, including semiconductors, aerospace, artificial intelligence, and critical minerals. Recent executive orders on critical mineral supply chains have invoked Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act to justify tariffs and restrictions aimed at boosting domestic mining, processing, and refining capacity.

In parallel, export controls administered by the Bureau of Industry and Security have been tightened to limit the transfer of sensitive dual-use technologies to strategic competitors. Complementing these are enhanced screening mechanisms for outbound investment and strengthened enforcement of

intellectual property (IP) protections—measures designed to prevent the erosion of the U.S. innovation base.

What sets the U.S. approach apart is the strategic use of alliances to multiply industrial power. Through platforms like the Quad and AUKUS, the United States is partnering with trusted allies to co-develop advanced technologies, coordinate export controls, and diversify supply chains. The Department of Defense's Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR) operationalizes this cooperation by facilitating regional sustainment hubs, reducing production bottlenecks, and aligning investments across fourteen Indo-Pacific partners.[28] Reinforcing these efforts, the 2023 National Defense Industrial Strategy underscores the need for resilient supply chains, a skilled workforce, agile procurement systems, and robust public-private partnerships.[29]

This is not a retreat from globalization, but a strategic recalibration. Often described as "friend-shoring," "ally-shoring," "near-shoring," or "re-shoring," the intent is to preserve the benefits of open markets while reorienting the most sensitive and consequential elements of industrial production toward secure, rules-based networks.[30]

In sum, America is not walking away from global economic integration—it is reshaping it.[31] By placing national security at the center of its industrial policy and reinforcing ties with like-minded partners, Washington is positioning itself to compete effectively in an era of strategic rivalry and competitive multipolarity.

Europe's Path: De-Risking Without Decoupling

In the intensifying landscape of industrial competition, Europe has charted a third path, which is distinct from both China's state-directed Technonationalism and the United States' security-centric industrial strategy. Rather than pursue outright decoupling from China, the European Union (EU) has embraced a more measured approach: strategic de-risking.[32] The objective is to reduce critical dependencies while preserving the openness of global markets, particularly in sectors where economic interdependence remains beneficial.

This doctrine, articulated by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, draws from Europe's unique geopolitical position, economic integration, and normative commitments.[33] Rather than using defense authorities or industrial alliances as primary tools, Europe relies on regulatory strength to shape global standards and secure its industrial base. The EU's industrial strategy prioritizes technological sovereignty in strategic sectors,[34] particularly semiconductors, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and green technologies like renewable energy, hydrogen, and electric vehicles under the broader framework of the *European Green Deal*.

Europe's influence is amplified through what scholars call the "Brussels effect," the extraterritorial impact of EU regulations on global markets.[35] Flagship rules like the *General Data Protection Regulation*, the *Digital Markets Act*,

and the upcoming *Critical Raw Materials Act* aim to secure Europe's digital and resource autonomy while nudging global firms toward European norms on privacy, competition, and sustainability.[36]

At the same time, structural vulnerabilities persist. The EU's internal market consists of highly diverse member economies, creating disparities in industrial capacity and innovation. The war in Ukraine exposed Europe's dependence on external energy sources, spurring urgent efforts to reduce reliance not only on Russian gas but also on Chinese-dominated supply chains for rare earths, critical minerals, and battery components.

In response, Brussels is advancing a series of diversification measures, ranging from domestic investments in strategic materials to new trade and industrial partnerships with the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Nevertheless, European policymakers remain cautious about adopting the more assertive, security-centric posture evident in Washington. While transatlantic coordination is deepening, Europe continues to emphasize autonomy, multilateralism, and a rules-based order over bloc-based confrontation.[37]

Ultimately, Europe's strategy is one of deliberate balance: reinforcing industrial resilience without defaulting to protectionism, safeguarding technological leadership without rejecting globalization, and advancing competitiveness while upholding core values of sustainability, human rights, and cooperative governance. In doing so, Europe is not retreating

from the global economy but reconfiguring its engagement on terms that reflect its institutional identity and geopolitical realities.

The Evolution of Industrial Policy: From Mercantilism to the Modern Era

Throughout history, industrial policy has served as a vital instrument of statecraft—a means by which nations shape economic deployment to secure power in the global order. Though the tools, actors, and priorities have evolved across centuries, the core logic remains unchanged: states intervene in markets not merely to stimulate growth, but to build resilience, project strength, and protect strategic advantage.

Early Foundations

The origins of industrial policy trace back to the mercantilist era of the 17th and 18th centuries, when European powers such as Britain and France sought to maximize exports, accumulate wealth, and gain strategic advantage through tightly controlled trade networks. Policies like the *Navigation Acts* restricted colonial commerce to domestic shipping, while state-chartered enterprises like the French East India Company operated with monopolies, subsidies, and political backing to expand imperial reach and economic influence.[38]

By the 19th century, the United States adopted similar protective strategies. Tariffs shielded emerging industries

from foreign competition, while land grants fueled the growth of railroads, steel, and manufacturing. These early interventions laid the foundation for the industrial rise of great powers and set the stage for more sophisticated state involvement in the 20th century.

The Cold War and the Space Race

The post-World War II era marked a pivotal shift in industrial policy. As the United States and the Soviet Union entered a high-stakes geopolitical rivalry, technological supremacy became a national imperative. Industrial policy evolved beyond tariffs and subsidies into large-scale state investments in research, development, and education, driven by the logic that innovation was essential to security and global influence.

In the United States, institutions like the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) propelled advances in aerospace, computing, and nuclear energy. The Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik I in 1957 triggered a profound policy response—a "Sputnik moment" that catalyzed a surge in federal funding for science and technology, space exploration, and STEM education.[39]

This Cold War-era industrial mobilization forged an enduring model: state-driven innovation as a strategic instrument of power. That model reverberates today, as

China's technological ascent prompts a new round of industrial recalibrations in Washington and beyond.

Power Industrialization Models

In the decades following World War II, many nations adopted industrial policies to accelerate development and enhance competitiveness. One of the most influential approaches emerged in East Asia, where Japan's postwar economic transformation, often labeled as "developmental state capitalism," combined export-led growth, targeted R&D, and close coordination between government and industry. This model, executed through powerful institutions like the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI),[40] proved highly effective due to disciplined investment, focused industrial targeting, and strong state capacity.[41]

South Korea and Taiwan adopted similar strategies, nurturing globally competitive sectors such as electronics, shipbuilding, and advanced manufacturing. These cases demonstrate that when aligned with institutional competence and long-term planning, state-guided industrialization could yield remarkable gains.

However, industrial policy was far from universally successful. In Latin America and parts of Africa, mid-20th-century import-substitution strategies often produced inefficient, overprotected industries with limited innovation and stagnant growth.[42] Argentina, for example, pursued self-sufficiency at the expense of cost competitiveness, leading to

isolation and structural imbalances. By contrast, resource-rich countries, such as Chile, Brazil, and the Gulf States, experienced mixed outcomes—success often hinged on their ability to balance state intervention with market openness and institutional discipline.

These contrasting experiences reveal a critical lesson: the success of industrial policy depends not merely on ambition but on governance, adaptability, and effective execution in the face of shifting global dynamics.

The Contemporary Context

In the 21st century, industrial policy has returned to the forefront of geopolitical strategy, driven by the rise of multipolar competition, rapid technological disruption, and a cascade of global risks. Much like the United States' Cold War response to Sputnik, China's technological surge has triggered renewed waves of public investment, alliance coordination, and strategic industrial planning across advanced economies.

Yet today's challenge is far more complex. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply embedded in global supply chains, making disentanglement costly, slow, and destabilizing. For the United States, Europe, and other actors, balancing the imperative for resilience and security with the economic realities of interdependence demands not only industrial capacity but also sophisticated policy design and multilateral collaboration.[43]

As nations navigate this new industrial era, they confront the same enduring dilemmas that have shaped state-market relations for centuries: how to foster innovation without stifling competition; how to protect strategic sectors without triggering protectionism, and how to align national industrial goals with the demands of a globalized, interconnected economy.

The answer to these questions will shape not only the next phase of global competition, but it will also shape the architecture of cooperation that underpins the international order.

Protectionism and Its Discontents

While classical free-market economic principles argue for minimal state intervention, the reality is more complicated and nuanced. Nations have long shaped their economies, particularly when national security, technological leadership, or resilience is at stake. Yet excessive protectionism through blanket tariffs, broad trade barriers, or market distortions can stifle innovation, inflate costs, and undermine long-term growth, and could have a disruptive impact on the economic conditions.

The core challenge for 21st-century policymakers is to calibrate intervention carefully: supporting strategic sectors and securing supply chains without sliding into economic isolationism or triggering retaliatory trade conflict. In an era of intensifying competition and global interdependence, the

line between strategic protection and self-defeating insularity is dangerously thin.

China's Protectionist Playbook

No country has developed protectionist tools more systematically or effectively in recent decades than China. While often framed as "infant industry protection," Beijing's strategy combines a range of interventions designed to shield domestic firms, cultivate national champions, and tilt global markets in its favor.[44]

Key elements of this approach include:

- High tariffs that make foreign goods less competitive than local alternatives.
- Non-tariff barriers, such as opaque regulatory requirements and technical standards that hinder foreign market access.
- Forced technology transfer, requiring foreign firms to share proprietary knowledge as a condition for doing business in China.
- Massive subsidies and preferential treatment for domestic firms, including cheap credit, favorable procurement, and regulatory advantages.
- Currency management that keeps exports attractively priced in global markets.

This multi-pronged strategy has underpinned China's ascent across a wide range of industries, from steel and shipbuilding to semiconductors, electric vehicles, and renewable energy. By fusing state support with global integration, Beijing has carved out competitive advantages that challenge both market norms and international trade rules.

Impact on Global Trade and Economic Order

China's protectionist industrial model has produced a set of destabilizing systemic effects across the global economy:[45]

- Persistent trade imbalance, especially with advanced economies, has contributed to deindustrialization and labor dislocation abroad.
- Asymmetric market access advantages Chinese firms internationally while restricting foreign entry into China's domestic markets.
- Market distortions arise from heavy state backing, allowing Chinese firms to outcompete rivals not through efficiency, but through policy-engineered cost advantages.

These dynamics challenge the credibility of the rules-based global trade system. As former U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan has warned, China's "non-market economy" poses foundational risks to fair competition and global economic governance.[46] Left unchecked, these

distortions could erode trust in international trade norms and fragment global markets along geopolitical lines.

The Geopolitical Stakes

China's protectionism is not just an economic tactic—it is a strategic lever of geopolitical power. By dominating critical industries and controlling key supply chains (from rare earths to advanced batteries), Beijing enhances its global influence, shapes dependency relationships, and increases its bargaining leverage on the world stage.

Initiatives like *Made in China 2025* and *China Standards 2035* reveal the broader ambition:[47] this is not simply about domestic development, but about reordering the global technological hierarchy to reflect Chinese interests and standards. The result has been growing anxiety among advanced economies, which now recognize the strategic risk of overdependence and the urgent need to rebuild and secure their own industrial foundations.[48]

Finding the Right Balance

Governments are right to defend key sectors and reduce strategic vulnerabilities, but the temptation to overreach is strong and costly. Excessive protectionism risks provoking retaliation, inflating prices, suppressing innovation, and fragmenting global markets.[49] The policy challenge for the

21st century is to navigate a narrow path between strategic intervention and economic isolationism.

To strike that balance, policymakers should:

- Use targeted, proportional tools to support critical industries while avoiding sweeping trade barriers that distort markets.
- Coordinate with allies and partners to confront unfair trade practices through collective, rules-based responses.
- Invest domestically in education, R&D, infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems to build long-term competitiveness and reduce dependence on defensive economic measures.

In an era of multipolar rivalry, the line between industrial policy and protectionism will define more than economic outcomes; it will shape the stability and legitimacy of the global order.[50] Navigating this delicate equilibrium will be one of the defining tests of 21st-century economic statecraft.

These systemic pressures, rooted in China's protectionist architecture, set the stage for more targeted confrontation over *Made in China 2025*, where industrial strategy, not just trade dynamics, becomes the arena of strategic rivalry.

Made in China 2025: Blueprint and Blowback

When China unveiled its *Made in China 2025* strategy, it

declared a bold and unambiguous ambition to move beyond its role as the "world's factory" and become the world's leading technological power. Released in 2015, the plan outlined a sweeping roadmap to upgrade China's industrial base across 10 high-tech sectors—from semiconductors and aerospace to electronic components, advanced robotics, and biotechnology. It marked a decisive departure from low-cost, labor-intensive manufacturing toward innovation-driven, high-value production.

A stake is far more than domestic transformation. *Made in China 2025* is a blueprint to reshape the global distribution of technological power, and with it, the future balance of geopolitical influence.

Core Goals of Made in China 2025

Beijing's objectives under *Made in China 2025* are ambitious and strategic, aimed at securing long-term technological dominance and industrial resilience.[51]

The plan sets four key goals:

- Achieve technological self-sufficiency in critical industries by reducing dependence on foreign suppliers and external innovation.
- Dominate global markets in high-tech sectors by securing over 70% of domestic production in key components and expanding China's global export share.

- Upgrade domestic manufacturing by moving up the value chain, shifting from low-cost assembly to advanced, innovative-driven production.
- Foster indigenous innovation by building national R&D capacity, nurturing national champions, and accelerating homegrown technological breakthroughs.

These priorities are closely aligned with China's broader *dual-circulation* strategy,[52] which seeks to fortify the domestic economy and internal innovation base while maintaining selective integration with global markets,[53] making China more resilient to external shocks, sanctions, and supply chain disruptions.

Global Backlash and Strategic Frictions

While China presents *Made in China 2025* as a pathway to modernization, many countries view it as a direct industrial challenge to fair competition and global norms. The plan's sweeping ambitions to dominate high-tech sectors have provoked growing alarm over Beijing's strategic methods, including:

- Opaque procurement practices and restricted market access, disadvantaging foreign firms.
- Forced technology transfers and intellectual property theft, often required as conditions for market entry.

- Aggressive subsidization, enabling state-backed firms to undercut competitors and threaten monopoly control in key sectors.[54]

In response, governments have begun to push back.[55] The United States has imposed tariffs, expanded export controls, and scrutinized Chinese investment in sensitive technologies. Europe and Japan have pursued supply chain diversification, strengthened technology protections, and intensified coordination with trusted partners. Yet all remain wary of provoking a full-scale decoupling that could fracture the global economy.[56]

Strategic Stakes for the Future

Made in China 2025 has accelerated the global technology race, compelling governments worldwide to reevaluate their industrial strategies, innovation ecosystems, and national resilience frameworks. China's success will depend not only on meeting it ambitious targets, but also on managing growing external resistance and navigating the complex shift from scale-driven to innovation-driven growth.

For the international system, the implications are far-reaching. This is not merely a contest over advanced manufacturing or artificial intelligence—it is a struggle over who defines technological standards,[57] sets the rules of global trade, and wields the strategic levers of power in the 21st century.

Counterstrategies: The United States, Europe, and Allies

Global industrial competition has reached a pivotal inflection point. Advanced economies are reassessing their industrial strategies in response to China's rising dominance across critical sectors, from advanced manufacturing and emerging technologies to raw materials and rare earth supply chains. Beijing's sweeping control over upstream inputs and downstream production has exposed structural vulnerabilities in countries that spent decades offshoring capabilities and hollowing out domestic industry. The result is a renewed focus on resilience, reindustrialization, and allied coordination.

Responding to the Challenge

China's state-driven industrial expansion has triggered a global recalibration. The United States, Europe, and key Indo-Pacific partners are increasingly aligning economic policy with national security objectives. While approaches differ in emphasis and execution, a common thread runs through them all: industrial strength is now inseparable from strategic power.

U.S. Strategy: Security-Driven Industrial Realignment

In 2025, the United States adopted a security-centric industrial strategy that is grounded in resilience, capacity-building, and assertive economic statecraft.

Key pillars include:

- **Revitalization of Strategic Sectors**

  Targeted use of tools like the Defense Production Act (DPA), fast-tracked permitting, and federal incentives to strengthen domestic capacity in semiconductors, aerospace, advanced computing, energy systems, and critical materials.

- **Resilient and Secure Supply Chains**

  Executive orders and trade authorities (e.g., Section 232) aimed at reducing dependence on foreign sources for critical minerals,[58] batteries, and pharmaceutical ingredients by expanding domestic extraction, processing, and stockpiling.

- **Technology Protection and Control**

  Expansion of export controls (under BIS), outbound investment screening (CFIUS and new Treasury authorities), and IP enforcement to prevent the transfer of sensitive or dual-use technologies to strategic competitors.[59]

- **Alliance-Driven Industrial Cooperation**

  Deepened co-production agreements, tech standardization (e.g., AI safety benchmarks), and R&D integration through frameworks like the Quad, AUKUS, and bilateral industrial accords with Japan, South Korea, the UK, and others.

- **Defense Industrial Base Modernization**

  Implementation of the 2023 National Defense Industrial Strategy (NDIS) to increase procurement speed, strengthen public-private partnerships, and ensure surge readiness in defense-relevant industries.[60]

- **Investment Facilitation for Strategic Projects**

  Establishment of the U.S. Investment Accelerator (EO 14255) to streamline billion-dollar investments in priority sectors by coordinating federal agencies, reducing permitting delays, and aligning national laboratories and regulatory support.[61]

This strategy reflects a marked shift from global integration to strategic separation, fortifying the U.S. industrial base not only for economic gain but to ensure strategic leverage in an era of enduring rivalry.

The European Strategy: De-Risking with Integration

Brussels has taken a calibrated path: rather than sever economic ties with China, it is building shock absorbers. In 2025, the EU began deploying sharper tools to reduce coercive dependencies without abandoning openness:

- **Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA)**

  A framework to boost EU's manufacturing capacity for net-zero technologies, secondary rules were adopted in May 2025. Streamlines permitting and allocates financing to EU-based clean-tech industries, while

mandating resilience and sustainability standards in public procurement and auctions.[62]

- **Supply Chain Diversification and Strategic Stockpiles**

  Pursuing alternative sourcing agreements in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, and expanding stockpiles of critical inputs to reduce short-term vulnerability.[63]

- **Technological Sovereignty Agenda**

  The Chips Act for Europe and Horizon Europe funding target breakthroughs in AI, quantum computing, biotechnology, and cybersecurity, securing innovation autonomy in key domains.[64]

Allied Indo-Pacific Initiatives: Strategic Convergence

Key U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific have recalibrated their industrial strategies to address growing economic and technological competition from China:

- **Japan**

  The 2022 *Economic Security Promotion Act* was expanded in April 2025 to include hydrogen infrastructure and impose export restrictions on advanced chip making equipment.[65]

- **South Korea**

  The February 2025 *K-Chip Act* amendment increased tax credits for semiconductor facility investments and

extended R&D incentives through 2031, aiming to boost domestic chip manufacturing and stabilize energy inputs.

- **India**

  The fourth round of *Production-Linked Incentives (February 2025)* added secure communications equipment and AI servers to its subsidy portfolio, reinforcing the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India) initiative's defense-tech priorities.[66]

The Power of Collaboration

Beyond domestic strategies, both the United States and Europe increasingly recognize the strategic importance of alliances in shaping the emerging industrial and technological order. Collaborative frameworks—often described as "friend-shoring," "ally-shoring," "near-shoring, and "re-shoring"—aim to build secure, diversified, and value-based supply chains among trusted partners. These efforts not only mitigate economic coercion but also share standards and innovation ecosystems.

Key examples include:

- **The Quad (Australia, India, Japan, U.S.)**

  While not a formal alliance, the Quad has intensified cooperation on supply chain resilience, semiconductor coordination, critical and emerging technologies, and technology governance, often through working groups

and ministerial dialogues.

- **AUKUS (Australia, UK, U.S.):**
  Initially focused on nuclear-powered submarine development, AUKUS has expanded into Pillar II, which includes collaboration on advanced capabilities such as AI, quantum technologies, undersea systems, and cyber defense, areas with significant industrial and strategic relevance.

These frameworks serve as geoeconomic multipliers and security compacts, amplifying collective leverage, fostering industrial interoperability, and offering viable alternatives to state-directed dependency models.

The Road Ahead

The race for industrial leadership is intensifying. The future of the global economy—and with it, the geopolitical balance—will hinge on how effectively nations mobilize strategic industries, secure critical supply chains, and foster innovation through trusted partnerships. In this environment, industrial capacity has become a cornerstone of strategic power.

By blending targeted investments, regulatory alignment, and alliance-driven collaboration, advanced economies are reshaping globalization—not by withdrawing from it, but by reengineering its architecture around resilience, security, and trust. This is the foundation of a new strategic order, where

industrial and technological leadership is shared among a network of capable and coordinated partners.

Quad and AUKUS: Industrial Security Alliances

In today's contested multipolar environment, economic and security interests have converged. The Quad and AUKUS have emerged as institutional frameworks that operationalize this convergence, linking industrial capacity, technological development, and strategic deterrence.

The Quad: Strategic Coordination for a Resilient Region

What began as a maritime security forum has evolved into a coordination platform for regional economic resilience and technological security. Since the meeting on January 21, 2025, Quad priorities reflect a sharpened focus on strategic alignment in critical domains:[67]

1. **Emerging Technology Cooperation**

   Working groups advance collaboration in AI, quantum computing, cybersecurity, and advanced telecommunications—capabilities that promote innovation and strategic advantage.

2. **Semiconductor Supply Chain Resilience**

   Joint efforts aim to diversify fabrication, increase transparency, and bolster trusted capacity across the semiconductor ecosystem, reducing overreliance on concentrated nodes in East Asia.

3. **Coordinated Economic Security**

   The Quad has launched a critical minerals partnership, an early-warning network for supply chain disruption, and a screening dialogue on outbound investment and project risk, together strengthening shared resilience.

These initiatives translate diplomatic solidarity into practical industrial deterrence, offering Indo-Pacific states a rules-based alternative to coercive economic dependence while reinforcing the region's collective capacity to innovate and compete.

AUKUS: Integrated Defense Industrial Collaboration

AUKUS represents a deeper model of allied industrial integration,[68] grounded in shared defense needs and advanced capability development.[69] While the nuclear-powered submarine initiative remains central, the partnership has broadened under Pillar II, which includes:

1. **Joint Capability Development**

   Collaborative projects in AI, quantum technologies, cyber defense, and undersea systems aim to preserve qualitative advantages and ensure interoperability across key domains.[70]

2. **Defense Industrial Base Integration**

   Partners are harmonizing export controls, aligning procurement standards, and co-investing in production

capacity to streamline cross-border defense manufacturing and technology sharing.

3. **Workforce and Innovation Ecosystems**

   AUKUS supports joint STEM initiatives, innovation hubs, and dual-use R&D platforms, recognizing that industrial resilience also depends on talent pipelines and innovation ecosystems.

This approach reflects a shift in alliance strategy—from procurement coordination to co-development and co-production. AUKUS illustrates how trusted defense partners can create a shared industrial base capable of sustaining strategic advantage.

Strategic Implications

Together, the Quad and AUKUS represent a new era of alliance design—one where industrial policy and strategic deterrence are fused. These frameworks serve not only as counterweights to authoritarian models but also as proactive architectures for economic and technological governance.

They reduce vulnerability to coercion, broaden access to trusted supply chains, and provide smaller partners with viable alternatives to concentrated dependencies. As these alliances deepen, they are constructing the scaffolding of collective resilience, defining the institutional and industrial foundations of a stable Indo-Pacific order.

U.S. National Strategies and the Manufacturing Renaissance

Amid intensifying geopolitical competition, the United States has adopted a more integrated economic-security approach, recognizing that a robust defense industrial base underpins both deterrence and long-term strategic power. This shift is evident in expanded industrial alliances such as the Quad and AUKUS, and in new frameworks like the National Defense Industrial Strategy (NDIS) and the Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR).[71]

The National Defense Industrial Strategy

Released in 2023, the NDIS lays out a roadmap to modernize and strengthen the U.S. defense industrial base around four strategic pillars:[72]

1. **Resilient Supply Chains:**
   Diversifying sources and eliminating single points of failure to secure access to critical components and technologies.
2. **Workforce Readiness:**
   Building talent pipelines through education, apprenticeships, and targeted skilling in mission-critical sectors.

3. **Flexible Acquisition:**

   Reforming procurement processes to enable speed, scale, and innovation across defense systems.

4. **Economic Deterrence:**

   Using industrial coordination and fair market mechanisms to safeguard advantage and counter manipulation.[73]

At its core, NDIS aims to revitalize the U.S. defense ecosystem through public-private partnerships, risk-sharing investments, and sustained innovation.[74]

The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience

Complementing NDIS, PIPIR extends U.S. industrial cooperation to key Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic partners.[75] Its objectives include:[76]

1. **Reducing Production Barriers**

   Harmonizing regulations and licensing to streamline cross-border defense manufacturing.

2. **Creating Sustainment Hubs**

   Establishing regional maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) sites to shorten supply lines and boost operational tempo.

3. **Mitigating Supply Chain Risks**

   Coordinating among partners to counter dependencies on adversarial networks.

A core innovation is the Regional Sustainment Framework (RSF), which decentralizes logistics and leverages allied industrial capacity for shared MRO operations, enhancing interoperability, cost-efficiency, and surge readiness.[77]

Global Endorsement: The Shangri-La Statements

At the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue, the United States introduced a *Statement of Principles for Indo-Pacific Defense Industrial Base Collaboration*,[78] endorsed by several regional partners. It affirms three shared commitments: (1) strengthening collective resilience, (2) advancing workforce readiness, and (3) fostering joint defense innovation.

Momentum accelerated at the 2025 Dialogue, where Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced the first operational PIPIR projects, including radar sustainment facilities in Australia and standardized frameworks for unmanned aerial systems across allies.[79]

Strategic Significance

These initiatives reflect a critical shift: the industrial base is now a domain of strategic competition. No nation, not even the United States, can sustain modern defense alone. By building a federated industrial ecosystem with trusted allies,

Washington seeks to maintain its technological edge, reinforce operational readiness, and offer a collaborative counter-model to authoritarian state capitalism.

Revitalizing American Manufacturing: A National Strategy for Strategic Resilience

At the core of America's response to intensifying global competition lies a critical realization: The United States cannot project strength abroad if it cannot produce at home. Revitalizing domestic manufacturing has reemerged as a national imperative—not just to drive growth but also to enhance security, restore technological leadership, and fortify supply chains against disruption.

Manufacturing as a Strategic Asset

U.S. national strategy increasingly views the industrial base not as a legacy sector, but as a cornerstone of strategic resilience.[80] Reindustrialization efforts center on three reinforcing pillars:[81]

1. **Technological Leadership**

   Advancing the adoption of frontier technologies, including AI, robotics, smart manufacturing systems, and advanced materials to sustain a competitive edge.

2. **Workforce Development**

   Expanding education pipelines, apprenticeships, and upskilling initiatives to build a modern industrial

workforce capable of operating in data-rich, automated environments.

3. **Supply Chain Resilience**

   Reducing foreign dependencies, diversifying sourcing, and expanding domestic capacity in critical inputs such as semiconductors, rare earths, and industrial components.

Strategic Investments

Federal initiatives have catalyzed a wave of investments into foundational sectors, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and industrial infrastructure. These efforts are increasingly concentrated in regional tech hubs that align federal support with private-sector capacity and academic research, seeding next-generation manufacturing ecosystems across the country.[82]

The Power of Partnership

At the center of this strategy is collaboration. Government cannot manufacture at scale, and the private sector cannot do it alone. Public-private partnerships, spanning industry, academia, and national laboratories are essential to translate R&D into production, connect innovation to market needs, and ensure that skilled labor is available where new industrial clusters take root.

Strategic Renewal, Not Nostalgia

America's manufacturing revival is not about returning to the past. It is about positioning for the future. In an era of contested supply chains, technological rivalries, and systemic shocks, the ability to build, adapt, and scale at home is becoming the decisive variable of national power. The manufacturing renaissance is thus more than economic policy—it is an industrial deterrent and a foundation of strategic autonomy.

Conclusion: Industrial Power and Strategic Advantage

In today's contested geopolitical landscape, industrial policy has become a strategic imperative. Once seen as the domain of economists and technocrats, it now anchors national security strategies and alliance frameworks. The United States, China, and Europe are each redefining the role of the state in setting industrial policy and redefining manufacturing, not merely to boost competitiveness, but to shape the global order itself.

China's model fuses authoritarian control with industrial planning to secure self-sufficiency, dominate global markets, and tilt international norms. The U.S. has responded with a hybrid approach—combining public investment, private innovation, and industrial coordination with trusted partners. Europe's strategy reflects regulatory assertiveness and "de-risking," preserving openness while curbing dependence.

Despite different models, all three powers now treat industrial capacity as essential to national resilience,

technological leadership, and global influence. This shift is more than economic; it is strategic. Industrial policy is now a tool of deterrence, a platform for innovation, and a foundation for alliance cohesion.

Initiatives like the U.S. NDIS, PIPIR, the EU's Net-Zero Industry Act, and joint ventures through Quad and AUKUS signal a shared recognition: no single country can secure its future alone. Resilient supply chains, interoperable production networks, and innovation ecosystems built on shared values are the new levers of power.

The stakes extend beyond great power rivalry. Decisions made now will shape the integrity of global supply chains, the governance of critical technologies, and the direction of the global economy. There are real dangers—protectionism, technological fragmentation, and systemic distrust—but also real opportunities: to reinvigorate domestic industries, renew alliances, and promote a rules-based order rooted in transparency and mutual benefit.

In this emerging era of competitive multipolarity, the nations that succeed will be those that can translate industrial strategy into a durable strategic advantage, without losing sight of the collaborative frameworks that global stability requires.

What is at stake is not only who leads, but also what kind of world they will establish.

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Afterword

The Edge of Advantage

James M. Minnich

The Indo-Pacific is not on the verge of change—it is already in the throes of it. *Edge of Competition* is a guide for navigating this turbulent reality: a playbook for governments, institutions, and leaders operating in a world shaped by systemic disruption, strategic rivalry, and competitive multipolarity. This volume does not impose a single doctrine. Instead, it illuminates the volatile "edges" where the rules are forged and where the future balance of power will be won or lost.

Across these chapters, we have traveled to the friction points of the 21st century. Technological shocks—from China's reusable rocket surge to the battlerace for industrial power—are redefining the laws of advantage. Maritime domains remain contested, with sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea and the enduring challenge of forced labor at sea, testing both moral resolve and strategic cohesion. In this emerging order, decisive shifts occur at the margins, where norms are fluid, power is diffused, and innovation outpaces regulation.

The central argument of this volume is that leadership in this era demands a new currency: integrated power. Deterrence is inseparable from industrial resilience. Alliance credibility hinges on innovation, speed, and trust. Power is no longer measured in platforms alone, but in the synchronization of economic levers, operational concepts, strategic messaging, and allied action. Integration is not an aspiration—it is the operating system of modern statecraft.

Crucially, this is not a contest reserved for great powers. From the ambitions of middle powers to the strategic resolve of Pacific small states, regional actors are not passive arenas of competition—they are active architects of the future. Through coalition-building, infrastructure diplomacy, and principled alignment, they remind us that influence is not a function of scale alone, but of strategic clarity and purpose.

Edge of Competition is not a passive diagnosis, but a call to action, built on three enduring principles:

1. **Master the Clock**

   In digital warfare and advanced manufacturing alike, advantage belongs to those who iterate faster than their rivals. Speed is strength.

2. **Weaponize Resilience**

   Critical infrastructure—semiconductors, seabed cables, energy corridors—is the new center of gravity. A system that bends without breaking deters by design.

3. **Command the Narrative**

   The Indo-Pacific contest is one of legitimacy, values, and vision. Strategic narratives are not sidebars—they are instruments of influence.

The complexity described in these pages demands a new generation of leaders, those who can fuse strategic patience with tactical urgency, who can build teams that learn, adapt, and take calculated risks. In an era of competitive multipolarity, inertia is a fatal flaw. The future will favor those who read the edge, anticipate cascading effects, and act—decisively and repeatedly.

Strategic advantage is not a destination. It is a posture: rooted in vigilance, reinforced through partnerships, and sustained by the relentless will to adapt faster than others can respond. This volume is a guide to finding and holding that edge.

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INDEX

A

ADMM-Plus, 276, 291
aerospace, 8, 24, 41, 121, 243, 456, 459, 460, 465, 473, 477, 493
Afghanistan, 126, 128, 130, 134–138, 144, 149, 151–154, 157, 186, 202, 214, 216, 228, 257, 260, 264, 272, 507
agency, ix, xiii, 15, 32, 102, 200, 202, 211, 244, 250, 265, 276, 302, 306, 314, 326, 330, 401, 450, 465
  autonomy, 7, 33, 67, 81, 207, 209, 239, 261, 266, 267, 276, 347, 463, 479
  small states, 17, 262, 504
ADIZ, 1, 12
Aksai Chin, 2
Anti-Access/Area Denial, 6, 26, 80
Artemis Accords, 101, 108, 110–112, 114, 116, 118, 119, 122
  Artificial Intelligence (AI), 3, 36–38, 77, 78, 94, 212, 218, 234, 343, 344, 354, 404, 429, 431, 444, 456, 460, 475, 477, 479–483, 488, 489, 492, 508
  technology disruption, 3, 212, 218, 343, 429, 444, 456, 460, 475, 489, 508
ASEAN, xiii, 4, 7, 11, 14, 38, 89, 123, 129, 146, 184, 195, 199, 208, 216, 223, 244, 275–278, 280–299, 340, 361, 363, 378, 394, 405
  ARF, 276, 284
  ASEAN AOIP, 277, 282, 290, 296–299
  centrality, 276, 281
  charter, 276, 295
  internal division, 283
  TAC, 285, 298
Asia-Africa-Europe-1, 396
astropolitics, 112
AUKUS, 23, 38, 170, 210, 211, 279, 298, 344, 454, 461, 477, 481–485, 491, 501
Australia, 5, 18, 19, 28, 29, 35, 38, 48, 49, 52, 89, 114, 142, 156,

170, 208, 210, 219, 221, 237, 257, 262, 279, 290, 298, 299, 302, 308, 311–315, 328, 329, 340, 342, 354, 367, 405, 463, 480, 481, 487, 509
Canberra, 3, 11, 18, 315, 328, 340, 509
Azerbaijan, 142, 156

B

balance of power, 28, 116, 207, 217, 224, 314, 347, 376, 408, 503
Ballistic Missile Defense, 163, 164, 171
Bangladesh, 16, 35, 46, 128, 144, 149, 185, 195, 198, 200, 201, 207, 228, 254, 255, 257, 258, 261–263, 265, 271, 396
Belarus, 162
Bhutan, 17, 207, 250, 251, 253, 257, 258, 263, 265, 270, 273
Biden, Joseph R., 91, 316, 330, 376, 502
Blue Origin, 110, 123
borders and sovereignty, ix, 4, 57, 61, 64, 76, 80, 128, 136, 169, 185, 192, 214–216, 252, 441
disputes, 211, 212, 221, 227, 374
EEZ, 18, 310, 319, 326, 360, 363, 368, 398
South China Sea, xiii, 4, 11, 13, 45, 52, 80, 85–87, 95, 159, 168, 182, 210, 212, 220, 221, 280, 295, 342, 359, 360–367, 369, 371–375, 377–382, 396, 504
Bosporus, 11

C

caliphate, xii, 125–127, 129, 139, 143, 149
Campbell, Kurt, 9, 28, 42, 52, 381, 383
Canada, 114, 141, 142, 367, 392
case studies
Supriyanto, 419–421
China, xii, 6, 8, 9, 11–14, 16–18, 20–32, 35, 36, 38–45, 47–53, 58, 66, 69, 71–95, 97, 98, 100–118, 120–122, 142, 152, 156, 157, 159–161, 163–175, 180–188, 193–198, 200, 202, 204, 206, 208, 210–213, 220, 221, 225, 228, 231–234, 240, 242,

245, 246, 249, 251, 252, 253, 255–261, 264, 266, 268–272, 276, 277, 279–282, 286, 294, 296, 297, 302, 304, 306–308, 313, 315, 316, 322–326, 328–330, 333–336, 338–340, 342–346, 348, 351–356, 359–383, 391, 411, 454, 455, 457–460, 462, 466, 467, 469–490, 492–499, 504, 509, 511
Beijing, xii, 5–8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17–21, 25–28, 30–32, 42, 49, 52, 53, 72, 78, 79, 81, 86–88, 90, 108–110, 113, 116, 120, 142, 160, 165, 166, 168–170, 172, 181–183, 186, 193–197, 200, 210, 213, 228, 232, 233, 251, 256, 258, 259, 268, 279–281, 296, 297, 302, 307, 316, 334–344, 346, 349, 360–367, 370, 372–374, 376, 377, 454, 458, 459, 469–471, 473, 474, 476
Belt and Road Initiative, 11, 14, 20, 23, 29, 49, 53, 74, 86, 89, 181, 186, 210, 228, 232, 251, 255, 258, 259, 269, 279, 355
China Coast Guard, 13, 26, 45
China-Myanmar Economic Corridor 181
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 212, 240, 259
Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 35, 71, 73, 75, 77–79, 82–85, 89
Chinese expansionism
  artificial islands, 210, 371, 372
  nine-dash line, 362, 365, 368
chokepoints, 2, 11, 27, 28, 43, 52, 180, 181, 209, 253, 314, 459
  Bosporus, 11
Christchurch, 131, 132
civil society, 132, 146, 198, 291, 421, 439, 447
Civil-Military, 16, 41, 321
Cold War, 6, 8, 160–164, 169, 171, 172, 206, 217, 275, 278, 294, 308, 315, 334, 456, 465, 467
competition, vii, viii, ix, xi, xiii, xiv, 2, 3, 6–8, 15, 18, 33, 34, 40, 59, 63, 65, 88, 94, 98, 110, 113, 114, 118, 127, 207, 209, 224–226, 231, 234, 252, 255–257, 276, 279, 281, 294, 302, 303, 308–310, 318, 335, 343, 357, 361, 382, 386–388, 390, 409, 416, 455, 457, 459, 462, 463,

465, 467, 468, 470, 474, 476, 479, 485, 487, 492, 503, 504, 510, 513
COPUOS, 115
crisis response, 3
cyber, 12, 14, 26, 27, 59, 62, 64, 79, 85, 86, 111, 184, 185, 193, 211, 234, 236, 343, 355, 403, 409, 457, 459, 481, 483
cyberattack, 66
cyber capabilities, 27, 234, 343
cyber domains, 26, 85, 111
cyber intrusions, 14, 59, 64, 211
cyber operations, 86
cyber scam, 184, 193
cybercrime, 200, 401
cybersecurity, 198, 236, 345, 402, 411, 412, 462, 479, 482, 513
cyberspace, 65, 129, 395
cyber threats, 457

D

debris, 102, 111–113, 115, 116
debris crisis, 102
debris liability, 112
debris mitigation, 111–113, 116
decoupling, 232, 462, 475
Defense Production Act, 23, 24, 460, 477
demographic challenges
aging population, 81
aging society, 77
one-child policy, 76
Department of Defense, 39, 50, 51, 379, 495, 500, 501, 502
de-risking, 454, 462, 478, 490, 496
digital literacy, 65
digital platforms, 15, 20, 21, 29, 64, 129, 192, 391, 403, 409, 435
disinformation, ix, 2, 38, 43, 58, 82, 88
disruption, vii, viii, xii, 2–4, 11, 13, 17, 32, 33, 55, 59, 63–66, 101, 151, 225, 310, 389, 394, 411, 456, 467, 483, 488, 503
disruption, division, and competition, 11, 13, 33, 400
division, vii, viii, xiii, 2–5, 33, 177, 192, 379
political fragmentation, 58
sovereignty disputes, 373, 504
Dolman, Everett, 98–100, 117–119, 123
Doshi, Rush, 9, 28, 42, 52

E

East China Sea, 26, 383
economic coercion, 58, 86, 345, 361, 480
economic interdependence
  globalization, xii, 57–59, 62– 68, 70, 92, 454, 455, 461, 463, 481
economic partnerships
  BRICS, 31, 230, 231, 232, 246
  CPTPP, 225
  Free Trade Agreements, 296
  RCEP, 225
economics, 36, 41, 45, 49, 68, 91, 98, 149, 151, 217, 218, 269, 292, 429, 492, 511
  debt crisis, 16, 255, 259
  economic development, 211, 230, 283, 377
  economic disparities, 215, 216
  economic growth, 82, 235, 254, 418
  economic incentives, 422, 442
  economic integration, 57, 64, 223, 224, 456, 461, 462
  economic interdependence, 219, 232, 388, 462
  economic resilience, 116, 211, 233, 454, 482
  economic sanctions, 369
entrepreneurial space ventures
  Relativity Space, 110
  Rocket Lab, 110, 122
  SpaceX, 100, 102–105, 110, 118, 119
  Stoke Space, 110
Ethnic Armed Organization, 190
Europe, 21, 48, 49, 74, 112, 138, 140–142, 155, 169, 210, 263, 273, 298, 338, 386, 388, 396, 402, 454, 457, 462, 463, 467, 475, 476, 479, 480, 490, 492, 496, 497
European Union, 123, 259, 260, 303, 320, 326, 330, 342, 354, 410, 443, 451, 462, 463, 478, 491, 496, 500
exploitation, 145, 179, 185, 216, 319, 346, 365, 416–418, 420–425, 434, 435, 442, 446

F

Falcon 9, 97, 100, 102, 118
First Island Chain, 80, 90, 183

fisheries, 18, 303, 312, 317, 319, 320, 326, 327, 330, 366, 419, 430, 439, 448, 449, 450, 507
Fishman, Edward, 11, 28, 43, 52
FONOPS, 210, 337, 349, 367
Foreign Terrorist Fighters, 127, 129, 147
fragmentation, viii, 5, 39, 190, 422, 428, 491
Free and Open Indo-Pacific, 217, 219, 233, 236, 276, 278, 281, 288, 289, 341, 376
Free Trade Agreement, 296
freedom of navigation, 210, 220, 222, 304, 313, 314, 337, 364, 367
Freely Associated States, 325
Fujian, 25

G

Gaza, 138, 154, 305, 324, 371
geoeconomics, 20, 22, 24, 29, 49, 50, 481
geopolitics, 39, 47, 54, 118, 295, 296, 297, 498
  power transition theory, 72
  U.S.-China relations, 377
global governance, 30, 31, 230, 231, 235, 263, 279, 305, 307, 391, 460
  United Nations, 31, 44, 45, 53, 68, 122, 134, 152, 201–203, 227, 229, 230, 241, 245, 258, 302, 304, 305, 324, 339, 343, 352, 353, 360, 368, 374, 379, 398, 400, 411, 412, 448, 511
Global Pivotal State (South Korea, 334, 336, 348
Global South, 5, 87, 89, 229, 230, 231, 232, 237, 256, 512
globalization, xii, xvi, 57–59, 62–68, 70, 92, 454, 455, 461, 463, 481
gray zone, ix, 5, 18, 26, 64, 82, 86, 182, 310, 342, 360, 363, 364, 386, 395, 396, 398, 400, 405, 510
great power, 12, 41, 71, 72, 81, 83, 113, 118, 183, 229, 259, 281, 282, 295, 296, 298, 391, 409, 456, 465, 491, 493, 504
great power competition, 118, 409, 456, 493
great power rivalry, 183, 491
great powers, 83, 259, 281, 282, 391, 465, 504

Gwadar Port, 16, 46, 212, 256

H

Hamas, 138, 139, 140, 142, 143, 147, 154, 155, 157
Hambantota Port, 17, 29, 253, 255, 256, 259
Hasina, Sheikh, 228
Hezbollah, 140

I

Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, xxiii, 312, 319, 327, 418, 419, 422, 431, 449, 450, 451
India, xiii, xiv, 5, 7, 11, 16, 17, 21, 35, 37, 38, 40, 45, 46, 47, 54, 76, 80, 89, 114, 130, 131, 132, 137, 150, 156, 162, 167, 170, 181, 185, 198, 200, 205–248, 250–261, 264, 266–273, 299, 311, 340, 385–389, 391, 394–397, 400–409, 412, 413, 464, 480, 500, 510, 511, 512
New Delhi, 15, 17, 21, 181, 206, 207, 217, 221, 226, 228, 232, 233, 236, 241, 400, 402
India-Asia-Express (IAX), 386, 388, 402
India-Europe-Express (IEX), 386, 388, 402
Indo-Pacific strategy, 69, 206, 207, 208, 211, 220, 223–225, 233, 236, 296, 297, 334, 337, 343, 347–351
Indo-Pacific Strategy (South Korea), 337
industrial base, 8, 63, 341, 375, 457, 462, 473, 478, 484, 485, 487, 488
infrastructure, viii, xiv, 4, 6, 11, 14, 16, 19, 21–23, 25, 27, 29–32, 41, 45, 49, 51, 61, 62, 64, 66, 67, 74, 76, 77, 100, 102, 104, 111, 115, 145, 161, 181, 182, 186, 192, 193, 207, 208, 210, 212, 214, 222, 223, 225, 233, 235, 244, 251–255, 258–272, 279, 283, 302, 306, 308–311, 317, 321, 323, 336, 344–346, 350, 351, 369, 386–389, 391, 392, 395, 396, 397, 401–405, 407–409, 412, 426, 432, 457, 472, 479, 489, 504, 505

integrated dissuasion, 416, 417, 422, 428, 431, 434, 440, 442, 445–447
interdependence, 2, 28, 29, 33, 49, 58, 59, 60, 63, 65–68, 70, 113, 195, 206, 407, 467, 468
  economic interdependence, 219, 232, 388, 462
intergovernmental organization
  ASEAN, xiii, 4, 7, 11, 14, 38, 89, 123, 129, 146, 184, 195, 199, 208, 216, 223, 244, 275–278, 280–299, 340, 361, 363, 378, 394, 405
  BRICS, 31, 230–232, 246
  EU, 123, 259, 260, 303, 320, 326, 330, 342, 354, 410, 443, 451, 462, 463, 478, 491, 496, 500
  NATO, 90, 111, 326, 337, 352, 493, 510
  UN, 31, 44, 45, 53, 68, 122, 134, 152, 201–203, 227, 229, 230, 241, 245, 258, 302, 304, 305, 324, 339, 343, 352, 353, 360, 368, 374, 379, 398, 400, 411, 412, 448, 511
  World Bank, 35, 70
Intergovernmental organization
  APEC, 297
international collaboration, 432
International Labour Organization (ILO), 418
Iran, 137, 138, 140, 153, 154, 216, 226, 227, 230, 237, 245
Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), 60, 125–133, 135, 137, 139–143, 147, 150, 153–157, 242
Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), 46, 128, 130, 133, 135–138, 145
Israel, 126, 138, 140, 141, 143, 154, 155, 156, 215, 512
IUU technological solutions
  AI/ML, 94, 429
  blockchain, 417, 429, 432, 444
  digital reporting tools, 432
  Satellite monitoring, 429
  vessel monitoring systems, 444

J

Japan, 2, 12, 13, 14, 19, 21, 35, 43, 44–46, 48, 52, 89, 114, 170, 208, 210, 219–221, 223, 237, 242, 257, 259, 262, 311, 312, 314, 336, 340, 342, 347, 349,

353, 354, 366–368, 375, 381, 391–393, 463, 466, 475, 477, 479, 480, 500, 508
Tokyo, 5, 12, 15, 18, 142, 157, 340, 508
Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), 128, 143, 150, 157
Jin, Keyu, 24, 50
Jiwani Port, 256

K

Kashmir, 16, 45, 131, 151, 207, 213, 214
Kazakhstan, 162
Kennedy, John F., 162
Klein, John J., 98–100, 117, 119
Korea (North), 10, 12, 44, 80, 162, 334, 336, 339, 346, 348, 352, 353, 355, 356, 509
Korea (South), xiii, 12, 13, 35, 36, 44, 221, 223, 313, 333, 334–348, 350–356, 463, 466, 477, 479, 509
Kyrgyzstan, 137, 154

L

Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT), 134
Lee Jae-myung, 334, 348, 350
Low Earth Orbit, 106. 107
Lupton, David E., 98–100, 117, 119

M

Make in India, 21
Malaysia, 14, 132, 133, 152, 283, 290, 360, 366, 372, 389, 393, 394
Maldives, 17, 47, 131, 137, 151, 154, 207, 228, 245, 249–251, 253, 256, 257, 260, 262, 263, 268, 269, 272
maritime security, 219
Marshall Islands, 18, 19, 303, 305, 309, 312, 313, 393
McGeorge, Bundy, 162, 173
media, 9, 37, 39, 41, 50, 52, 68, 70, 95, 129, 146, 153, 155, 173, 192, 198, 267, 299, 324, 328, 331, 376, 379, 435, 496, 508, 510–512
Mehsud, Noor Wali, 136
Menon, Shivshankar, 34, 54
Micronesia, 18, 19, 303, 305, 309, 312
Middle East, 21, 127, 138, 140, 141, 155, 250, 262, 386, 388
military engagement

capacity building, 19, 63, 90, 209, 236, 320, 321, 426, 432, 476
joint military exercises, 208, 219, 365, 374
missiles
BMD, 163, 164, 171
FOBS, 164
hypersonic, 3, 26, 27, 113, 164
ICBM, 160
IRBM, 170
Silo, 164
multilateralism, 113, 207, 238, 239, 463
multipolar, 98, 115, 117, 232, 238, 261, 467, 472, 482
multipolarity, ix, 72, 115, 206, 266, 408, 461, 491, 503, 505
Myanmar, xiii, 4, 11, 14, 37, 179, 180–197, 200–204, 208, 216, 227, 228, 245, 283, 507

N

nationalism, 57, 68, 85, 90, 183, 239, 247
Nehru, Jawaharlal, 205, 239
Nepal, 17, 47, 207, 228, 250, 253, 255–258, 262, 265, 269, 270, 510
Neutron, 114
New Glenn, 110, 112, 114
New Zealand, 131, 132, 302, 312, 313, 316, 507
Wellington, 131, 132, 302, 312, 313, 316, 507
non-traditional security threats
forced labor, xiv, 185, 216, 415–447, 504
pandemics, ix, 3, 58–61, 237, 497
sea slavery, 415–418, 421, 425, 437
Northeast Asia, 10, 11, 13, 312, 346, 348, 508
nuclear, xii, 15, 16, 40, 83, 84, 103, 108, 159–163, 165–175, 211, 339, 344–346, 350, 355, 360, 366, 465, 481, 483, 508, 513
deterrence, 160, 161, 166, 172
nuclear-armed state, 161, 167, 168, 169

O

Oceania, 10, 18, 20, 47, 48, 301, 302, 303, 310, 312, 315, 320, 321, 323
Outer Space Treaty, 108, 111

P

Pacific Islands, 4, 19, 29, 31, 306, 316, 324, 326, 328–330
Pacific Islands Forum, 19, 306, 316, 324, 329, 330
Pakistan, 10, 16, 17, 45, 46, 47, 87, 128, 130, 134, 136–138, 143, 144, 149, 150, 153, 157, 162, 167, 207, 212, 213, 227, 228, 238, 240, 251, 256, 257, 259, 260, 264, 268, 270, 271
  Islamabad, 16, 137, 259
Palau, 18, 19, 301, 303, 309, 310, 313, 321, 325, 330, 331
Palestinian Islamic Jihad, 139
Paparo, Samuel J., 7, 13, 14, 40, 44, 45, 54, 301
Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), 320
partnerships
  ASEAN, xiii, 4, 7, 11, 14, 38, 89, 123, 129, 146, 184, 195, 199, 208, 216, 223, 244, 275–278, 280–299, 340, 361, 363, 378, 394, 405
  AUKUS, 23, 38, 170, 210, 211, 279, 298, 344, 454, 461, 477, 481–485, 491, 501
  IPEF, 14, 210, 244
  Quad, 5, 7, 23, 38, 46, 170, 208, 210, 211, 220, 226, 233, 237, 239, 257, 279, 311, 326, 336, 375, 387, 389, 400, 401, 403, 405, 408, 413, 414, 454, 461, 477, 480, 482–485, 491, 500
People's Liberation Army, xxiv, 7, 12, 25, 26, 28, 34, 41–43, 51, 73, 79–82, 87, 93, 182, 359, 378
People's Liberation Army Navy, 12, 25, 26, 80, 87
Philippines, 89, 128, 130, 132, 143, 149, 220, 243, 280, 337, 342, 347, 354, 360, 363, 366, 368, 370, 371, 374, 380, 381, 394, 433, 442, 450
  Second Thomas Shoal, 14, 337, 370, 381

policies and initiatives
Act East Policy, 208, 211, 220, 240
BBIN, 208, 265
BIMSTEC, 132, 146, 208, 216, 261, 264
China's Dual Circulation Strategy, 454, 459
China's *Made in China 2025*, 27, 454, 458, 471–475, 495, 498
China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy, 8, 27, 41, 343
NDIS, xxiv, 478, 491, 495, 500, 501
Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP), 18, 320
PIPIR, xxiv, 23, 461, 485, 486, 487, 491
Quad, 5, 7, 23, 38, 46, 170, 208, 210, 211, 220, 226, 233, 237, 239, 257, 279, 311, 326, 336, 375, 387, 389, 400, 401, 403, 405, 408, 413, 414, 454, 461, 477, 480, 482–485, 491, 500
RSF, 487
South Korea's New Southern Policy, 340
policies and initiatives
China's Medium and Long Term Program of Science and Technology (MLP), 458
NDIS, 461, 478, 485, 495, 500, 501
private space companies in China
CAS Space, 103, 105
Deep Blue Aerospace, 104, 106, 121
Galactic Energy, 103, 106, 121
iSpace, 103, 104, 105, 121
Landspace, 104, 105
SAST & CALT, 106
Space Epoch, 106

Q

Quad, 5, 7, 23, 38, 46, 170, 208, 210, 211, 220, 226, 233, 237, 239, 257, 279, 311, 326, 336, 375, 387, 389, 400, 401, 403, 405, 408, 413, 414, 454, 461, 477, 480, 482, 483, 484, 485, 491, 500

R

regional architectures, 510
Bilateral, 215, 270

minilateral, 207, 261, 266, 277, 286, 510
multilateral, 4, 6, 32, 113, 114, 146, 195, 207, 214, 216, 222, 223, 225, 230, 233, 235, 236, 238, 239, 250, 257, 261, 263–266, 273, 299, 306, 307, 318, 320, 342, 349, 367, 399, 402, 463, 467, 510
trilateral, 12, 132, 208, 215, 320, 336, 344, 510
regional institutions
APEC, 297
ASEAN, xiii, 4, 7, 11, 14, 38, 89, 123, 129, 146, 184, 195, 199, 208, 216, 223, 244, 275–278, 280–299, 340, 361, 363, 378, 394, 405
BIMSTEC, 132, 146, 208, 216, 261, 264
IORA, 262, 264, 405
Quad, 5, 7, 23, 38, 46, 170, 208, 210, 211, 220, 226, 233, 237, 239, 257, 279, 311, 326, 336, 375, 387, 389, 400, 401, 403, 405, 408, 413, 414, 454, 461, 477, 480, 482–485, 491, 500
SAARC, 146, 207, 256, 264, 265
relations
India-Japan relations, 218, 219, 242, 243
India-Philippines relations, 220
India-U.S. relations, xxii, 217, 218, 237, 248
India-Vietnam relations, 221, 243
U.S.-China, 12, 49, 95, 170, 174, 234, 238, 271, 302, 335, 338, 372, 377, 381–383, 494, 495, 499
U.S.-Japan-Korea Trilateral relations, 215, 344
resilience, ix, 3, 6, 9, 11, 20, 22, 23, 24, 31, 34, 53, 59, 61, 63, 65–68, 85, 90, 99, 101, 104, 109, 110, 111, 114, 126, 149, 181, 186, 188, 190, 200, 202, 211, 220, 223, 232, 244, 252, 254, 261, 267, 303, 305, 310, 311, 317–319, 321–323, 326, 342, 389, 392, 403, 405, 406, 408, 414, 419, 434, 446, 457, 461, 463, 464, 467, 468, 473, 475, 476, 479–490, 499, 501, 504, 505

resistance and opposition
CDM, 191
Ethnic Armed Organizations 190
resistance movement, 189
resource scarcity, 61
resources, 18, 76, 82, 89, 102, 108, 118, 146, 181, 183, 225, 228, 250, 265, 272, 290, 291, 302, 303, 304, 306, 311, 313, 319, 322, 327, 360, 363, 365, 380, 419, 426, 432, 433, 441, 443, 446, 449, 492
rivalry, viii, 3, 10, 17, 19, 34, 58, 60, 98, 99, 114, 115, 117, 146, 148, 159, 179, 249, 250, 252–254, 271, 277, 299, 318, 322, 323, 343, 454, 456, 461, 465, 472, 478, 490, 492, 503
Russia, 13, 18, 26, 38, 44, 80, 160, 162, 163, 166–169, 171, 174, 175, 188, 206, 211, 226, 227, 231, 237, 238, 245, 310, 338, 339, 352, 353, 376

S

Sagan, Scott, 162, 171, 173
sea slavery, 415–418, 421, 425, 437
second-strike capability, 160–162, 164, 165, 171
security challenges
non-traditional, 214
traditional, 223
security cooperation, 35, 37, 38, 40, 45, 47, 48, 67, 91, 118, 149, 173, 201, 211, 212, 235, 239, 267, 295, 303, 309, 311, 318, 319, 323, 324, 328, 351, 366, 378, 408, 448, 492, 508, 509
semiconductors, 21, 22, 27, 218, 219, 454, 456, 460, 462, 470, 473, 477, 489, 505
Senkaku Island, 12, 44
Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology, 104, 106, 121
Singapore, 15, 50, 142, 156, 157, 205, 208, 239, 283, 290, 295, 296, 299, 366, 389, 392, 394, 502
social cohesion, 235
soft power, 87, 224, 239, 255
Solomon Islands, 2, 18, 19, 35, 47, 302, 305, 313, 314, 315, 316, 328, 329
South Africa, 162

South Asia, xiii, 10, 15, 17, 47, 130, 146, 151, 153, 207, 213, 228, 232, 241, 242, 249–252, 254–257, 261, 263, 265–270, 511, 512
South China Sea, xiii, 4, 11, 13, 45, 52, 80, 85–87, 95, 159, 168, 182, 210, 212, 220, 221, 280, 295, 342, 359–367, 369, 371–374, 375, 377–382, 396, 504
Southeast Asia, 5, 10, 13–15, 21, 28, 49, 112, 126, 127, 129, 142, 145, 147, 180, 181, 187, 201–203, 208–211, 215, 216, 220, 221, 254, 262, 275, 278, 282, 298, 349, 365, 368, 370, 371, 373–375, 386, 388, 419
Soviet Union, 83, 162, 164, 167, 169, 465, 467
space programs, 107, 347
SpaceX, 100, 102–105, 110, 118, 119
Sri Lanka, 10, 17, 21, 29, 46, 47, 87, 130, 132, 142, 156, 207, 228, 250, 251, 253, 255–257, 259, 262, 264, 268, 271, 272, 394, 513
strategic autonomy, 5, 15, 27, 206, 208, 211, 213, 224, 226, 227, 229, 233, 234, 237, 238, 250, 306, 391, 454, 490
submarine cables, 303, 310, 318, 389, 390, 397, 402, 403
summits
  BRICS Summit, 231
  East Asia Summit, 208, 280, 282
  NATO Summit, 352
  U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit, 316, 329
  UN Summit, 230
supply chains, 3, 4, 8, 22, 28, 29, 57, 58, 60, 61, 63, 65, 66, 76, 183, 196, 213, 223, 225, 232, 313, 391, 416, 422, 424, 426, 432, 434, 444, 454, 456, 457, 459, 460, 461, 463, 468, 471, 474, 475, 476, 480, 481, 483, 484, 488, 490, 491
  global, 62, 418, 447, 467, 491

T

Taiwan, xix, 1–3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 29, 34, 37, 43, 44, 79, 80, 82, 85–87, 89, 95, 159, 168, 170, 175, 181, 292, 299, 302, 306, 307,

310, 315, 324, 325, 328, 337, 359, 376, 377, 378, 393, 394, 396, 411, 466, 509
Taipei, 2, 34, 306, 337, 509
Tajikistan, 137, 154
technology, xii, 3, 5, 8, 22, 23, 27, 51, 58, 64, 70, 89, 101, 103, 104, 107, 115, 116, 206, 215, 218, 230, 233, 235, 242, 344, 345, 349, 351, 354, 401, 410, 411, 413, 427, 429, 431–433, 446, 459, 465, 469, 474, 475, 477, 480, 482, 484,493, 495, 508
terrorism, xii, 46, 59, 125, 126, 129–135, 139, 144, 147–151, 154, 155, 207, 211, 214, 510, 512, 513
counterterrorism, 128, 132, 145, 151, 152, 236
jihadist, 138, 149
terrorist networks and actors
Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr, 131
Al-Qaeda, 127, 128, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 139
Al-Zawahiri, Aymen, 136
AQAP, 132
AQIS, 134
FTF, 127, 129, 147
ISIS, 60, 125–133, 135, 137, 139–143, 147, 150, 153–157, 242
ISK, 46, 128, 130, 133, 135–138, 145
JeM, 131
JI, 128, 143, 150, 157
LeT, 134
Taliban, 46, 126, 127, 133–137, 144, 152, 153, 186, 214, 228, 260, 264, 272
TTP, 16, 128
terrorist networks and actors
Foreign Terrorist Fighters, 127–130, 134, 137, 147
Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), 134
Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), 190, 194
Tiangong Space Station, 107, 122
trafficking, 185–187, 216, 241, 290, 421
transnational crime
human trafficking, 184, 185, 216, 290
treaties and agreements
1949 Treaty of Friendship, 258

NATO, 90, 111, 326, 337, 352, 493, 510
Outer Space Treaty, 108, 111
TAC, 285, 298
TCA, 132
U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty, 369
UNCLOS, 122, 343, 360, 365, 367, 375, 379, 398, 399, 411, 412
Trump, Donald J., 40, 42, 496, 499
Türkiye, 128, 138

U

U.S. National Security Strategy, 43, 74, 91, 502
U.S. Space Force, 100, 119
U.S.-China rivalry, 12, 238, 302, 338, 372
Ukraine, 90, 162, 163, 166, 167, 168, 169, 174, 175, 227, 238, 245, 250, 310, 326, 338, 371
United Kingdom, 19, 68, 69, 141, 168, 170, 279, 342, 354, 383, 392, 394, 477, 481
United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 122, 343, 360, 365, 367, 375, 379, 398, 411, 412
United Nations Security Council, 152, 246
United States, iv, ix, x, xiv, xv, 4–9, 11, 12, 14, 19, 22, 23, 27, 28, 29, 31, 34, 37–42, 44, 45, 48–51, 54, 58, 69–72, 74, 76, 77, 79–82, 84–91, 93–95, 98–101, 104, 107, 109, 110, 112–119, 126, 131, 132, 134–136, 142, 144, 148, 150, 152–155, 159–175, 187, 196, 197, 201, 202, 206, 208–211, 215, 217, 219, 221, 226, 234, 237, 238, 242, 244, 247, 248, 257, 259, 260, 271, 276–279, 281, 282, 286, 287, 294, 297, 301–305, 307–309, 311, 312, 314–318, 320–325, 328–330, 333–338, 340, 342, 343, 345–347, 349, 352–356, 359, 361, 362, 364–383, 391, 392, 394, 410, 422, 426, 439, 443, 449, 450, 454, 457, 460–465, 467, 470, 475, 476, 478–481, 485–488, 490–492, 494, 495, 499–502, 507, 509, 511–513

Washington, 5, 6, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 22, 24, 40, 41, 51, 52, 54, 110, 112, 117, 151, 152, 154, 160, 169, 171, 173, 209, 217, 302, 309, 315, 334, 335, 337, 346, 361, 367, 369, 37–375, 448, 449, 454, 460, 461, 463, 466, 488, 493, 507, 508
Uzbekistan, 137

V

Vietnam, 15, 208, 221, 243, 244, 360, 363, 371, 382
Voice of Hind, 130, 150

W

war, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 22, 35, 40, 42, 46, 51, 53, 58, 90, 93, 127, 139, 140, 141, 142, 144, 152, 154–156, 161, 162, 165–170, 172, 179, 184, 193, 200, 238, 242, 245, 326, 360, 372, 377, 378, 382, 453, 463, 513
Cold War, 6, 8, 160–164, 169, 171, 172, 206, 217, 275, 278, 294, 308, 315, 334, 456, 465, 467
Cuban Missile Crisis, 161, 162, 173
Galwan Valley Clash, 212, 232, 240
Gaza War, 126, 138, 141, 142, 144, 154, 305, 324, 371
Gulf War, 79
Kargil Conflict, 167
Korean War, 169
nuclear war, 161, 162, 166, 171
Ukraine War, 12, 160, 166, 168, 169, 172, 245, 463
Ussuri River Crisis, 167
World War II, 8, 40, 41, 169, 335, 465, 466
Wray, Christopher, 139, 155

X

Xi Jinping, 25, 30, 41, 51, 81, 84, 94, 159, 163, 165, 174, 232, 246, 269, 279, 281, 295–297, 340, 359, 369, 376, 383

Y

Yoon Suk-yeol, 12, 44, 93, 334, 336, 337, 349, 350, 351, 355
Yunus, Muhammad, 16

Z

Zhuque Series, 103, 105

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